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PHERECYDES' FABLE

MICHAEL JAY KATZ

*If I could learn what I know not,
Then I would really know a lot—
But what I know is all I've got.
(And what I don't won't be forgot.)*

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This work will be published as one of a collection of the author's Socratic dialogues, entitled *Socrates in August: From Incondensable Complexity to Myth*, by Peter Lang Publishing of Bern. This is a monograph scheduled to be published in 1989 and is the last of a trilogy of Socratic dialogues by M. J. Katz. Copyright of the entire volume will be to Peter Lang Publishing.

SOCRATES: Good morning, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Ah, good morning, Socrates.

SOCRATES: May I sit down here?

PHERECYDES: Of course, of course—the sun is warm and the day is young. Tell me what news you have heard, my friend.

SOCRATES: There is no news since yesterday, old man.

PHERECYDES: Then tell me this: What new philosophical devilment have you been up to?

SOCRATES: I am still worn out from my long discussion with Eudicus. I am tired of talking; I would rather hear a tale from you.

PHERECYDES: From me? All I know are the old myths, the children's tales. You need something new and fresh to keep your mind keen, Socrates. Otherwise, you will become an old man like me, and you will find yourself constantly musing and dozing and nodding off in the sun.

SOCRATES: I am already an old man, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Do you think that seventy years is old? When you become eighty, *then* you will know what old is.

SOCRATES: I doubt that I will ever live to see eighty years.

PHERECYDES: Then you will never grow old, Socrates.

SOCRATES: That is fine with me. So, old man, tell me a story.

PHERECYDES: As I told you, Socrates, I know no special stories. However, before you came I was remembering Zeus and Artemis' mice. Earlier I had seen a mouse run by that wall over there, and it put me in mind of a bit of a story that I had heard from old Hecataeus.

SOCRATES: Hecataeus of Miletus, the historian?

PHERECYDES: No, no, Socrates—of course not! Hecataeus of Miletus lived and died long before my time. Do you think that I am 200 years old? No, Socrates, I am referring to Hecataeus the old sailor of Leros. I do not suppose that you ever knew him; he never set foot here in Athens.

SOCRATES: And I have never been to Leros, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Never? You know that I spent my happy lazy youth on Leros.

SOCRATES: Yes, I know.

PHERECYDES: It is a shame that you never got to Leros, my young friend. It is a delightful, sleepy little copy of the island of Rhodes. There are fewer than a thousand people living on Leros. It is all forested, with gently rolling hills and fine valleys, valleys that produce the most delicious fruits and

vegetables—figs and pomegranates and oranges. On the sloping hills, carob trees grow abundantly. And wine? Why, our vines grow only the sweetest of grapes, and of course Lerosian grains make the richest of breads. It is a heavenly land. And everyone—every single householder—is a sailor. The winds come out of the west nine months of the year (they blow away the summer heat), and it is only an afternoon's easy sail to the Carian coast. What a place for a happy little boy to grow up.

SOCRATES: And you knew Hecataeus there?

PHERECYDES: How could I not, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Ah yes—how could you not.

PHERECYDES: Everyone knew Hecataeus.

SOCRATES: They did?

PHERECYDES: Of course they did. He had thick white bushy eyebrows, and he had two crazy eyes. One looked left and one looked right, and you never knew if he was looking at you or if he was looking out to sea.

SOCRATES: It sounds as if he was always doing both.

PHERECYDES: Certainly he was always doing both! Any good sailor always keeps one eye on the weather and one eye on the ocean and one eye on the sail.

SOCRATES: That is three eyes, old man.

PHERECYDES: Of course that is three eyes—have you never heard of the mind's eye? Hecataeus used all his eyes, and he looked all ways at once. And bright and keen were those eyes too, Socrates! Do not imagine that just because he was eighty-five years old he could not see through things. He knew a shadow from a shade, as my mother used to say.

SOCRATES: She did?

PHERECYDES: Yes, she did—and she said many other things besides. Did you ever meet my mother?

SOCRATES: No, I am afraid not. I have never been to Leros, you know.

PHERECYDES: That is too bad. Everyone on Leros knew my mother, and they knew what she would say.

SOCRATES: I am certain that they did.

PHERECYDES: Yes they did. "Jiffle," she once said to me. Just like that: "Jiffle."

SOCRATES: Jiffle?

PHERECYDES: Yes, jiffle—and it was not only me to whom she said that, she said it to others too. Ah, but that was long ago.

SOCRATES: Does jiffle have anything to do with Hecataeus?

PHERECYDES: Certainly not, Socrates! Do you imagine that Hecataeus was a man who would say something like "jiffle"?

SOCRATES: I do not know.

