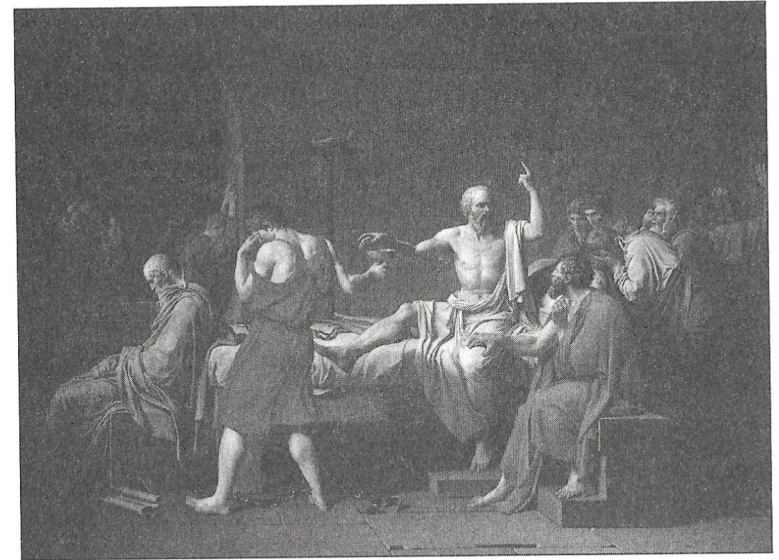


Socrates was, we are told, delighted that he had the opportunity to die by hemlock. According to Xenophon, he cited at least three advantages to dying this way. 'If I am condemned,' said Socrates, 'it is clear that I will get the chance to enjoy the death which has been judged easiest or least painful (by those whose job it is to consider these things); the death which causes the least trouble to one's family and friends; and the death which makes people feel most grief for the deceased.' Socrates avoided all of the indignity usually associated with death. He died at the peak of his powers. His friends did not have to see him convulsed or racked by agonising pain. They did not have to empty bedpans, mop up vomit or nurse a senile old man. He left only good memories behind him.

Socrates – surrounded by a group of friends – drank the poison in prison. Plato gives us a detailed and tear-jerking description of what happened as the hemlock took hold of him.

He walked about and, when he said his legs were heavy, lay down on his back, for such was the advice of the attendant. The man who had administered the poison laid his hands on him, and after a while examined his feet and legs, then pinched his foot hard and asked if he felt it. He said, 'No'; then after that, his thighs; and passing upwards in this way he showed us that he was growing cold and rigid. And again he touched him and said that when it reached his heart, he would be gone. The chill had now reached the region about the groin, and uncovering his face, which had been covered, he said – and these were his last words – 'Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Pay it, and do not forget.' Crito said,



1. Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Socrates* (1787) shows the philosopher dying in his sexy, six-pack prime, an Enlightenment hero of reason and revolution (see chapter 6). Through the archway we glimpse Xanthippe going away up the stairs, while Plato, as an old man, sits at the foot of the bed remembering the scene.

'It will be done. But see if you have anything else to say.' To this question, he made no reply, but after a little while he moved; the attendant uncovered him; his eyes were fixed. And when Crito saw it, Crito closed his mouth and eyes.

This was the end, Echecrates, of our friend, who was, as we may say, of all those of his time whom we have known, the best and wisest and most just man.

The manner of Socrates' death fits perfectly with the life he has chosen to live. The numbness which overcomes him is presented as a gradual liberation from bodily life. Socrates

dies with all his faculties intact, talking all the while, in no particular physical discomfort. The body need not intrude on the final work of the soul as it prepares to depart. Although the friends are all finally reduced to tears, Socrates remains calm, his attention devoted to philosophy until almost the last minute of life. This is the image of the death of Socrates which has most deeply influenced later generations.

Several late-twentieth-century scholars argued that Plato's account of the death of Socrates cannot possibly be accurate. It seemed too good to be true. Hemlock poisoning, they claimed, produces drooling, profuse sweating, stomach pains, headache, vomiting, rapid heart rate, dry mouth, fits and convulsions. A passage from an ancient didactic poem about poisons and their remedies (the *Alexipharmaca* of Nicander, from the second century BC), describes these horrible symptoms:

A terrible choking blocks
the lower throat and the narrow passage of the
windpipe;
the extremities grow cold, and inside the limbs the
arteries,
strong though they are, get contracted. For a while he
gasps
like somebody swooning, and his spirit sees the land
of the dead.

(186–94)

This does not sound much like the death of Socrates according to Plato's *Phaedo*. If Plato sanitised the real symptoms of hemlock poisoning, this would suggest that his version of Socrates' death is largely fictional, albeit based on a real event.

But the sceptical view has been convincingly challenged in a brilliant article by Enid Bloch. She shows that Plato gives a perfectly accurate description of Socrates' medical symptoms in the last hours of life. The hemlock family of plants is a large one, including water hemlock, poison hemlock and 'fool's parsley' or lesser hemlock. They all look almost identical. Whereas water hemlock attacks the central nervous system, producing seizures – as described by Nicander – poison hemlock works on the peripheral nervous system. Consequently, those who take it are affected just as Plato describes: they go gradually numb and then die – painlessly – once the paralysis affects the respiratory system or the heart.