

The Problem of Socrates

Socrates son of Sophroniscus was born in Athens *circa* 470 BCE and was executed by the Athenian state in 399 BCE. Probably, it is safe to say that more has been written about, and more conflicting reports surround this enigmatic philosopher than all other ancient philosophers combined. We do have some solid historical information about him. First, in an era marked by physical appearance, we know quite a lot about Socrates' physical appearance. It is said that Socrates resembled a Satyr from the description provided by Aristophanes. Socrates went about barefoot and unwashed, had bulging eyes that darted side-ways and enabled him, like a crab, to see not only what was straight ahead, by what was on the sides as well. He had a flat, upturned nose with wide-open nostrils that sniffed all around. He had large, fleshy lips like an ass, an arrogant expression, and tended not to leave the city of Athens. The only exception to this was when he served as a soldier in the Peloponnesian War. He saw battle at Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium. Potidaea revolted in April of 432, and Socrates (age 37) was among the Athenian troops deployed that summer. This campaign was brutal. There was a long siege in which there are reports of cannibalism. Athens won this siege, but the troops, on the way home, were ambushed by the Spartans on a rare night battle. It is reported that Socrates saved the day because of his weird behavior. Socrates would often stand immobile for long periods of time, staring in the distance, and then start moving around. He was left to watch the perimeter of the camp, became immobile, and "woke up" just at the time when most of the rest of the camp was asleep. He warned the camp and proceeded, single handedly, to ward off the Spartans. During the battle, he saved Alcibiades and his armor. The other two battles also ended disastrously for Athenians. Socrates' military career ended when he was age 47. During his lifetime, his friend and comic playwright Aristophanes parodied him in the *Clouds*. We, also, know that he was involved in the last days of the original democracy, and participated in two controversial trials held by the restored democracy. Beyond this is a matter of speculation. Many legends surround Socrates. Anyone who has read Plato's *Apology* has encountered the most well known accounts of these. Also, it is well known that Socrates was Plato's philosophical "teacher". Exactly what this relationship entailed is also a matter of much speculation. Before probing what we can safely say about Socrates, we should compare him to his most famous pupil.

Socrates	Plato
Wrote nothing	Wrote 36 texts and several letters
Lower to working class background	Aristocratic background
Poor	Wealthy
Ugly	Handsome
Married with 3 children	Never Married

Did not form a school	Founded the Academy
Traveled little	Traveled greatly
Was hostile to his philosophical teacher	Was sympathetic to his philosophical teacher
Involved in Politics	Shunned Politics

We have four main sources, and a number of minor sources, concerning Socrates. These are Plato's dialogues, Aristophanes' play *The Clouds*, Xenophon's dialogues, and Aristotle's treatises. None of these sources agree with one another about the philosophical content of Socrates' teachings. Aristophanes was a comic poet in the 5th century BCE. His account of Socrates makes him out to be a Sophist. Xenophon was a follower of Socrates, a general, and considered to be a historian. Xenophon's account of Socrates comes later than Plato's, but shares a number of the same concerns found in the Platonic account. Keep in mind, however, that Xenophonic Socrates is very different than the Platonic Socrates. Aristotle, also, discusses Socrates and separates Socratic teaching from Platonic teaching in his survey of former *endoxai* of previous philosophers. Aristotle, however, never met Socrates, but he did attend the Academy, and would therefore have heard much about him from Plato.

In comparing these four sources, three things can be said with much certainty. Socrates had a method of inquiry and held several paradoxes. He was also not concerned, primarily, with questions about the nature of the universe. His concern was with practical problems. Definition also play an important role in Socratic philosophy. Ultimately, Socratic thinking ends in a type of scepticism. Now that we have addressed some of the more certain ideas about Socratic philosophy, let's move into the controversies.

Since the early part of the 1940's, most philosophers distinguish Socratic inquiry from Platonic inquiry, by calling Socrates' method the *elenchus*. This is a term derived from the Greek ἐλεγχων which means to inquire or to interrogate; this term also is used for cross-examination in legal texts from this century. Richard Robinson, in *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, champions this notion. It is later developed by Gregory Vlastos in a number of essays and books. Because of the authority of Vlastos, this view has almost become orthodox among Platonists. For the sake of argument, I will now provide an account of this method according to this interpretation. In cross-examination, Socrates would ask someone to define some notion, say virtue. The other person would then offer a definition in which some hidden assumption lied. Socrates would then proceed to extract these hidden implications and through questioning derive a contradiction to the initial definition. For example, in Plato's *Meno*, Socrates asks Meno to define what virtue is. Meno, in summary, says that virtue is different for each and every one of us. By implication, then, virtue in a man would not be the same thing as virtue in a woman, because of Meno's definition. This is the hidden implication. Socrates then asks Meno whether Strength and Health are virtues. Meno concedes that these are in fact virtues. Meno is then asked whether strength is the same in a man as in a woman, and the same with health. Meno concedes this as well, that they are the same. So, virtue is not different in a man as in a woman. Hence, his initial definition can be rejected as not

accounting for what virtue, in fact, is. The argumentative structure can be schematized as follows.

