

Socrates (469-399 BC)

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Biography

Socrates, an Athenian Greek of the second half of the fifth century bc, wrote no philosophical works but was uniquely influential in the later history of philosophy. His philosophical interests were restricted to ethics and the conduct of life, topics which thereafter became central to philosophy. He discussed these in public places in Athens, sometimes with other prominent intellectuals or political leaders, sometimes with young men, who gathered round him in large numbers, and other admirers. Among these young men was Plato. Socrates' philosophical ideas and – equally important for his philosophical influence – his personality and methods as a 'teacher' were handed on to posterity in the 'dialogues' that several of his friends wrote after his death, depicting such discussions. Only those of Xenophon (*Memorabilia*, *Apology*, *Symposium*) and the early dialogues of Plato survive (for example *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*). Later Platonic dialogues such as *Phaedo*, *Symposium* and *Republic* do not present the historical Socrates' ideas; the 'Socrates' appearing in them is a spokesman for Plato's own ideas.

Socrates' discussions took the form of face-to-face interrogations of another person. Most often they concerned the nature of some moral virtue, such as courage or justice. Socrates asked what the respondent thought these qualities of mind and character amounted to, what their value was, how they were acquired. He would then test their ideas for logical consistency with other highly plausible general views about morality and goodness that the respondent also agreed to accept, once Socrates presented them. He succeeded in showing, to his satisfaction and that of the respondent and any bystanders, that the respondent's ideas were not consistent. By this practice of 'elenchus' or refutation he was able to prove that politicians and others who claimed to have 'wisdom' about human affairs in fact lacked it, and to draw attention to at least apparent errors in their thinking. He wanted to encourage them and others to think harder and to improve their ideas about the virtues and about how to conduct a good human life. He never argued directly for ideas of his own, but always questioned those of others. None the less, one can infer, from the questions he asks and his attitudes to the answers he receives, something about his own views.

Socrates was convinced that our souls – where virtues and vices are found – are vastly more important for our lives than our bodies or external circumstances. The quality of our souls determines the character of our lives, for better or for worse, much more than whether we are healthy or sick, or rich or poor. If we are to live well and happily, as he assumed we all want to do more than we want anything else, we must place the highest priority on the care of our souls. That means we must above all want to acquire the virtues, since they perfect our souls and enable them to direct our lives for the better. If only we could know what each of the virtues is we could then make an effort to obtain them. As to the nature of the virtues, Socrates seems to have held quite strict and, from the popular point of view, paradoxical views. Each virtue consists entirely in knowledge, of how it is best to act in some area of life, and why: additional 'emotional' aspects, such as the disciplining of our feelings and desires, he dismissed as of no importance.

Weakness of will is not psychologically possible: if you act wrongly or badly, that is due to your ignorance of how you ought to act and why. He thought each of the apparently separate virtues amounts to the same single body of knowledge: the comprehensive knowledge of what is and is not good for a human being. Thus his quest was to acquire this single wisdom: all the particular virtues would follow automatically.

At the age of 70 Socrates was charged before an Athenian popular court with ‘impiety’ – with not believing in the Olympian gods and corrupting young men through his constant questioning of everything. He was found guilty and condemned to death. Plato’s *Apology*, where Socrates gives a passionate defence of his life and philosophy, is one of the classics of Western literature. For different groups of later Greek philosophers he was the model both of a sceptical inquirer who never claims to know the truth, and of a ‘sage’ who knows the whole truth about human life and the human good. Among modern philosophers, the interpretations of his innermost meaning given by Montaigne, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche are especially notable.

1. Life and sources

Socrates, an Athenian citizen proud of his devotion to Athens, lived his adult life there engaging in open philosophical discussion and debate on fundamental questions of ethics, politics, religion and education. Going against the grain of the traditional education, he insisted that personal investigation and reasoned argument, rather than ancestral custom, or appeal to the authority of Homer, Hesiod and other respected poets, was the only proper basis for answering these questions. His emphasis on argument and logic and his opposition to unquestioning acceptance of tradition allied him with such Sophists of a generation earlier as Protagoras, Gorgias and Prodicus, none of whom was an Athenian, but all of whom spent time lecturing and teaching at Athens (see Sophists). Unlike these Sophists Socrates did not formally offer himself or accept pay as a teacher. But many upper-class young Athenian men gathered round him to hear and engage in his discussions, and he had an inspirational and educational effect upon them, heightening their powers of critical thought and encouraging them to take seriously their individual responsibility to think through and decide how to conduct their lives. Many of his contemporaries perceived this education as morally and socially destructive – it certainly involved subverting accepted beliefs – and he was tried in 399 bc before an Athenian popular court and condemned to death on a charge of ‘impiety’: that he did not believe in the Olympian gods, but in new ones instead, and corrupted the young. Scholars sometimes mention specifically political motives of revenge, based on guilt by association: a number of prominent Athenians who were with Socrates as young men or were close friends did turn against the Athenian democracy and collaborated with the Spartans in their victory over Athens in the Peloponnesian war. But an amnesty passed by the restored democracy in 403 bc prohibited prosecution for political offences before that date. The rhetorician Polycrates included Socrates’ responsibility for these political crimes in his *Accusation of Socrates* (see Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I 2.12), a rhetorical exercise written at least five years after Socrates’ death. But there is no evidence that, in contravention of the amnesty, Socrates’ actual accusers covertly attacked him, or his jurors condemned him, on that ground. The defences Plato and Xenophon constructed for Socrates, each in his respective *Apology*, imply that it was his own questioning mind and what was

