

Comfort in the Hour of Death: A Comparative Analysis of Master/Pupil Relations as Depicted by Thomas More and Plato

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Both *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* by Saint Thomas More and Plato's *Phaedo* tell the story of a master being approached by his pupils for perhaps the last time. In the former, the significance of the dying mentor transcends its literary context, as More himself was awaiting execution in the Tower of London during the Dialogue's composition. Impending execution in the *Phaedo* functions on more than one level as well; although Socrates did not write the *Phaedo*, the conditions of his actual death serve as a powerful extraliterary sanctifier of the text. Under the dire circumstances facing the ultra-real characters of Socrates and Anthony, the relative ease with which these men meet their respective ends, and the words and actions with which they justify their deaths (as in both cases it is a matter of principle by which they choose death over life), is very telling about the sturdiness of their faith in the principles by which they lived and died. In this essay I will analyze the state of the master/pupil relationship in each dialogue as it faces the inevitable removal of one of its components. How is the absence of the master anticipated by the pupil? What precautions does the master make in order to ensure the continued growth of the pupil in his absence? Moreover, as in these cases both masters purport to serve causes which are higher than any single human being, how necessary was their involvement in their pupils' lives to begin with? By means of comparison, I will attempt to approach all of these questions from both the Socratic angle and that of More, drawing on the distinction between faith and reason as a source of ultimate truth, and assuming the perspective of both the master and pupil as represented in the dialogues.

The theme of taking comfort in one's master's words and actions is explicitly central to *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, though it is also a prominent theme in the *Phaedo*. The fact that in both dialogues,

the master in question is nearing the hour of his death means that the comfort he provides to his pupils in these last moments must be of a particularly permanent sort if it is to be of any use at all. But in what way is this demand for a legacy of permanent comfort which will outlast its provider met by Anthony and Socrates, respectively? In *Dialogue Against Tribulation*, Vincent rushes to his uncle with exactly this question in mind. He is concerned that with Anthony's death he will lose not only an uncle, but more importantly, perhaps, a source of consistent comfort: "But us here shall you leave of your kindred a sort of sorry comfortless orphans, to all whom your good help, comfort, and counsel hath long been a great stay—not as an uncle unto some and to some as one farther of kin, but as though unto us all you had been a natural father" (6). Phaedo uses similar language in anticipating his inevitable severance from his mentor, saying of the effect of Socrates' impending death on his gathered friends, ". . . it seemed as if we were going to lose a father and to be orphans for the rest of our lives" (Baird 155).

In answer to the charge that he is leaving his pupils as "sorry comfortless orphans," Anthony establishes himself as a mere surrogate father, standing in as mediator between God and the pupils themselves. By convincing Vincent of his inessentiality, Anthony is deferring all comfort, which Vincent had previously attributed to him, to God Himself: "God is and must be your comfort, and not I" (*Tribulation 7*). Thus, the problem of the disappearing master is solved by linking the pupils up to the first in command, i.e. God; by doing this, Vincent is absolving himself of any parental/spiritual duties he will be abandoning through death.

A similar solution to the problem of the "orphaned pupil" is proposed by Socrates in the last hours of his life as recalled by Phaedo; but instead of referring his followers to God, as Anthony does, Socrates refers them to *his* master: Philosophy. Socrates deals with the mounting concerns of his throng—which are manifesting themselves in periodic sobbing fits on the parts of his disciples—by appealing to the idea of a beneficial divide between soul and body which is made complete only after death, wherein the inferior body dies, leaving only the superior soul (Baird 120). He thereby divests Socrates the body from Socrates the mind, lending everlasting solace to his mourners by the comforting notion that in death only Socrates' body is being destroyed, while his soul eternally remains—and it was the aspirations of his soul, not his

body, which he pursued in philosophy, and which they admired in him. Death, therefore, for the philosopher is seen as a good thing.

Thus, by pursuing philosophy, Socrates suggests that his pupils may find comfort in this life, and in meeting their death—as death may now be seen as nothing more than freedom from the body—and may join him in the afterlife insofar as they have maximized the potentials of their souls and gleaned what little wisdom was available to them while weighed down by their bodies.

For those reasons, then any man should have confidence for his own soul, who during his life has rejected the pleasures of the body and its adornments as alien, thinking they do more harm than good, but has devoted himself to the pleasures of learning, and has decked his soul with no alien adornment, but with its own, with temperance and justice, bravery, liberality, and truth, thus awaiting the journey he will make to Hades (Gallop 75: 114e–115a).