Let P define the nature of P .

P implies Q .

But Q implies its negation ($\sim Q$),

Hence, $\sim P$.

Hence P is an inadequate definition for P .

This model of argumentation is found in a number of the so-called early Platonic dialogues as well as in Xenophon's account of Socratic inquiry. One thing does not factor into this account, that is, Socrates' famous use of examples and analogy as a form of argumentation. Needless to say, Socrates was formidable in argumentation.

The three paradoxes that are associated with Socrates are as follows:

1. No one does evil knowingly.
2. To know the good is to do the good.
3. Virtue is knowledge.

Exactly what the content of these paradoxes meant for Socrates is a matter of great dispute. Suffice it to say that he held three paradoxes. We will see more about the nature of these, and how *Plato* understood their significance later on. What is safe to say here is that Socrates seemed to collapse Practical knowledge into Theoretical knowledge.

To sum this section up, Socrates was not concerned or did not appear to concern himself with inquiry into nature. He was concerned with practical knowing, and saw this as having certain theological implications. He had a method, and held three paradoxes concerning the nature of knowledge and virtue. As a result of his method of inquiry, Socratic thinking tends to result in perplexity or *aporia*, because any definition is subject to hidden implications, and hence to contradiction.

Something here needs to be said about the myths surrounding Socrates and his relationship to Plato. Let's start with the myths. The most important myth is the one concerning his knowledge. It is recorded by Plato and Xenophon that Socrates' associate Chaerephon asked the Pythia at Delphi who was the wisest man on earth. The Pythia was reported to have said that Socrates was, because he knew that he did not know, whereas others believe that they know but in fact do not. Socrates is said to have been shocked by the Pythia's oracle. He, then, took it as a mission to determine whether the Pythia was in fact correct. Through inquiry, he discovered that many pretended to have knowledge, but under investigation, did not know what they claimed to know. For Socrates, according to the accounts of Plato and Xenophon, he saw this as a religious mission from Apollo. He considered himself to be the gadfly of Athens. Something that stings others and spurs them to action. Socrates is portrayed in many of Plato's dialogues as admitting that he does not know anything, but because of his careful questioning, this appears often to be a matter of

irony.

Here, it must be said that Plato's account of Socrates is one of many. It is the most influential for us, because it is the most complete account we possess. In antiquity, there were at least eight other Socratic schools besides that of Plato's that develop soon after Socrates' death. Most of these other Socratics do not exist any longer. Our only point of comparison that is rich enough to see what variation there is in these other accounts of Socrates are those of Xenophon and to a lesser extent, that of Aristotle. Xenophon wrote a series of Socratic dialogues entitled the *Memorabilia Socratica*. Xenophon writes an account of Socrates' trial, a symposium, and an extended dialogue referred to as the *Household Management*. This last work resembles some parts of Plato's *Republic*, somewhat. These serve as points of comparison with some of Plato's works (the *Apology*, *Symposium*, and the *Republic*.) I would recommend anyone interested in furthering this line of inquiry to those works.

This leaves us with one major problem. If most of what we know of Socrates now comes from Plato's account, where does Plato the writer end and Plato the philosopher begin? In other words, how much of Plato's use of the *character* of Socrates provide us with insight into the historical person of Socrates and *his* thought? I cannot answer this in any detail here. What is safe to say about the historical Socrates has been said above. Some philosophers privilege Socrates as the creative genius and therefore relegate Plato to being a careful scribe. Others privilege Plato as being the creative genius, and relegate Socrates to merely the role of a character in the dialogues. Everyone else is somewhere in the middle. What should be noted here is several things. First, besides the *Apology*, even though Socrates is doing the speaking in these dialogues, *Plato* is composing them. One also should not confuse Socrates as Plato's mouthpiece in the dialogues. Plato is also writing all of the other characters as well. *Depending on the dialogue*, "Socrates" will say things that clearly the historical Socrates could not have held. Finally, what we may be seeing in the progression of the dialogues may be something like Plato entertaining the best arguments he is aware of for some line of inquiry and developing his own perspective by using the Socratic example. What is clear, in the end, that Socrates had a major influence on Plato, one that even late in life he did not abandon.