CHAPTER XI

Socrates

SOCRATES is a very difficult subject for the historian. There are many men concerning whom it is certain that very little is known, and other men concerning whom it is certain that a great deal is known; but in the case of Socrates the uncertainty is as to whether we know very little or a great deal. He was undoubtedly an Athenian citizen of moderate means, who spent his time in disputation, and taught philosophy to the young, but not for money, like the Sophists. He was certainly tried, condemned to death, and executed in 399 B.C., at about the age of seventy. He was unquestionably a well-known figure in Athens, since Aristophanes caricatured him in *The Clouds*. But beyond this point we become involved in controversy. Two of his pupils, Xenophon and Plato, wrote voluminously about him, but they said very different things. Even when they agree, it has been suggested by Burnet that Xenophon is copying Plato. Where they disagree, some believe the one, some the other, some neither. In such a dangerous dispute, I shall not venture to take sides, but I will set out briefly the various points of view.

Let us begin with Xenophon, a military man, not very liberally endowed with brains, and on the whole conventional in his outlook. Xenophon is pained that Socrates should have been accused of impiety and of corrupting the youth; he contends that, on the contrary, Socrates was eminently pious and had a thoroughly wholesome effect upon those who came under his influence. His ideas, it appears, so

far from being subversive, were rather dull and commonplace. This defence goes too far, since it leaves the hostility to Socrates unexplained. As Burnet says (*Thales to Plato*, p. 149): "Xenophon's defence of Socrates is too successful. He would never have been put to death if he had been like that."

There has been a tendency to think that everything Xenophon says must be true, because he had not the wits to think of anything untrue. This is a very invalid line of argument. A stupid man's report of what a clever man says is never accurate, because he unconsciously translates what he hears into something that he can understand. I would rather be reported by my bitterest enemy among philosophers than by a friend innocent of philosophy. We cannot therefore accept what Xenophon says if it either involves any difficult point in philosophy or is part of an argument to prove that Socrates was unjustly condemned.

Nevertheless, some of Xenophon's reminiscences are very convincing. He tells (as Plato also does) how Socrates was continually occupied with the problem of getting competent men into positions of power. He would ask such questions as: "If I wanted a shoe mended, whom should I employ?" To which some ingenuous youth would answer: "A shoemaker, O Socrates." He would go on to carpenters, coppersmiths, etc., and finally ask some such question as "who should mend the Ship of State?" When he fell into conflict with the Thirty Tyrants, Critias, their chief, who knew his ways from having studied under him, forbade him to continue teaching the young, and added: "You had better be done with your shoemakers, carpenters, and coppersmiths. These must be pretty well trodden out at heel by this time, considering the circulation you have given them" (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, Bk. I, Chap. II). This happened during the brief oligarchic government established by the Spartans at the end of the Peloponnesian War. But at most times Athens was democratic, so much so that even generals were elected or chosen by lot. Socrates came across a young man who wished to become a general, and persuaded him that it would be well to know something of the art of war. The young man accordingly went away and took a brief course in tactics. When he returned, Socrates, after some satirical praise, sent him back for further instruction (*ib.* Bk. III, Chap I). Another young man he set to learning the principles of

finance. He tried the same sort of plan on many people, including the war minister; but it was decided that it was easier to silence him by means of the hemlock than to cure the evils of which he complained.

With Plato's account of Socrates, the difficulty is quite a different one from what it is in the case of Xenophon, namely, that it is very hard to judge how far Plato means to portray the historical Socrates, and how far he intends the person called "Socrates" in his dialogues to be merely the mouthpiece of his own opinions. Plato, in addition to being a philosopher, is an imaginative writer of great genius and charm. No one supposes, and he himself does not seriously pretend, that the conversations in his dialogues took place just as he records them. Nevertheless, at any rate in the earlier dialogues, the conversation is completely natural and the characters quite convincing. It is the excellence of Plato as a writer of fiction that throws doubt on him as a historian. His Socrates is a consistent and extraordinarily interesting character, far beyond the power of most men to invent; but I think Plato *could* have invented him. Whether he did so is of course another question.

The dialogue which is most generally regarded as historical is the *Apology*. This professes to be the speech that Socrates made in his own defence at his trial—not, of course, a stenographic report, but what remained in Plato's memory some years after the event, put together and elaborated with literary art. Plato was present at the trial, and it certainly seems fairly clear that what is set down is the *sort* of thing that Plato remembered Socrates as saying, and that the intention is, broadly speaking, historical. This, with all its limitations, is enough to give a fairly definite picture of the character of Socrates.