perceived as the bad moral influence he had on his young men that led to his trial and condemnation.

Socrates left no philosophical works, and apparently wrote none. His philosophy and personality were made known to later generations through the dialogues that several of his associates wrote with him as principal speaker (see Socratic dialogues). Only fragments survive of those by Aeschines of Sphettus and Antisthenes, both Athenians, and Phaedo of Elis (after whom Plato's dialogue *Phaedo* is named). Our own knowledge of Socrates depends primarily on the dialogues of Plato and the Socratic works of the military leader and historian Xenophon. Plato was a young associate of Socrates' during perhaps the last ten years of his life, and Xenophon knew him during that same period, though he was absent from Athens at the time of Socrates' death and for several years before and many years after.

We also have secondary evidence from the comic playwright Aristophanes and from Aristotle. Aristotle, although born fifteen years after Socrates' death, had access through Plato and others to first-hand information about the man and his philosophy. Aristophanes knew Socrates personally; his *Clouds* (first produced c.423 bc) pillories the 'new' education offered by Sophists and philosophers by showing Socrates at work in a 'thinkery', propounding outlandish physical theories and teaching young men how to argue cleverly in defence of their improper behaviour. It is significant that in 423, when Socrates was about 45 years old, he could plausibly be taken as a leading representative in Athens of the 'new' education. But one cannot expect a comic play making fun of a whole intellectual movement to contain an authentic account of Socrates' specific philosophical commitments.

However, the literary genre to which Plato's and Xenophon's Socratic works belong (along with the other, lost dialogues) also permits the author much latitude; in his *Poetics* Aristotle counts such works as fictions of a certain kind, alongside epic poems and tragedies. They are by no means records of actual discussions (despite the fact that Xenophon explicitly so represents his). Each author was free to develop his own ideas behind the mask of Socrates, at least within the limits of what his personal experience had led him to believe was Socrates' basic philosophical and moral outlook. Especially in view of the many inconsistencies between Plato's and Xenophon's portraits (see §7 below), it is a difficult question for historical-philosophical interpretation whether the philosophical and moral views the character Socrates puts forward in any of these dialogues can legitimately be attributed to the historical philosopher. The problem of interpretation is made more difficult by the fact that Socrates appears in many of Plato's dialogues – ones belonging to his middle and later periods (see Plato §§10–16) – discussing and expounding views that we have good reason to believe resulted from Plato's own philosophical investigations into questions of metaphysics and epistemology, questions that were not entered into at all by the historical Socrates. To resolve this problem – what scholars call the 'Socratic problem' – most agree in preferring Plato to Xenophon as a witness. Xenophon is not thought to have been philosopher enough to have understood Socrates well or to have captured the depth of his views and his personality. As for Plato, most scholars accept only the philosophical interests and procedures, and the moral and philosophical views, of the Socrates of the early dialogues, and, more guardedly, the Socrates of 'transitional' ones such as *Meno* and *Gorgias*, as legitimate

representations of the historical personage. These dialogues are the ones that predate the emergence of the metaphysical and epistemological inquiries just referred to. However, even Plato's early dialogues are philosophical works written to further Plato's own philosophical interests. That could produce distortions, also; and Xenophon's relative philosophical innocence could make his portrait in some respects more reliable. Moreover, it is possible, even probable, that in his efforts to help his young men improve themselves Socrates spoke differently to the philosophically more promising ones among them – including Plato – from the way he spoke to others, for example Xenophon. Both portraits could be true, but partial and needing to be combined (see §7). The account of Socrates' philosophy given below follows Plato, with caution, while giving independent weight also to Xenophon and to Aristotle.