PHERECYDES: That is apparent, Socrates. Well set your mind at ease—he was not such a man at all. On the other hand, Hecataeus did once tell me about a skillagalee.

SOCRATES: He did?

PHERECYDES: I know that it is hard to believe, but I am telling you the truth, by all the gods. Yes, one day old Hecataeus found a worthless coin—a skillagalee—on the beach. Now I know you are going to say: "How can a coin possibly be worthless, Pherecydes?" Well, it is a good question—but I do not have the time to answer you now, Socrates, because I assume that you really want to hear about the mice and the slonk. Is that not what you

asked me in the beginning?

SOCRATES: To be honest, Pherecydes, I am not certain. Is that what I asked you?

PHERECYDES: Socrates, if you do not know what you asked, then how do you expect me to know? Really, you *are* getting old and forgetful after all.

SOCRATES: I think that you were going to tell me a tale, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Of course I was—and if you can restrain yourself from interrupting me, I am still going to tell you that tale.

SOCRATES: Please do.

PHERECYDES: Very well, my impatient friend, just sit here quietly then. Now, where was I? Oh yes—Hecataeus tied three pieces of knotroot grass together. (Although, for the life of me I do not know how he managed to tie anything, especially knotroot grass, with one eye looking left and one eye looking right.)

SOCRATES: Three pieces of grass?

PHERECYDES: Not just *grass*, Socrates—*knotroot grass*. It was to forecast the winds: three pieces tossed east will land east if the wind is east; three pieces ripped once will land together if rain shall come tomorrow. You remember those rules, do you not?

SOCRATES: I am not certain that I have ever heard them before, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Then you have not been listening carefully, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Has this something to do with mice and slonks?

PHERECYDES: Not “mice and slonks,” mice and *slonk*—there was only one slonk, Socrates—and there was also the bright blue splanch.

SOCRATES: “Splanch”?

PHERECYDES: Splanch, splanch! Please, Socrates, can you not sit more quietly? We will never get the story unfolded—let alone get it neatly refolded again—if you insist on telling it your way. Do you think you know it better than Hecataeus, who heard it from his father, who actually saw it happen?

SOCRATES: I am sorry, Pherecydes; I will be more patient.

PHERECYDES: Oh I do not blame you for wanting to tell it also, for wanting to be a part of the excitement, for wanting to walk back through those warm historic days. But Artemis is the goddess of mice, and Artemis, you will recall, is originally from Leros. Therefore, who knows her better than a sailor from Leros? Well, Socrates, I do not mean to embarrass you, but perhaps you should just admit it: Pan may be a friend of yours, but Artemis belongs to Leros, does she not? (Now, now—do not make a long speech, my friend; just answer yes or no.)

SOCRATES: A long speech? You leave me speechless, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Socrates, I am too old to leave you anywhere. It is Hecataeus who is still speechless; so if you will refrain from talk a moment, I will allow him to continue.

SOCRATES: Please do, old man.

PHERECYDES: Old man? I am younger than Hecataeus, who was five years older than I am now when he first told me about the mice. You see, Socrates, the mice (Artemis' mice) wanted a king. I know that you are thinking: “My good Pherecydes, did they not have the lion as king?” Admit it, Socrates, was that not what you were thinking?

SOCRATES: Well, no, not really, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: No? Then you were not paying attention, Socrates. Let me

repeat: the mice wanted a king. They were tired of having no one to make decisions, no one to give them guidance, no one to govern them. What is life without royalty? Well, Socrates, have you never thought of that? What is life without royalty?

SOCRATES: I am happy without a king, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Of course you are, Socrates: you are satisfied because you are not a mouse. A mouse, on the other hand, is a mouse, as my mother used to say. Think a moment: Do mice have holidays? Are there royal birthdays to celebrate? Are there royal weddings for endless eating? Are there royal palaces to dream about? No, not for a mouse, Socrates. Or do you imagine that the mice have a king and have just not told us? Do you think so, Socrates? Because if you do, then you are mistaken. (And did you not tell me just yesterday that you would not like to be mistaken?)

SOCRATES: Frankly, I am not certain; I do not remember saying that, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Well, *I* remember, Socrates; I remember quite well. And I also remember that Hecataeus was not surprised that the mice wanted a king. They wanted a king—so, do you know what they did?

SOCRATES: No, what did they do?

PHERECYDES: They petitioned Zeus, of course. (It is no wonder this story is dragging on and on, Socrates, if you cannot imagine even the simplest logical details.) Anyways, the mice did the most logical thing, they sent a deputation to Zeus in order to secure a king.

“You want a king?” asked the great god of thunder.

“Yes,” responded the mice, “we would like a king, if you please.”

So, Socrates, you can imagine what Zeus did.