The main facts of the trial of Socrates are not open to doubt. The prosecution was based upon the charge that "Socrates is an evil-doer and a curious person, searching into things under the earth and above the heaven; and making the worse appear the better cause, and teaching all this to others." The real ground of hostility to him was, almost certainly, that he was supposed to be connected with the aristocratic party; most of his pupils belonged to this faction, and some, in positions of power, had proved themselves very pernicious. But this ground could not be made evident, on account of the amnesty. He was found guilty by a majority, and it was then open to him, by

Athenian law, to propose some lesser penalty than death. The judges had to choose, if they had found the accused guilty, between the penalty demanded by the prosecution and that suggested by the defence. It was therefore to the interest of Socrates to suggest a substantial penalty, which the court might have accepted as adequate. He, however, proposed a fine of thirty minae, for which some of his friends (including Plato) were willing to go surety. This was so small a punishment that the court was annoyed, and condemned him to death by a larger majority than that which had found him guilty. Undoubtedly he foresaw this result. It is clear that he had no wish to avoid the death penalty by concessions which might seem to acknowledge his guilt.

The prosecutors were Anytus, a democratic politician; Meletus, a tragic poet, "youthful and unknown, with lanky hair, and scanty beard, and a hooked nose"; and Lykon, an obscure rhetorician. (See Burnet, *Thales to Plato*, p. 180.) They maintained that Socrates was guilty of not worshipping the gods the State worshipped but introducing other new divinities, and further that he was guilty of corrupting the young by teaching them accordingly.

Without further troubling ourselves with the insoluble question of the relation of the Platonic Socrates to the real man, let us see what Plato makes him say in answer to this charge.

Socrates begins by accusing his prosecutors of eloquence, and rebutting the charge of eloquence as applied to himself. The only eloquence of which he is capable, he says, is that of truth. And they must not be angry with him if he speaks in his accustomed manner, not in "a set oration, duly ornamented with words and phrases." * He is over seventy, and has never appeared in a court of law until now; they must therefore pardon his un-forensic way of speaking.

He goes on to say that, in addition to his formal accusers, he has a large body of informal accusers, who, ever since the judges were children, have gone about "telling of one Socrates, a wise man, who speculated about the heavens above, and searched into the earth beneath, and made the worse appear the better cause." Such men, he says, are supposed not to believe in the existence of the gods. This old accusation by public opinion is more dangerous than the formal

* In quotations from Plato I have used Jowett's translation.

indictment, the more so as he does not know who are the men from whom it comes, except in the case of Aristophanes.* He points out, in reply to these older grounds of hostility, that he is not a man of science—"I have nothing to do with physical speculations"—that he is not a teacher, and does not take money for teaching. He goes on to make fun of the Sophists, and to disclaim the knowledge that they profess to have. What, then, is "the reason why I am called wise and have such an evil fame?"

The oracle of Delphi, it appears, was once asked if there were any man wiser than Socrates, and replied that there was not. Socrates professes to have been completely puzzled, since he knew nothing, and yet a god cannot lie. He therefore went about among men reputed wise, to see whether he could convict the god of error. First he went to a politician, who "was thought wise by many, and still wiser by himself." He soon found that the man was not wise, and explained this to him, kindly but firmly, "and the consequence was that he hated me." He then went to the poets, and asked them to explain passages in their writings, but they were unable to do so. "Then I knew that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration." Then he went to the artisans, but found them equally disappointing. In the process, he says, he made many dangerous enemies. Finally he concluded that "God only is wise; and by his answer he intends to show that the wisdom of men is worth little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name by way of illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing." This business of showing up pretenders to wisdom takes up all his time, and has left him in utter poverty, but he feels it a duty to vindicate the oracle.

Young men of the richer classes, he says, having not much to do, enjoy listening to him exposing people, and proceed to do likewise, thus increasing the number of his enemies. "For they do not like to confess that their pretence of knowledge has been detected."

So much for the first class of accusers.