The suggestion that the dedicated followers of Socratic philosophy will meet up with Socrates' soul itself in the afterlife is suggested by a line, uttered earlier in the text, in which Socrates professes his personal beliefs about what occurs after death: "But you must know that I hope that I am going to live among good men, though I am not quite sure of that" (Baird 118). Thus, reason and philosophy, and a small share of wishful thinking, are offered up as the self-evident mechanisms for fearlessness and comfort in the face of death; and, in prescribing the pursuit of philosophy above all else to his friends, Socrates is naming philosophy as his replacement, as the father of all comfort in man.

By leaving their pupils with the key with which they taught them, i.e., by linking them up with the supreme master (in the case of Anthony, God, in the case of Socrates, Reason), they are making their departure more bearable. Yet, by the fact that this linkage is only occurring at the hour of their deaths, they are also implicitly establishing their own temporary necessity as intermediaries to this divine fount of knowledge and comfort. There is a distinct sense in which this source of comfort is available at first only indirectly, by means of a teacher. This notion is made clear on the Socratic side, if we may take Socrates and Plato to be of like mind on this issue, through the dialogue with Diotima provided in the *Symposium*. Socrates recounts Diotima's explanation of the role of a mentor in guiding his pupil up from knowledge of specific physical beauties to mental beauty and

eventually to beauty in general, instilling in him the instinct towards high concepts which is the mark of the true philosopher.

. . . his teacher should direct him [the pupil] to knowledge, so that he may, in turn, see the beauty of different types of knowledge. Whereas before, in servile and contemptible fashion, he was dominated by the individual case, loving the beauty of a boy or man, or a single human activity, now he directs his eyes to what is beautiful in general, as he turns to gaze upon the limitless ocean of beauty. Now he produces many fine and inspiring thoughts and arguments, as he gives his undivided attention to philosophy. (*Symposium* 207: 210d)

In this passage, the mentor is described as something of a stepping stone and a straightening force by which the pupil is put in contact with the real source of knowledge—high concepts (or, in Platonic terms: the Forms, the Good) as approached via philosophy. The teacher is therefore indispensable in providing a way towards the object of philosophy, but once the pupil has become a proficient philosopher himself, once he has become reoriented, he may kick away this step ladder and contemplate those things from which his teacher drew his power to teach.

In *Dialogue Against Tribulation*, on the other hand, contact with God is seen as the first step—something which can and must precede one's interpersonal training, as it is only by the direction of God that one is able to pick the right teachers and avoid imposters. Anthony uses the extended metaphor of physician and drug to explicate this complicated causal principle (that between advice and divine source); it is only by faith in God, and knowledge of His commandments, Anthony charges, that the advice (medicine) of the pagan philosophers may be sifted through to find its good (pious) properties, among a ubiquity of bad ones:

. . . though they [the pagan philosophers] be far unable to cure our disease of themselves, and therefore are not sufficient to be taken for our physicians, some good drugs have they yet in their shops for which they may be suffered to dwell among our poticaries—if their medicines be made not of their own brains, but after the bills made by the great physician God, prescribing the medicines Himself, and correcting the faults of their erroneous receipts. (*Tribulation* 13)

Thus, it is only by the redirection of the advice of pagan [natural] philosophy through God, in a sense, that such philosophical medicine

is purified as a means towards spiritual comfort rather than spiritual degradation¹. This view taken towards the role of philosophers and earthly mentors, as being merely secondary instruments by which an already existing faith is augmented—rather than being the stepping stone by which that faith is first reached—represents a reversal of the parallel causal principle in Plato. Faith, in this case, not Reason, as with Socrates, is the primary means by which one finds comfort.

For Socrates, the end goal of reason is truth—and this truth can be approached by increasing degrees through philosophy and mentorship during one's life, but can never be attained fully until death: "Then, it seems, after we are dead we shall gain the wisdom which we desire, and for which we say we have a passion, but not while we are alive, as the argument shows" (Baird 120: 66e). According to Anthony, on the other hand, truth is delivered by faith, which is a gift from God; therefore, the end goal is given *a priori* and any outside teaching or advice one receives can neither bolster nor erode this foundation of faith, as is made clear by the line: "This virtue of faith can neither any man give himself nor yet any one man another. . ." (*Tribulation* 15). Thus, the pupil takes from his master not everything he gives, but only that which is consistent with his own immovable faith. Hence, in his death, Anthony encourages his pupils to acknowledge the true source of the comfort they attribute to him, ". . . referring the final end of their comfort unto God. . ." (*Tribulation* 13), while Socrates refers this comfort, in its final end to truth, and effectively death, since it is only through death that this truth can be fully realized.

