COLLOQUY · A DIALOGUE

Phylax, or On the Spoon

Socrates, brought into a Toronto psychiatric ward after a night standing on a street corner, questions the man who keeps it. Safe, and well: he wants to know where in the house each of them lives.

Richard Verver · October 2026

Toronto, a psychiatric ward, early on a Monday. Two nights ago Socrates was brought in off the street. Now he sits barefoot on a stretcher parked in the middle of the day room, under the round mirrors in the ceiling. Phylax, who keeps the ward, comes by with a tablet.

Phylax. You're up early, Socrates.

Socrates. I was never down. But tell me, what does your tablet say about me?

Phylax. That you were found barefoot in October, stopping strangers on Yonge Street to ask them what justice is. That you stood still on a corner all night, thinking. And that you hear a voice.

Socrates. All true. I did the same at Potidaea, and nobody wrote it down then except my friends. As for the voice, it only ever tells me what not to do. I've found it a better counsellor than most.

Phylax. The doctor will see you this afternoon. Did you sleep?

Socrates. Like a man in a bus station. But I'm glad you've come. I've been looking around your house since dawn, and I have questions only its keeper can answer.

Phylax. Ask. I have ten minutes.

Socrates. Then the first is the easiest. What is this house for?

Phylax. To keep people safe while they get well.

Socrates. Safe, and well. Two things, then. Remember that you said both.

Socrates. Last night they brought me supper on a tray: roast pork with applesauce, potatoes, carrots. And beside it, a spoon. Tell me, Phylax, what is a knife for?

Phylax. Cutting.

Socrates. And a spoon?

Phylax. Soup. Things you don't cut.

Socrates. Then I was served a thing to cut, with a tool for things not cut. Did the cook make a mistake?

Phylax. No. Knives are a risk here. Someone could hurt himself, or someone else.

Socrates. Has that happened?

Phylax. It has. Not on my shift, but it has.

Socrates. Then the spoon is a scar. It remembers a wound, and I don't mock it. But does a scar heal the next man?

Phylax. It prevents the next wound.

Socrates. Perhaps. Let me tell you what happened next. I didn't fight over a knife, and I didn't saw at the pork with the spoon. I went to the desk and asked the woman there if she would cut my meat for me, the way you'd ask a friend when your hands are full. She laughed. Then she went and fetched a knife, and gave it to me.

Phylax. She shouldn't have.

Socrates. Shouldn't she? She looked at me and saw a man who wanted his supper. Was anyone less safe because she looked?

Phylax. She took a risk.

Socrates. She took a measure. The rule can't look at me; it can only look at everyone. She could. So which of the two kept me safe last night, the spoon or the nurse?

Phylax. The nurse, I suppose. But I can't put a nurse beside every tray.

Socrates. No. Hold on to that. We'll come back to it.

Socrates. Here is a smaller puzzle. On your floor there are purple signs. Please do not, they say, and please observe. They ask me to keep two metres from my neighbour. Is there a plague?

Phylax. Not anymore. Those are left over from the pandemic.

Socrates. Then they command something no one needs, and everyone ignores them. What does a man learn from a sign that everyone ignores?

Phylax. That the signs don't matter.

Socrates. Including the next one, which might. And the bins? This morning I watched a man sort his rubbish with great care: the cup here, the peel there, the paper in the blue. Where do the bins go?

Phylax. It all goes out together as medical waste. It's incinerated.

Socrates. So the sorting is a rite with no god. He performs it, and the fire doesn't care. In a later age the jurists had a maxim for this: *cessante ratione legis, cessat ipsa lex*. When the reason for a law ceases, the law itself ceases.

Phylax. Nobody here has time to audit the signs.

Socrates. I believe you. But your house is full of laws whose reasons have died, and nobody has buried them. A man who lives among dead rules learns one lesson very well: that the rules here aren't for him. Is that the lesson you want to teach people who are trying to get well?

Phylax. No.

Socrates. Then here is a labour that costs nothing but attention. Take down the signs from the plague that has passed. And either tell the man that his sorting goes to one fire, or give him bins that mean what they say.

Socrates. Now my ears. From morning to night a television on the wall talks to no one. When I asked for something to help me sleep, I was given earplugs.

Phylax. The TV keeps people occupied. The earplugs are for the noise.

Socrates. So the house makes a noise, and then hands out a remedy for it. Is that like a man who throws sand in your eyes and then offers you a cloth?

Phylax. That's not fair. Some patients want the TV.

Socrates. Fair enough. Then let me ask it another way. An earplug takes sound away. Is there nothing in sound worth giving?

Phylax. Music, I suppose.

Socrates. The followers of Pythagoras met at dawn to sing to the lyre and calm the spirit, and they kept songs against rage and against despair. Plato even put a speech in my mouth about it, and for once I agree with him: rhythm and harmony sink deeper into the soul than anything else.

Phylax. We're not a concert hall.

Socrates. No. But you hand out earplugs, which subtract. Why not earbuds, which could add? Then a man can have Tallis at night and his neighbour the hockey game, and neither troubles the other.

Phylax. Cords. They're a ligature risk.