Socrates now proceeds to examine his prosecutor Meletus, "that good man and true lover of his country, as he calls himself." He asks

* In *The Clouds*, Socrates is represented as denying the existence of Zeus.

who are the people who *improve* the young. Meletus first mentions the judges; then, under pressure, is driven, step by step, to say that every Athenian except Socrates improves the young; whereupon Socrates congratulates the city on its good fortune. Next, he points out that good men are better to live among than bad men, and therefore he cannot be so foolish as to corrupt his fellow-citizens *intentionally;* but if unintentionally, then Meletus should instruct him, not prosecute him.

The indictment had said that Socrates not only denied the gods of the State, but introduced other gods of his own; Meletus, however, says that Socrates is a complete atheist, and adds: "He says that the sun is stone and the moon earth." Socrates replies that Meletus seems to think he is prosecuting Anaxagoras, whose views may be heard in the theatre for one drachma (presumably in the plays of Euripides). Socrates of course points out that this new accusation of complete atheism contradicts the indictment, and then passes on to more general considerations.

The rest of the *Apology* is essentially religious in tone. He has been a soldier, and has remained at his post, as he was ordered to do. Now "God orders me to fulfil the philosopher's mission of searching into myself and other men," and it would be as shameful to desert his post now as in time of battle. Fear of death is not wisdom, since no one knows whether death may not be the greater good. If he were offered his life on condition of ceasing to speculate as he has done hitherto, he would reply: "Men of Athens, I honour and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you,* and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting any one whom I meet. . . . For know that this is the command of God; and I believe that no greater good has ever happened in the State than my service to the God." He goes on:

> I have something more to say, at which you may be inclined to cry out; but I believe that to hear me will be good for you, and therefore I beg that you will not cry out. I would have you know, that if you kill such a one as I am, you will injure yourselves more than you will injure me. Nothing will injure me, not Meletus nor yet Anytus—they cannot, for a bad man is not permitted to injure a better than himself. I do not deny that

* Cf. *Acts*, V, 29.

> Anytus may perhaps kill him, or drive him into exile, or deprive him of civil rights; and he may imagine, and others may imagine, that he is inflicting a great injury upon him: but there I do not agree. For the evil of doing as he is doing—the evil of unjustly taking away the life of another—is greater far.

It is for the sake of his judges, he says, not for his own sake, tha he is pleading. He is a gad-fly, given to the state by God, and it wil not be easy to find another like him. "I dare say you may feel out o temper (like a person who is suddenly awakened from sleep), an you think that you might easily strike me dead as Anytus advises, an then you would sleep on for the remainder of your lives, unless Go in his care of you sent you another gad-fly."

Why has he only gone about in private, and not given advice o public affairs? "You have heard me speak at sundry times and i diverse places of an oracle or sign which comes to me, and is th divinity which Meletus ridicules in the indictment. This sign, whic is a kind of voice, first began to come to me when I was a child; i always forbids but never commands me to do anything which I ar going to do. This is what deters me from being a politician." He goe on to say that in politics no honest man can live long. He gives tw instances in which he was unavoidably mixed up in public affairs: i the first, he resisted the democracy; in the second, the Thirty Tyrant in each case when the authorities were acting illegally.

He points out that among those present are many former pupil of his, and fathers and brothers of pupils; not one of these has bee produced by the prosecution to testify that he corrupts the youn (This is almost the only argument in the *Apology* that a lawyer fo the defence would sanction.) He refuses to follow the custom of pro ducing his weeping children in court, to soften the hearts of th judges; such scenes, he says, make the accused and the city alik ridiculous. It is his business to convince the judges, not to ask a favou of them.

After the verdict, and the rejection of the alternative penalty o thirty minae (in connection with which Socrates names Plato as on among his sureties, and present in court), he makes one final speech

> And now, O men who have condemned me, I would fain prophesy to you; for I am about to die, and in the hour of death

> men are gifted with prophetic power. And I prophesy to you, who are my murderers, that immediately after my departure punishment far heavier than you have inflicted on me will surely await you. . . . If you think that by killing men you can prevent some one from censuring your evil lives, you are mistaken; that is not a way of escape which is either possible or honourable; the easiest and the noblest way is not to be disabling others, but to be improving yourselves.

He then turns to those of his judges who have voted for acquittal, and tells them that, in all that he has done that day, his oracle has never opposed him, though on other occasions it has often stopped him in the middle of a speech. This, he says, "is an intimation that what has happened to me is a good, and that those of us who think death is an evil are in error." For either death is a dreamless sleep—which is plainly good—or the soul migrates to another world. And "what would not a man give if he might converse with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer? Nay, if this be true, let me die and die again." In the next world, he will converse with others who have suffered death unjustly, and, above all, he will continue his search after knowledge. "In another world they do not put a man to death for asking questions: assuredly not. For besides being happier than we are, they will be immortal, if what is said is true. . . .