Thus, in both *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulations* and *Phaedo*, it seems that the departing master has done his duty only insofar as he has convinced his pupils that his death will be of no significance to them; that is, by bringing them to realize the metaphysical source from which they derive all their comfort in fact, each mentor, respectively, is justifying his own death to his pupils, by deeming himself replaceable—as Anthony puts it: "Good cousin, trust well in God and He shall provide you teachers abroad convenient in every time, or else shall Himself sufficiently teach you within" (*Tribulation* 7). Yet there is, in both dialogues, a strong sense in which this assurance does not seem

1. Warning against the latter is given by the lines: "For without this way taken with them, they shall not fail to do as many bold blind potteries do which, wither for lucre or of a foolish pride, give sick folk medicines of their own devising, and therewith kill up in corners many such simple folk. . ." (*Tribulation* 13).

to be enough—as if the mentor were providing something more by his life, through his personal presence, than any dose of high principles and advice would account for. Indeed, both mentors seem sensitive to the insufficiency of the lofty notions they have offered their pupils to assuage their mourning.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates notices Crito, in particular, as one for whom his rational arguments and myths of the afterlife have fallen short of bringing lasting comfort. He admits, as he prepares to bathe before drinking his state-sanctioned poison, “All the arguments which I have used to prove that I shall not remain with you after I have drunk the poison, but that I shall go away to the happiness of the blessed, with which I tried to comfort you and myself, have been thrown away on him [Crito]” (Baird 154: 115d). Yet Socrates, even after seeing that all his efforts and arguments have not comforted Crito, remains true to his master, Reason, blaming Crito’s misery on misunderstanding. Crito’s insistence on being morose about Socrates’ death, and fussing about how his body should be dealt with, Socrates argues, is the result not of any failure in reason itself to provide all necessary comfort, but rather of Crito’s lack of understanding of his arguments about the body and soul. Socrates therefore leaves it to his other pupils to complete the work of reason which he has laid out, and thereby liberate Crito from his confusion and discomfort—which, for Socrates, amount to the same thing—“Do you therefore be my sureties to him. . . that I shall go away when I am dead, and not remain with you; then he will feel my death less” (Baird 154: 115 d–e). Thus, comfort, in the wake of Socrates’ death comes as a benevolent side-effect of reason—of deducing the truth about death. Comfort, Socrates predicts, will come to Crito, only by way of his assent to the arguments which Socrates himself has laid out before his death. The preservation of his arguments, of the high place of reason in the minds of his pupils, as opposed to any sentimental preservation of his image or personality, is seen by Socrates as the ultimate way to comfort his pupils about his death.

Anthony’s method of dealing with his pupil’s grief over his death is not quite so self-effacing. Although he points out that his role as teacher is one which is sanctioned first by God and checked by faith, and that there is nothing particular in him, other than his affinity to God, which makes him a source of comfort, he nonetheless humors Vincent’s request for a dying gift of something which is essentially personal: experience.

And therefore I will allow your request . . . [so] that [you sh]ould have store of comfort aforehand ready by you, to resort to and to lay up in your heart as a triacle against the poison of all dread that might rise . . . And herein shall I be glad, as my poor wit will serve me, to call to mind with you such things as I before have read, heard, or thought upon, that may conveniently serve us to this purpose. (*Tribulation* 10–11)

In agreeing to provide an account of the tribulations he has experienced and survived in his lifetime, Anthony is, in a sense, unburdening himself of his last duty as a teacher to the young Vincent. By unloading his experiences as “a triacle against . . . tribulation,” he is providing Vincent with a resource of immediate, practical comfort against specific tribulations (in this case, the anticipated tribulations resulting from the Turkish invasion of Hungary). Thus, to revive the previous metaphor, while the universal cure against earthly suffering may be derived from God alone “without whom we could never be healed of our very deadly disease of damnation. . .” (*Tribulation* 14), these interpersonal experiential accounts of overcoming specific hardships may serve as local anesthetic, specifically fitted to each tribulation to dull the pain, making it bearable; this local anesthetic, which works on a case-by-case basis against tribulation, is the unique contribution of the mentor to his pupil, and that which Vincent feared he would lose by the death of his uncle, even though he might retain his faith in God.