Socrates. The spoon again. Then wireless ones. Or a small speaker at the desk that plays something gentle at night instead of the news. You see, I'm not asking for a temple. Only for one thing in this house that was chosen *for* the soul, instead of *against* the danger.

Socrates. When is supper here?

Phylax. The trays come round about five.

Socrates. And where do people eat?

Phylax. In their rooms, mostly. Wherever they like.

Socrates. So no one eats together. In Sparta, when King Agis came home from beating the Athenians and asked to eat at home with his wife, the magistrates refused to send him his portion. Even a king ate at the common table.

Phylax. We're not Sparta.

Socrates. Thank the gods. Then take a gentler house. Your chaplain lent me a little book by a man of Nursia, who kept a house not unlike yours. His monks ate together, and one of them read aloud at every meal, so the man who ate was fed twice.

Phylax. People here aren't monks. Some of them can't sit in a room with others.

Socrates. Then let them take a tray, as a sick monk was given a room of his own. But you've made the exception into the rule. And earlier you told me you couldn't put a nurse beside every tray.

Phylax. I did.

Socrates. At one table, one nurse can see twelve knives. So the common table isn't only kinder than the spoon, Phylax. It's safer.

Phylax. You want a dinner hour.

Socrates. An hour, a table, a cloth if you can find one, and someone to put on music or read. People who eat together talk. People who talk are seen. And people who are seen don't need to be watched so hard.

Socrates. I read the little book all night. I think your house is his house turned inside out.

Phylax. How so?

Socrates. Both are closed houses. Both have a rule, a timetable and a superior, and people who didn't choose each other living under one roof. A scholar of your own century called both kinds of place *total institutions*, and he put monasteries on the same list as asylums. So the shape is the same. Now look at what fills it.

Socrates takes the marker from the whiteboard by the desk, as he once drew squares in the sand for Meno's slave, and draws two columns.

	BENEDICT'S HOUSE	THIS HOUSE
The hours	Offices sung through the day and night; silence after Compline (RB 16, 42)	A television, all day and into the night
Meals	One table, with reading at every meal (RB 38)	A tray in each room
Tools	Every vessel kept as if it belonged to the altar (RB 31)	The knife kept as a weapon
The sick	Cared for before all things, as Christ himself (RB 36)	Managed as a risk
The rule	The abbot serves many temperaments, and fits himself to each (RB 2)	One rule for every patient
The day	Idleness is the enemy of the soul, so there is work and reading (RB 48)	Nothing to do but wait
The night	A lamp burns in the dormitory till morning (RB 22)	A light burns at the desk till morning

Phylax. That's not fair either. A monk chose to be there. Most of my patients didn't.

Socrates. That's the best objection you've made, and it's true. But look how Benedict wrote, even for men who chose. He expected the grumbler, the latecomer, the sick, even the runaway: a brother who leaves may be taken back as many as three times. He told them to bear one another's weaknesses, of body and of character, with the greatest patience. If a house for people who chose needs that much patience, how much more does a house for people who didn't?

Phylax. So we get nothing right.

Socrates. You have one sign on your wall that's alive: Welcome families. Benedict told his monks to receive every guest as Christ. Keep that one.

Phylax. And the rest? You think I can change all that?

Socrates. No. I think you can change one row. Start with meals, since we've found the table is safer. The signs cost nothing at all.

Socrates. Look at the last row. Did you notice it?

Phylax. The light. Ours burns at the desk.

Socrates. And his in the dormitory. Both houses keep a light on all night, and both of them watch. I won't pretend his lamp watched no one. The brothers slept clothed, in one room, with the young men's beds among the old, so the old could keep an eye on them.

Phylax. Then what's the difference?

Socrates. His lamp watched *for* something. It burned so that when the signal came in the dark, they could rise and go and sing. Yours watches *against* something. It burns so that nothing happens. Tell me, Phylax: in all your years here, has anyone ever got well because nothing happened?

Phylax. People do get well here. I've seen it.

Socrates. I believe you. And I'd wager it happened when somebody looked at them. Like the woman with the knife.

Phylax. My ten minutes are up.

Socrates. Then one last question, and you needn't answer it now. You told me this house is for keeping people safe while they get well. You've shown me a great deal of *safe*. Where in this house is the *well*?

Phylax doesn't answer. On his way back to the desk he stops, crouches, and peels one purple sign off the floor.

Notes

- Socrates standing in thought from dawn to dawn at Potidaea: Plato, *Symposium* 220c–d.
- The voice that only ever turns him away: Plato, *Apology* 31d.
- The squares drawn for Meno's slave: Plato, *Meno* 82b–85b.
- Rhythm and harmony sinking deepest into the soul: Plato, *Republic* III, 401d.
- Pythagoras singing to the lyre at dawn: Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras* 32. Songs against rage and despair: Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life* 111–112.
- King Agis refused his portion: Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 12.4.
- Total institutions, monasteries among them: Erving Goffman, *Asylums* (1961).
- The Rule of Benedict, besides the chapters on the whiteboard: a separate room for the sick (RB 36), the runaway taken back up to three times (RB 29), guests received as Christ (RB 53), bearing one another's weaknesses of body and character (RB 72).

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