2. Life and sources (cont.)

Xenophon's *Apology of Socrates*, *Symposium* and *Memorabilia* (or *Memoirs*) may well reflect knowledge of Plato's own *Apology* and some of his early and middle period dialogues, as well as lost dialogues of Antisthenes and others. Xenophon composed the *Memorabilia* over many years, beginning only some ten years after Socrates' death, avowedly in order to defend Socrates' reputation as a good man, a true Athenian gentleman, and a good influence upon his young men. The same intention motivated his *Apology* and *Symposium*. Anything these works contain about Socrates' philosophical opinions and procedures is ancillary to that apologetic purpose. Plato's *Apology*, of course, is similarly apologetic, but it and his other early dialogues are carefully constructed discussions, strongly focused upon questions of philosophical substance. Plato evidently thought Socrates' philosophical ideas and methods were central to his life and to his mission. Xenophon's and Plato's testimony are agreed that Socrates' discussions consistently concerned the *aretai*, the recognized 'virtues' or excellences of character (see *Aretē*), such as justice, piety, self-control or moderation (*sōphrosynē*), courage and wisdom; what these individual characteristics consist in and require of a person, what their value is, and how they are acquired, whether by teaching or in some other way. In his *Apology* and elsewhere Plato has Socrates insist that these discussions were always inquiries, efforts made to engage his fellow-discussants in coming jointly to an adequate understanding of the matters inquired into. He does not himself know, and therefore cannot teach anyone else – whether by means of these discussions or in some other way – either how to be virtuous or what virtue in general or any particular virtue is. Furthermore, given his general characterization of virtue (see §§4–5), Plato's Socrates makes a point of suggesting the impossibility in principle of teaching virtue at all, by contrast with the Sophists who declared they could teach it. Virtue was not a matter of information about living or rote techniques of some sort to be handed on from teacher to pupil, but required an open-ended personal understanding that individuals could only come to for themselves. Xenophon, too, reports that Socrates denied he was a teacher of *aretē*, but he pays no attention to such issues of philosophical principle. He does not hesitate to show Socrates speaking of himself as a teacher (see *Apology* 26, *Memorabilia* I 6.13–14), and describes him as accepting young men from their fathers as his pupils (but not for a fee), and teaching them the virtues by displaying his own virtues to them for emulation, as well as through conversation and precepts. Perhaps Socrates did not insist on holding to strict philosophical principles in dealing with people on whom their point would have been lost.

In his *Apology* Plato's Socrates traces his practice of spending his days discussing and inquiring about virtue to an oracle delivered at the shrine of Apollo at Delphi. Xenophon also mentions this oracle in his *Apology*. A friend of Socrates', Chaerephon, had asked the god whether anyone was wiser than Socrates; the priestess answered that no one was. Because he was sure he was not wise at all – only the gods, he suspected, could actually *know* how a human life ought to be led – Socrates cross-examined others at Athens with reputations for that kind of wisdom. He wanted to show that there were people wiser than he and thus discover the true meaning of the oracle – Apollo was known to speak in riddles requiring interpretation to reach their deeper meaning. In the event, it turned out that the people he examined were not wise, since they could not even give a self-consistent set of answers to his questions: obviously, true knowledge requires at least that one think and speak consistently on the subjects one professes to know. So he concluded that the priestess's reply had meant that of all those with reputations for wisdom only he came close to deserving it; he wisely did not profess to know these things that only gods can know, and that was wisdom enough for a human being. Because only he knew that he did *not* know, only he was ready earnestly to inquire into virtue and the other ingredients of the human good, in an effort to learn. He understood therefore that Apollo's true intention in the oracle had been to encourage him to continue his inquiries, to help others to realize that it is beyond human powers actually to *know* how to live – that is the prerogative of the gods – and to do his best to understand as far as a human being can how one ought to live. The life of philosophy, as led by him, was therefore something he was effectively ordered by Apollo to undertake.

We must remember that Socrates was on trial on a charge of 'impiety'. In tracing his philosophical vocation back to Apollo's oracle, and linking it to a humble recognition of human weakness and divine perfection, he was constructing a powerful rebuttal of the charges brought against him. But it cannot be literally true – if that is what he intended to say – that Socrates began his inquiries about virtue only after hearing of the oracle. Chaerephon's question to Apollo shows he had established a reputation in Athens for wisdom before that. That reputation cannot have rested on philosophical inquiries of another sort. In Plato's *Phaedo* Socrates says he had been interested as a young man in philosophical speculations about the structure and causes of the natural world, but he plainly did not take those interests very far; and in any event, his reputation was not for that kind of wisdom, but wisdom about how to lead a human life. In fact we do not hear of the duty to Apollo in Xenophon, or in other dialogues of Plato, where we might expect to find it if from the beginning Socrates thought Apollo had commanded his life of philosophizing. However, we need not think Socrates was false to the essential spirit of philosophy as he practised it if in looking back on his life under threat of condemnation for impiety he chose, inaccurately, to see it as initially imposed on him by Apollo's oracle.