SOCRATES: What did he do?

PHERECYDES: By the golden gods, must I tell you everything man?! Zeus dropped down upon them a large block of wood with a blue splanck painted across the middle.

SOCRATES: He did?

PHERECYDES: Of course he did. Zeus saw how simple the mice were, and he thought: “A large solid block of wood with a blue splanck would be a fine king for a crowd of field mice.” He dropped the block of wood, and it landed in the midst of a slonk . . .

SOCRATES: A “slonk”?

PHERECYDES: Yes—a slonk.

SOCRATES: What is a slonk?

PHERECYDES: Socrates, did you not attend a gymnasium? (What do they teach children nowadays?) A slonk is a damp ditch, my hasty young friend; it is a wet and slonky hollow. And there it lay—that wooden block—wet and thick, splanked and slonked. Well you can imagine how the mice felt.

SOCRATES: I am not certain that I can, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Of course you cannot, Socrates—you are not a mouse. But were you a mouse, then you would have been startled at first. Startled, I say (and so said Hecataeus). Therefore, they ran: the mice scattered in all directions.

SOCRATES: And well they might.

PHERECYDES: And well they did. They whisked off, and they hid in the fields, behind the wheat stalks and the jipijapa leaves and the tangleberry roots. The wooden block did not move. Night came, and the moon rose. The mice

peeked and poked out. A snuffle and a whisker and little by little they came near the wooden block again. Finally, they gathered round—and just then the block wiggled. And do you know why?

SOCRATES: No, I cannot imagine, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Oh? Then you had best be quiet, Socrates.

SOCRATES: I will be as quiet as a mouse, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Ah, that is very apt, Socrates, for the mice *were* quiet; they were absolutely silent, like statues (not the statues of Daedalus, of course, which move of their own volition). The wooden block lay still, and it lay quiet. The mice watched and waited. Nothing happened during all the rest of the night. Finally, Dawn arose, with her long pink fingers spreading across the sky and tinting the edges of the gray clouds. The dawn on Leros is always a wondrous sight, Socrates. Have you ever seen a Lerosian morning?

SOCRATES: No, my friend, I have never been to Leros.

PHERECYDES: That is a shame, Socrates, but you are still young, perhaps one of these years . . .

SOCRATES: Perhaps.

PHERECYDES: Do not give up hope, my friend, anything is possible: even a block of wood might be king—at least, that is what the mice thought at first. After the dawn, however, it became clear that the block of wood had little to offer. In the cold morning light, the blue splanck lost its luster—for, what is a blue splanck without spleen? (Well, Socrates? Have you nothing to say?)

SOCRATES: Nothing, my friend—a splanck without spleen does sound rather dull.

PHERECYDES: With no spleen, the wooden block was blank and plain and ordinary. The mice had no glittering majestic royalty, and they felt cheated. How could they be ruled by a lump of wood, by a chunk of lumber, by a churlish bit of tree trunk? Have you ever thought about that, Socrates? Can you imagine following the dictates of a chip of wood?

SOCRATES: I have never considered it, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Well, you should think more widely, young man. Now, what would you do if faced with that situation? No doubt, Socrates, you would do what the mice did: they prayed. It was undignified to be ruled by such a thing, they told great Zeus. In fact, it was contemptible.

Ah, but that was not the thing to tell a god like Zeus.

SOCRATES: It was not?

PHERECYDES: Of course it was not! A god who throws thunderbolts about, before breakfast, is not a god whose actions one might question casually. If Zeus drops a log on you, then it is best to think carefully before complaining.

SOCRATES: That sounds prudent.

PHERECYDES: Oh? Sounds can deceive, Socrates. My mother often said that the ear is a poor listener, and those who knew her on Leros knew that she meant what she said.

SOCRATES: I am certain that she did, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: She did, by the gods—and Zeus, too, meant what he said. And as Hecataeus reported, Zeus said: "All right, my good mice, if it is royalty that you want, then it is royalty that you shall get. I will send down upon you full and awesome majesty and grace."

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With that, Zeus summoned a fine and fearsome eagle—it was a majestic and graceful avian ruler—from atop the cold Olympos heights. That great and wondrous bird, the kingly eagle, circled long and slow, far above the clouds. The huge bird hovered a moment, and then he began to swoop down through the skies. A great wind arose, and the bird dropped to earth. The eagle fell upon the mice; he grabbed them, one and all, in his six sharp talons; and he ate them, every last one. And that, Socrates, is why to this day there are no mice on Leros, not a single one. The fields are empty of mice, and the whole island, as you know, is mouseless.

SOCRATES: I did not know that, Pherecydes.

PHERECYDES: Then you still have much to learn, my young and hasty friend.

