

We Rule: A Socratic Dialogue

Socrates: You look troubled, Glaucon.

Glaucon: [sighs] I'm tired of all the lies, Socrates.

Socrates: What lies do you have in mind?

Glaucon: Did you witness the Festival of Barbaric Thought?

Socrates: No. Did I miss anything?

Glaucon: Hardly. But the whole Athenian elite was there, oohing and aahing over the paltry "achievements" of mere barbarians.

Socrates: Did you criticize them for their lack of discernment?

Glaucon: How I wanted to! But they'd have called me a Son of Hades if I'd spoken the truth.

Socrates: The truth that their festival was a farce?

Glaucon: I suppose that would have galled them, too. But I have a far greater truth in mind.

Socrates: Namely?

Glaucon: [whispering] That civilization rests upon Athenian achievements. Objectively speaking, we Athenians rule. Whatever the barbarians have, they owe to us.

Socrates: And you think everyone ought to know and admit this?

Glaucon: Exactly.

Socrates: I'm puzzled. Most of the Athenians I know haven't contributed anything to civilization.

Glaucon: Don't be dense, Socrates. I'm not claiming that the average Athenian is a great thinker. I'm claiming that the great thinkers are Athenian.

Socrates: Not all, Glaucon. Think of the brilliance of Adalwin the Vandal.

Glaucon: [sigh] Yes, I am well-aware of Adalwin's accomplishments. My point, obviously, is that great thinkers are disproportionately Athenian. A few outstanding barbarians do

nothing to vitiate this point.

Socrates: True enough. But why then do you say that civilization rests upon Athenian achievements, or that barbarians “owe us” anything?

Glauccon: Have I not made myself clear, Socrates? We Athenians have built civilization. Without us, the barbarians would be even more barbarous than they already are.

Socrates: Perhaps I am simply slow-witted, Glauccon. But answer me this. How many Athenians have been great thinkers?

Glauccon: Hmm... about 300.

Socrates: Very well. And how many barbarians have been great thinkers?

Glauccon: [scoffs] Very well, about 50.

Socrates: Why then do you say that barbarians owe civilization to Athenians?

Glauccon: Isn't it as obvious as your bald head?

Socrates: Not at all. What's obvious as my bald head, if your numbers are correct, is that mankind – Athenian and barbarian alike – owes civilization to 350 great thinkers.

Glauccon: But six out of seven of those great thinkers were Athenian!

Socrates: How is that a legitimate source of pride for the vast majority of Athenians who are anything but great thinkers?

Glauccon: So the citizens of Athens should kneel before these “great men”?

Socrates: I didn't say that. But if you want to give credit where credit is due, you should say not “Athenians rule,” but that “Great thinkers rule.”

Glauccon: No doubt you count yourself among these “great thinkers”!

Socrates: It's presumptuous to say so. But suppose I did; would that be so terrible?

Glauccon: Absolutely. Being a great thinker is no excuse for bad manners.

Socrates: So it is bad manners when the great alert the not-so-great to their unequal achievements?

Glauccon: Indeed.

Socrates: Was it not then bad manners when you declared that “Athenians rule”?

Glaucou: I wasn't proclaiming my personal achievements. I was proclaiming the achievements of the Athenian people.

Socrates: I see. So it would be rude to call attention to my own brilliance, but acceptable to call attention to the brilliance of brilliant people in general?

Glaucou: No, that's even worse! You should identify with fellow Athenians, not "great thinkers."

Socrates: But do we not owe civilization itself to these great thinkers?

Glaucou: Ha! Where would these great thinkers be without the mass of people to implement their ideas? The great thinkers earn ample rewards in the market; they shouldn't think themselves entitled to popular adulation as well.

Socrates: Could we not say the same about the Athenians?

Glaucou: What ever do you mean?

Socrates: The barbarians pay us for our products, bringing great riches to Athens. Why should we expect them to augment their gold with gratitude?

Glaucou: Without Athens, they'd be nothing!

Socrates: It is far more to the point to say that without great thinkers, mankind would be nothing. But even that is a half-truth, for without the rest of mankind, great thinkers would be too preoccupied with menial labor to advance civilization. Great and mediocre minds alike profit from this specialization and trade. Or so it seems to me; perhaps one day a great thinker will put my conjecture to the test.

Glaucou: Maybe a Gaul? Or even a Briton! [laughs]

Socrates: [waits for Glaucou to stop laughing] What's so funny, Glaucou?

Glaucou: Why don't you just denounce me as a "Son of Hades" and be done with it?

Socrates: I have no wish to denounce anyone. I'm merely puzzled.

Glaucou: Then I return to my original claim: Compared to Athenian greatness, the barbarians' paltry accomplishments make me laugh.

Socrates: Then I return to my original critique: If we're going to laugh at anyone, it is not "barbarians," but the mass of unaccomplished human beings – barbarian and Athenian alike.

Glaucou: [points at Socrates] Arrogant Son of Hades!

Socrates: Hardly; I said “if we’re going to laugh at anyone” to make a deeper point.

Glaucou: [glares] Namely?

Socrates: Great thinkers, rather than laughing at the common man, should acknowledge his value. Civilization is not the product of knowledge alone; it is a partnership of knowledge and effort. Yes, great thinkers bring most of the knowledge. But the common man provides most of the effort. And neither is worth much without the other, my dear Glaucou.

Glaucou: You would deprive the common Athenian of his pride.

Socrates: No more than you would deprive the barbarian of his.

Glaucou: Well, if Athenian greatness is a lie, at least it is a noble lie.

Socrates: Could you not say the same about the Festival of Barbaric Thought?

Glaucou: [shudders]

Socrates: To be honest, I share your disapproval. People should stop seeking solace in the accomplishments of strangers.

Glaucou: Including me, I suppose?

Socrates: Yes, I suppose so.

Glaucou: [sighs] Then what’s left?

Socrates: Instead of spreading allegedly noble lies about Athenians or barbarians, my dear Glaucou, let us spread the noble truth that civilization is the product of human knowledge and human effort – and celebrate both wherever they may be found.