Despite its impressiveness, Socrates' speech failed to convince his jury of 501 male fellow citizens, and he died in the state prison by drinking hemlock as required by law. His speech evidently offended the majority of the jurors by its disdain for the charges and the proceedings; Xenophon explains his lofty behaviour, which he thinks would otherwise have been lunatic – and damaging to his reputation – by reporting that he had told friends in advance that as a 70-year-old still in possession of his health and faculties it was time for him to die anyhow, before senility set in. Furthermore, his 'divine sign' – the 'voice' he sometimes heard warning him for

his own good against a contemplated course of action – had prevented him from spending time crafting a defence speech. (This voice seems to have been the basis for the charge of introducing ‘new’ gods.) So he would do nothing to soften his manner in order to win his freedom. Even if this story is true, Plato could be right that Socrates put on a spirited, deeply serious defence of his life and beliefs – one that he thought should have convinced the jurors of his innocence, if only they had judged him intelligently and fairly.

3. Socratic elenchus, or refutation

In cross-examining those with reputations for wisdom about human affairs and showing their lack of it, Socrates employed a special method of dialectical argument that he himself had perfected, the method of ‘elenchus’ – Greek for ‘putting to the test’ or ‘refutation’. He gives an example at his trial when he cross-examines Meletus, one of his accusers (Plato, *Apology* 24d–27e). The respondent states a thesis, as something he *knows* to be true because he is wise about the matter in question. Socrates then asks questions, eliciting clarifications, qualifications and extensions of the thesis, and seeking further opinions of the respondent on related matters. He then argues, and the respondent sees no way not to grant, that the original thesis is logically inconsistent with something affirmed in these further responses. For Socrates, it follows at once that the respondent did not know what he was talking about in stating his original thesis: true knowledge would prevent one from such self-contradiction. So the respondent suffers a personal set-back; *he* is refuted – revealed as incompetent. Meletus, for example, does not have consistent ideas about the gods or what would show someone not to believe in them, and he does not have consistent ideas about who corrupts the young, and how; so he does not know what he is talking about, and no one should take *his* word for it that Socrates disbelieves in the gods or has corrupted his young men. In many of his early dialogues Plato shows Socrates using this method to examine the opinions of persons who claim to be wise in some matter: the religious expert Euthyphro on piety (Euthyphro), the generals Laches and Nicias on courage (Laches), the Sophist Protagoras on the distinctions among the virtues and whether virtue can be taught (Protagoras), the rhapsodist Ion on what is involved in knowing poetry (Ion), the budding politician Alcibiades on justice and other political values (Alcibiades), the Sophist Hippias on which was the better man, Odysseus or Achilles (Lesser Hippias), and on the nature of moral and aesthetic beauty (Greater Hippias). They are all refuted – shown to have mutually inconsistent ideas on the subject discussed (see Plato §§4, 6, 8–9).

But Socrates is not content merely to demonstrate his interlocutor’s lack of wisdom or knowledge. That might humiliate him into inquiring further or seeking by some other means the knowledge he has been shown to lack, instead of remaining puffed up with self-conceit. That would be a good thing. But Socrates often also indicates clearly that his cross-examination justifies him and the interlocutor in rejecting as false the interlocutor’s original thesis. Logically, that is obviously wrong: if the interlocutor contradicts himself, at least one of the things he has said must be false (indeed, all of them could be), but the fact alone of self-contradiction does not show where the falsehood resides. For example, when Socrates leads Euthyphro to accept ideas that contradict his own definition of the pious as whatever pleases all the gods, Socrates concludes that that definition has been shown to be false (Euthyphro 10d–11a), and asks

Euthyphro to come up with another one. He does not usually seem to consider that perhaps on further thought the additional ideas would seem faulty and so merit rejection instead.

Socrates uses his elenctic method also in discussion with persons who are not puffed up with false pride, and are quite willing to admit their ignorance and to reason out the truth about these important matters. Examples are his discussions with his long-time friend Crito on whether he should escape prison and set aside the court's death sentence (Plato, *Crito*), and with the young men Charmides, on self-control (*Charmides*), and Lysis and Menexenus, on the nature of friendship (*Lysis*). Socrates examines Crito's proposal that he escape on the basis of principles that he presents to him for his approval, and he, together with Crito (however half-heartedly), rejects it when it fails to be consistent with them. And he examines the young men's successive ideas about these virtues, rejecting some of them and refining others, by relying on their own acceptance of further ideas that he puts to them. Again, he is confident that the inconsistencies brought to light in their ideas indicate the inadequacy of their successive proposals as to the nature of the moral virtue in question.

In many of his discussions, both with young men and the allegedly wise, Socrates seeks to know what some morally valuable property is – for example, piety, courage, self-control or friendship (see §5). Rejecting the idea that one could learn this simply from attending to examples, he insisted on an articulated 'definition' of the item in question – some single account that would capture all at once the presumed common feature that would entitle anything to count as a legitimate instance. Such a definition, providing the essence of the thing defined, would give us a 'model' or 'paradigm' to use in judging whether or not some proposed action or person possesses the moral value so defined (*Euthyphro* 6d–e). Aristotle says (in *Metaphysics* I, 6) that Socrates was the first to interest himself in such 'universal definitions', and traces to his interest in them Plato's first impetus towards a theory of Forms, or 'separated' universals (see Plato §10).