"The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows."

The *Apology* gives a clear picture of a man of a certain type: a man very sure of himself, high-minded, indifferent to worldly success, believing that he is guided by a divine voice, and persuaded that clear thinking is the most important requisite for right living. Except in this last point, he resembles a Christian martyr or a Puritan. In the final passage, where he considers what happens after death, it is impossible not to feel that he firmly believes in immortality, and that his professed uncertainty is only assumed. He is not troubled, like the Christians, by fears of eternal torment: he has no doubt that his life in the next world will be a happy one. In the *Phaedo*, the Platonic Socrates gives reasons for the belief in immortality; whether these were the reasons that influenced the historical Socrates, it is impossible to say.

There seems hardly any doubt that the historical Socrates claimed to be guided by an oracle or *daimon*. Whether this was analogous to what a Christian would call the voice of conscience, or whether it appeared to him as an *actual* voice, it is impossible to know. Joan of Arc was inspired by voices, which are a common form of insanity. Socrates was liable to cataleptic trances; at least, that seems the natural explanation of such an incident as occurred once when he was on military service:

> One morning he was thinking about something which he could not resolve; he would not give it up, but continued thinking from early dawn until noon—there he stood fixed in thought; and at noon attention was drawn to him, and the rumour ran through the wondering crowd that Socrates had been standing and thinking about something ever since the break of day. At last, in the evening after supper, some Ionians out of curiosity (I should explain that this occurred not in winter but in summer), brought out their mats and slept in the open air that they might watch him and see whether he would stand all night. There he stood until the following morning; and with the return of light he offered up a prayer to the sun, and went his way (*Symposium*, 220).

This sort of thing, in a lesser degree, was a common occurrence with Socrates. At the beginning of the *Symposium*, Socrates and Aristodemus go together to the banquet, but Socrates drops behind in a fit of abstraction. When Aristodemus arrives, Agathon, the host, says "what have you done with Socrates?" Aristodemus is astonished to find Socrates not with him; a slave is sent to look for him, and finds him in the portico of a neighbouring house. "There he is fixed," says the slave on his return, "and when I call to him he will not stir." Those who know him well explain that "he has a way of stopping anywhere and losing himself without any reason." They leave him alone, and he enters when the feast is half over.

Every one is agreed that Socrates was very ugly; he had a snub nose and a considerable paunch; he was "uglier than all the Silenuses in the Satyric drama" (Xenophon, *Symposium*). He was always dressed in shabby old clothes, and went barefoot everywhere. His indifference to heat and cold, hunger and thirst, amazed every one. Alcibiades in the *Symposium*, describing Socrates on military service, says:

> His endurance was simply marvellous when, being cut off from our supplies, we were compelled to go without food—on such occasions, which often happen in time of war, he was superior not only to me but to everybody: there was no one to be compared to him. . . . His fortitude in enduring cold was also surprising. There was a severe frost, for the winter in that region is really tremendous, and everybody else either remained indoors, or if they went out had on an amazing quantity of clothes, and were well shod, and had their feet swathed in felt and fleeces: in the midst of this, Socrates with his bare feet on the ice and in his ordinary dress marched better than the other soldiers who had shoes, and they looked daggers at him because he seemed to despise them.

His mastery over all bodily passions is constantly stressed. He seldom drank wine, but when he did, he could out-drink anybody; no one had ever seen him drunk. In love, even under the strongest temptations, he remained "Platonic," if Plato is speaking the truth. He was the perfect Orphic saint: in the dualism of heavenly soul and earthly body, he had achieved the complete mastery of the soul over the body. His indifference to death at the last is the final proof of this mastery. At the same time, he is not an orthodox Orphic; it is only the fundamental doctrines that he accepts, not the superstitions and ceremonies of purification.

The Platonic Socrates anticipates both the Stoics and the Cynics. The Stoics held that the supreme good is virtue, and that a man cannot be deprived of virtue by outside causes; this doctrine is implicit in the contention of Socrates that his judges cannot harm him. The Cynics despised worldly goods, and showed their contempt by eschewing the comforts of civilization; this is the same point of view that led Socrates to go barefoot and ill-clad.