Having discussed the recurring notion of comfort and its opposites which surround the death of the mentor in *Dialogue Against Tribulation* and *Phaedo*, respectively, it seems appropriate to discuss the notion of the mentor’s master—which I have heretofore referenced frequently, though never fully addressed. I have maintained, throughout, that Socrates’ master can be none other than Reason (as harnessed through philosophy), and its master: truth. However, there are many elements of the *Phaedo* which might cast doubt on this assumption, most pressingly his constant references and offerings to the gods, and his extended myth of the afterlife, which seems to be an artistic invention with little or no basis in reason. Yet, even these I will argue are mere supplements to his reason-based argument, which appear only as garnishments to the comfortable foundation of reason that accompanies him to the grave. A reference to religious duty first occurs in Socrates’ discussion of his recent unprecedented attempts to make poetry, “putting the tales of Aesop into verse,” (Gallop 31: 60d), in which he claims he was

trying to “. . . fulfill a sacred duty. . . ” (Gallop 33: 60e), given to him in a dream. But his adherence to religious duty here comes only as a result of careful scientific reasoning, as he goes on with his explanation: “. . . now that the trial was over and the festival of the god was preventing my death, I thought that in case it was art in the popular sense that the dream was commanding me to make, I ought not to disobey it . . . as it was safer not to go off before I'd fulfilled a sacred duty. . . ” (Gallop 31: 61a–b). Socrates therefore comes to the conclusion that he should do the will of the god Apollo, only by means of practical reason—he weights the circumstantial evidence (the festival, the repetition of the dream, etc.), and the potential pros and cons of leaving the dream's command unfulfilled, and then decides to go ahead with it after finding it in his favor to do so. Thus, Socrates' submission to religious duty here, and elsewhere can be seen as nothing more than an instantiation of Pascal's Wager, whereby he retains the hierarchy of Reason as his supreme master over and above religion (in the popular sense). This hierarchy is reinforced by a passage in the *Euthyphro* in which Socrates refuses to believe things about the gods which the religious authorities insist are true, simply because they are inconsistent with reason and proper definitions². Thus, Socrates is in essence forcing religion to conform to Reason—his true master.

Anthony, on the other hand, does exactly the opposite. He warns Vincent that the scientific methods and arguments of the “old moral philosophers,” in which group he clearly lumps Plato, must be taken to heart only insofar as they conform to religion, to faith, “We shall therefore neither fully receive these philosophers' reasons. . . nor yet utterly refuse them” (*Tribulation* 13). Thus, all “natural reasons,” and for that matter natural authorities, according to Anthony, must be approached cautiously and with a certain degree of ambivalence; and must first be subjected to God-given faith and accepted only insofar as they agree with it. Anthony's true master, therefore, is always God, by whom all other masters must be ordained. In this respect, and many others, Anthony can be seen as the mouthpiece for More himself, whose epitaph “The King's good servant, but God's First” underscores

2. In *Euthyphro* Socrates denies that there have been “. . . wars among the gods, and terrible enmities and battles, and other such things as are told by the poets . . . ” (Gallop 21: 5e–6c), as these suppositions lie in conflict with reason, and make the notion of piety nonsensical. *Euthyphro*, a priest, on the other hand, insists that these things about the gods are true.

the conflict between religious and political loyalties which led to his execution.

The master/pupil relationship in *Phaedo* and *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* can thus be seen as having many nuanced layers. On the one hand both men claim to be dying for high concepts, and unwavering principles, which shall be ample substitutes for their living minds and bodies when they die. Yet, on the other hand, there is an ongoing battle with natural human emotion and the desire for “comfort” as opposed to pain and anxiety—a desire which speaks to both master and pupil alike on a personal level. Socrates expresses his befuddlement at the heightened importance of such sensations in the hour of one’s death, contemplating the alternating experience of pleasure and pain which visits his fettered leg³. Indeed, “comfort” seems to take on an unusual saliency in the minds of both pupil and master in the dialogues. In the end, it is only through some combination of personal expression and personal renunciation through metaphysical reorientation, that these great masters find comfort in their deaths, and provide solace to their followers.

3. “What an odd thing it seems, friends, this state that people call ‘pleasant’; and how curiously it’s related to its supposed opposite, ‘painful’” (Gallop 31: 60 b–c).

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