In none of his discussions in Plato's early works does Socrates profess to think an adequate final result has actually been established – about the nature of friendship, or self-control, or piety, or any of the other matters he inquires about. Indeed, on the contrary, these works regularly end with professions of profound ignorance about the matter under investigation. Knowledge is never attained, and further questions always remain to be considered. But Socrates does plainly think that progress towards reaching final understanding has taken place (even if only a god, and no human being, could ever actually attain it). Not only has one discovered some things that are definitely wrong to say; one has also achieved some positive insights that are worth holding onto in seeking further systematic understanding. Given that Socrates' method of discussion is elenctic throughout, what does he think justifies this optimism?

On balance, our evidence suggests that Socrates had worked out no elaborate theory to support him here. The ideas he was stimulated to propound in an elenctic examination which went against some initial thesis seemed to him, and usually also to the others present, so plausible, and so supportable by further considerations, that he and they felt content to reject the initial thesis. Until someone came up with arguments to neutralize their force, it seemed the thesis was doomed, as contrary to reason itself. Occasionally Socrates expresses himself in just those terms: however unpalatable the option might seem, it remains open to someone to challenge the

grounds on which his conclusions rest (see Euthyphro 15c, Gorgias 461d–462a, 509a, Crito 54d). But until they do, he is satisfied to treat his and his interlocutor's agreement as a firm basis for thought and action. Later, when Plato himself became interested in questions of philosophical methodology in his Meno, this came to seem a philosophically unsatisfactory position; Plato's demand for justification for one's beliefs independent of what seemed on reflection most plausible led him to epistemological and metaphysical inquiries that went well beyond the self-imposed restriction of Socratic philosophy to ethical thought in the broadest sense. But Socrates did not raise these questions. In this respect more bound by traditional views than Plato, he had great implicit confidence in his and his interlocutors' capacity, after disciplined dialectical examination of the issues, to reach firm ground for constructing positive ideas about the virtues and about how best to lead a human life – even if these ideas never received the sort of final validation that a god, understanding fully the truth about human life, could give them.

4. Elenchus and moral progress

The topics Socrates discussed were always ethical, and never included questions of physical theory or metaphysics or other branches of philosophical study. Moreover, he always conducted his discussions not as theoretical inquiries but as profoundly personal moral tests. Questioner and interlocutor were equally putting their ways of life to what Socrates thought was the most important test of all – their capacity to stand up to scrutiny in rational argument about how one ought to live. In speaking about human life, he wanted his respondents to indicate what they truly believed, and as questioner he was prepared to do the same, at least at crucial junctures. Those beliefs were assumed to express not theoretical ideas, but the very ones on which they themselves were conducting their lives. In losing an argument with Socrates you did not merely show yourself logically or argumentatively deficient, but also put into question the very basis on which you were living. Your way of life might ultimately prove defensible, but if you cannot now defend it successfully, you are not leading it *with* any such justification. In that case, according to Socrates' views, your way of life is morally deficient. Thus if Menexenus, Lysis and Socrates profess to value friendship among the most important things in life and profess to be one another's friends, but cannot satisfactorily explain under pressure of elenctic investigation what a friend is, that casts serious doubt on the quality of any 'friendship' they might form (Plato, Lysis 212a, 223b). Moral consistency and personal integrity, and not mere delight in argument and logical thought, should therefore lead you to repeated elenctic examination of your views, in an effort to render them coherent and at the same time defensible on all sides through appeal to plausible arguments. Or, if some of your views have been shown false, by conflicting with extremely plausible general principles, it behoves you to drop them – and so to cease living in a way that depends upon accepting them. In this way, philosophical inquiry via the elenchus is fundamentally a personal moral quest. It is a quest not just to understand adequately the basis on which one is actually living, and the personal and moral commitments that this contains. It is also a quest to change the way one lives as the results of argument show one ought to, so that, at the logical limit of inquiry, one's way of life would be completely vindicated. Accordingly, Socrates in Plato's dialogues regularly insists on the individual and personal character of his discussions. He wants to hear the views of the one person with whom he is speaking. He dismisses as of no interest what outsiders or most people may think – provided that is not what his discussant is

personally convinced is true. The views of ‘the many’ may well not rest on thought or argument at all. Socrates insists that his discussant shoulder the responsibility to explain and defend rationally the views he holds, and follow the argument – reason – wherever it may lead.