It seems fairly certain that the preoccupations of Socrates were ethical rather than scientific. In the *Apology*, as we saw, he says: "I have nothing to do with physical speculations." The earliest of the Platonic dialogues, which are generally supposed to be the most Socratic, are mainly occupied with the search for definitions of ethical terms. The *Charmides* is concerned with the definition of temperance or moderation; the *Lysis* with friendship; the *Laches* with courage. In all of these, no conclusion is arrived at, but Socrates makes it clear

that he thinks it important to examine such questions. The Platonic Socrates consistently maintains that he knows nothing, and is only wiser than others in knowing that he knows nothing; but he does not think knowledge unobtainable. On the contrary, he thinks the search for knowledge of the utmost importance. He maintains that no man sins wittingly, and therefore only knowledge is needed to make all men perfectly virtuous.

The close connection between virtue and knowledge is characteristic of Socrates and Plato. To some degree, it exists in all Greek thought, as opposed to that of Christianity. In Christian ethics, a pure heart is the essential, and is at least as likely to be found among the ignorant as among the learned. This difference between Greek and Christian ethics has persisted down to the present day.

Dialectic, that is to say, the method of seeking knowledge by question and answer, was not invented by Socrates. It seems to have been first practised systematically by Zeno, the disciple of Parmenides; in Plato's dialogue *Parmenides*, Zeno subjects Socrates to the same kind of treatment to which, elsewhere in Plato, Socrates subjects others. But there is every reason to suppose that Socrates practised and developed the method. As we saw, when Socrates is condemned to death he reflects happily that in the next world he can go on asking questions for ever, and cannot be put to death, as he will be immortal. Certainly, if he practised dialectic in the way described in the *Apology*, the hostility to him is easily explained: all the humbugs in Athens would combine against him.

The dialectic method is suitable for some questions, and unsuitable for others. Perhaps this helped to determine the character of Plato's inquiries, which were, for the most part, such as could be dealt with in this way. And through Plato's influence, most subsequent philosophy has been bounded by the limitations resulting from his method.

Some matters are obviously unsuitable for treatment in this way—empirical science, for example. It is true that Galileo used dialogues to advocate his theories, but that was only in order to overcome prejudice—the positive grounds for his discoveries could not be inserted in a dialogue without great artificiality. Socrates, in Plato's works, always pretends that he is only eliciting knowledge already possessed by the man he is questioning; on this ground, he compares himself to a midwife. When, in the *Phaedo* and the *Meno*, he applies his

method to geometrical problems, he has to ask leading questions which any judge would disallow. The method is in harmony with the doctrine of reminiscence, according to which we learn by remembering what we knew in a former existence. As against this view, consider any discovery that has been made by means of the microscope, say the spread of diseases by bacteria; it can hardly be maintained that such knowledge can be elicited from a previously ignorant person by the method of question and answer.

The matters that are suitable for treatment by the Socratic method are those as to which we have already enough knowledge to come to a right conclusion, but have failed, through confusion of thought or lack of analysis, to make the best logical use of what we know. A question such as "what is justice?" is eminently suited for discussion in a Platonic dialogue. We all freely use the words "just" and "unjust," and, by examining the ways in which we use them, we can arrive inductively at the definition that will best suit with usage. All that is needed is knowledge of how the words in question are used. But when our inquiry is concluded, we have made only a linguistic discovery, not a discovery in ethics.

We can, however, apply the method profitably to a somewhat larger class of cases. Wherever what is being debated is logical rather than factual, discussion is a good method of eliciting truth. Suppose some one maintains, for example, that democracy is good, but persons holding certain opinions should not be allowed to vote, we may convict him of inconsistency, and prove to him that at least one of his two assertions must be more or less erroneous. Logical errors are, I think, of greater practical importance than many people believe; they enable their perpetrators to hold the comfortable opinion on every subject in turn. Any logically coherent body of doctrine is sure to be in part painful and contrary to current prejudices. The dialectic method —or, more generally, the habit of unfettered discussion—tends to promote logical consistency, and is in this way useful. But it is quite unavailing when the object is to discover new facts. Perhaps "philosophy" might be defined as the sum-total of those inquiries that can be pursued by Plato's methods. But if this definition is appropriate, that is because of Plato's influence upon subsequent philosophers.