We learn a good deal about Socrates’ own principles from both Plato and Xenophon. Those were ones that had stood up well over a lifetime of frequent elenctic discussions and had, as he thought, a wealth of plausible arguments in their favour. Foremost is his conviction that the virtues – self-control, courage, justice, piety, wisdom and related qualities of mind and soul – are essential if anyone is to lead a good and happy life. They are good in themselves for a human being, and they guarantee a happy life, *eudaimonia* – something that he thought all human beings always wanted, and wanted more than anything else. The virtues belong to the soul – they are the condition of a soul that has been properly cared for and brought to its best state. The soul is vastly more important for happiness than are health and strength of the body or social and political power, wealth and other external circumstances of life; the goods of the soul, and pre-eminently the virtues, are worth far more than any quantity of bodily or external goods. Socrates seems to have thought these other goods *are* truly good, but they only *do* people good, and thereby contribute to their happiness, under the condition that they are chosen and used in accordance with virtues indwelling in their souls (see Plato, *Apology* 30b, *Euthydemus* 280d–282d, *Meno* 87d–89a).

More specific principles followed. Doing injustice is worse for oneself than being subjected to it (*Gorgias* 469c–522e): by acting unjustly you make your soul worse, and that affects for the worse the whole of your life, whereas one who treats you unjustly at most harms your body or your possessions but leaves your soul unaffected. On the same ground Socrates firmly rejected the deeply entrenched Greek precept to aid one’s friends and harm one’s enemies, and the accompanying principle of retaliation, which he equated with returning wrongs for wrongs done to oneself and one’s friends (*Crito* 49a–d). Socrates’ daily life gave witness to his principles. He was poor, shabbily dressed and unshod, and made do with whatever ordinary food came his way: such things matter little. Wealth, finery and delicacies for the palate are not worth panting after and exerting oneself to enjoy. However, Socrates was fully capable of relishing both refined and plain enjoyments as occasion warranted (see §7).

5. The unity of virtue

The Greeks recognized a series of specially prized qualities of mind and character as *aretai* or virtues. Each was regarded as a distinct, separate quality: justice was one thing, concerned with treating other people fairly, courage quite another, showing itself in vigorous, correct behaviour in circumstances that normally cause people to be afraid; and self-control or moderation, piety and wisdom were yet others. Each of these ensured that its possessor would act in some specific ways, regularly and reliably over their lifetime, having the justified conviction that those are ways one *ought* to act – *agathon* (good) and *kalon* (fine, noble, admirable or beautiful) ways of acting. But each type of virtuous person acts rightly and well not only in regularly recurring, but also in unusual and unheralded, circumstances; the virtue involves always getting something right about how to live a good human life. Socrates thought these virtues were essential if one was to live happily (see §4). But what exactly were they? What was it about someone that made

them just, or courageous, or wise? If you did not know that, you would not know what to do in order to acquire those qualities. Furthermore, supposing you did possess a virtue, you would have to be able to explain and defend by argument the consequent ways in which you lived – otherwise your conviction that those are ways one *ought* to act would be shallow and unjustified. And in order to do that you would have to know what state of mind the virtue was, since that is essential to them (see Plato, Charmides 158e–159a). Consequently, in his discussions Socrates constantly asked for ‘definitions’ of various virtues: what is courage (Laches); what is self-control or moderation (Charmides), what is friendship (Lysis) and what is piety (Euthyphro). As this context shows, he was asking not for a ‘dictionary definition’, an account of the accepted linguistic understanding of a term, but for an ethically defensible account of an actual condition of mind or character to which the word in common use would be correctly applied. In later terminology, he was seeking a ‘real’ rather than a ‘nominal’ definition (see Definition; Plato §§6–9).

Socrates objected to definitions that make a virtue some external aspect of a virtuous action (such as the manner in which it is done – for example its ‘quiet’ or measured quality in the case of moderation, Charmides 160b–d), or simply the doing of specific types of action, described in terms of their external circumstances (such as, for courage, standing one’s ground in battle; Laches 190e–191d). He also objected to more psychological definitions that located a virtue in some non-rational and non-cognitive aspect of the soul (for example, in the case of courage, the soul’s endurance or strength of resistance) (Laches 192d–193e). For his own part, he regularly shows himself ready to accept only definitions that identify a virtue with some sort of knowledge or wisdom about what is valuable for a human being. That ‘intellectualist’ expectation about the nature of virtue, although never worked out to his satisfaction in any Platonic dialogue, is central to Socrates’ philosophy.

Given that in his discussions he is always the questioner, probing the opinions of his respondent and not arguing for views of his own, we never find Socrates stating clearly what led him to this intellectualism. Probably, however, it was considerations drawn from the generally agreed premise that each virtue is a condition motivating certain voluntary actions, chosen because they are good and fine or noble. He took it that what lies behind and produces any voluntary action is the idea under which it is done, the conception of the action in the agent’s mind that makes it seem the thing to do just then. If so, each virtue must be some state of the mind, the possessor of which constantly has certain distinctive general ideas about how one ought to behave. Furthermore, since virtues get this *right*, these are true ideas. And since a virtuous person acts well and correctly in a *perfectly reliable* way, they must be seated so deeply in the mind as to be ineradicable and unwaveringly present. The only state of mind that meets these conditions is knowledge: to know a subject is not just to be thoroughly convinced, but to have a deep, fully articulated understanding, being ready with explanations to fend off objections and apparent difficulties and to extend old principles into new situations, and being prepared to show with the full weight of reason precisely why each thing falling under it is and must be so. Each virtue, then, must be knowledge about how one ought to behave in some area of life, and why – a knowledge so deep and rationally secure that those who have it can be counted upon never to

change their minds, never to be argued out of or otherwise persuaded away from, or to waver in, their conviction about how to act.

In Plato's *Protagoras* Socrates goes beyond this, and identifies himself with the position, rejected by Protagoras in their discussion, that the apparently separate virtues of justice, piety, self-control, courage and wisdom are somehow one and the same thing – some single knowledge (361a–b). Xenophon too confirms that Socrates held this view (*Memorabilia* III 9.5). Protagoras defends the position that each of the virtues is not only a distinct thing from each of the others, but so different in kind that a person could possess one of them without possessing the others (329d–e). In opposing him, Socrates sometimes speaks plainly of two allegedly distinct virtues being 'one' (333b). Given this unity of the virtues, it would follow that a person could not possess one without having them all. And in speaking of justice and piety in particular, Socrates seems to go further, to imply that every action produced by virtue is equally an instance of *all* the standardly recognized virtues: pious as well as just, wise and self-controlled and courageous also. Among his early dialogues, however, Plato's own philosophical interests show themselves particularly heavily in the *Protagoras*, so it is doubtful how far the details of his arguments are to be attributed to the historical Socrates. The issues raised by Socrates in the *Protagoras* were, none the less, vigorously pursued by subsequent 'Socratic' philosophers (as Plutarch's report in *On Moral Virtue* 2 demonstrates). And the positions apparently adopted by Plato's Socrates were taken up and ingeniously defended by the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus (see Stoicism §16). As usual, because of his questioner's role, it is difficult to work out Socrates' grounds for holding to the unity of virtue; and it is difficult to tell whether, and if so how, he allowed that despite this unity there were some real differences between, say, justice and self-control, or courage and piety. Apparently he thought the same body of knowledge – knowledge of the whole of what is and is not good for human beings, and why it is so or not – must at least underlie the allegedly separate virtues. If you did not have that vast, comprehensive knowledge you could not be in the state of mind which is justice or in that which is courage, and so on; and if you did have it you would necessarily be in those states of mind. It seems doubtful whether Socrates himself progressed beyond that point. Efforts to do that were made by Chrysippus and the other philosophers referred to above. And despite denying that all virtues consist in knowledge, Plato in the *Republic* and Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI follow Socrates to the extent of holding, in different ways, that you need to have all the virtues in order to have any one.

6. Weakness of will denied

In Plato's *Protagoras* Socrates also denies the possibility of weakness of will – being 'mastered' by some desire so as to act voluntarily in a way one knows is wrong or bad (see also Xenophon, *Memorabilia* III 9.4, IV 5.6.) All voluntary wrongdoing or bad action is due to ignorance of how one ought to act and why, and to nothing else. This would be easy to understand if Socrates were using 'knowing' quite strictly, to refer to the elevated and demanding sort of knowledge described in §5 (sometimes called 'Socratic knowledge'). Someone could know an action was wrong or bad, with full 'Socratic knowledge', only if they were not just thoroughly convinced, but had a deep, fully articulated understanding, being ready with explanations to fend off objections and apparent difficulties, and prepared to show

precisely *why* it was so. That would mean that these ideas were seated so deeply in the mind as to be ineradicable and unwaveringly present. Accordingly, a person with ‘Socratic knowledge’ could not come to hold even momentarily that the action in question would be the thing to do, and so they could never do it voluntarily.

However, Plato’s Socrates goes further. He explains his denial of weak-willed action by saying that a person cannot voluntarily do actions which, in doing them, they even *believe* to be a wrong or bad thing to do (Protagoras 358c–e). He gives a much-discussed, elaborate argument to establish this stronger conclusion, starting from assumptions identifying that which is pleasant with that which is good (352a–357e). These assumptions, however, he attributes only to ordinary people, the ones who say they believe in the possibility of weak-willed action; he makes it clear to the careful reader, if not to Protagoras, that his own view is simply that pleasure is a good thing, not ‘the’ good (351c–e; see 354b–d). Although some scholars have thought otherwise, Socrates himself does not adopt a hedonist analysis of the good in the Protagoras or elsewhere either in Plato or Xenophon; indeed, he speaks elsewhere against hedonist views (see Hedonism). The fundamental principle underlying his argument – a principle he thinks ordinary people will accept – is that voluntary action is always ‘subjectively’ rational, in the sense that an agent who acts to achieve some particular sort of value always acts with the idea that what they are doing achieves *more* of that value than alternatives then thought by them to be available would achieve. If someone performs an overall bad action because of some (lesser) good they think they will get from it, they cannot do it while *believing* it is bad overall. That would mean they thought they could have got *more* good by refraining, and their action would violate the principle just stated. Instead, at the time they acted (despite what they may have thought before or after acting), they believed (wrongly and ignorantly) that the action would be good overall for them to do. Thus ignorance, and only ignorance, is responsible for voluntary error. Weakness of will – knowingly pursuing the worse outcome – is psychologically impossible: ‘No one does wrong willingly’.

The details of this argument may not represent explicit commitments of the historical Socrates. None the less, his denial of weakness of will, understood as presented in Plato’s Protagoras, was the centre of a protracted debate in later times. First Plato himself, in Republic IV, then Aristotle in Nicomachean Ethics VII, argued against Socrates’ conclusion, on the ground that he had overlooked the fact that human beings have other sources of motivation that can produce voluntary actions, besides their ideas about what is good or bad, or right or wrong to do. ‘Appetites’ and ‘spirited desires’ exist also, which can lead a person to act in fulfilment of them without having to adopt the idea, in their beliefs about what is best to do, that so acting would be a good thing (see Plato §14; Aristotle §20, 22–23). The Stoics, however, and especially Chrysippus, argued vigorously and ingeniously in defence of Socrates’ analysis and against the Platonic–Aristotelian assumption of alternative sources of motivation that produce voluntary action on their own (see Stoicism §19). In fact, during Hellenistic times it was the Socratic, ‘unitary’ psychology of action that carried the day; the Platonic–Aristotelian alternative, dominant in the ‘common sense’ and the philosophy of modern times, was a minority view. The issues Socrates raised about weakness of will continue to be debated today.

7. Socrates' personality

Socrates drew to himself many of the brightest and most prominent people in Athens, securing their fascinated attention and their passionate friendship and support. His effectiveness as a philosopher, and the Socratic 'legend' itself, depended as much on the strength and interest of his personality as on the power of his mind. Plato's and Xenophon's portraits of Socrates as a person differ significantly, however. Plato's Socrates is aloof and often speaks ironically, although also with unusual and deeply held moral convictions; paradoxically, the depth and clarity of his convictions, maintained alongside the firm disclaimer to know what was true, could seem all the stronger testimony to their truth, and made them felt the more strongly as a rebuke to the superficiality of one's own way of living. In Xenophon, Socrates is also sometimes ironical and playful, especially in the *Symposium*, but his conversation is usually direct, even didactic, and often chummy in tone; his attitudes are for the most part conventional though earnest; and there is nothing to unsettle anyone or make them suspect hidden depths. It is much easier to believe that the Socrates of Plato's dialogues could have had such profound effects on the lives of the brightest of his contemporaries than did the character in Xenophon. That is one reason given for trusting Plato's more than Xenophon's portrait of the historical personage. But perhaps Socrates used the more kindly and genial manner and conventional approach depicted by Xenophon to draw out the best in some of his young men and his friends – ones who would have been put off by the Platonic subtleties. The historical Socrates may have been a more complex person than even Plato presents.

Plato and Xenophon both represent Socrates as strongly attracted to good-looking young men in the 'bloom' of their middle to late teens, just the period when they were also coming of age morally and intellectually. In both he speaks of himself as unusually 'erotic' by temperament and constantly 'in love'. But he explains his 'erotic' attachments in terms of his desire to converse with bright and serious young men, to question them about virtue and how best to live a human life, and to draw out what was best in their minds and characters. In Xenophon he describes his love as love for their souls, not their bodies, and he vigorously condemns sexual relations with any young man: using him that way disgraces him and harms him by encouraging a loose attitude as regards physical pleasures (*Symposium* 8). The overheated sexuality of Plato's own accounts (*Symposium* and *Phaedrus*) of *erōs*, sexual love, for a young man's beauty as motivating an adult male to pursue philosophical truth into an eternal realm of Forms (see Plato §12) is to be distinguished sharply from Socrates' ideas, as we can gather them from Xenophon and from Plato's own early dialogues.

Xenophon emphasizes Socrates' freedom from the strong appetites for food, drink, sex and physical comfort that dominate other people; his *enkrateia* or self-mastery is the first of the virtues that Xenophon claims for him (*Memorabilia* I 2.1). He was notorious for going barefoot even in winter and dressing always in a simple cloak. Socrates' self-mastery was at the centre of Antisthenes' portrayal, and is reflected also in several incidents reported in Plato, such as his serene dismissal of the young Alcibiades' efforts to seduce him sexually (Plato, *Symposium* 217b–219e), or, perhaps when engrossed in a philosophical problem, his standing in the open (during a break in the action while on military service) from morning to

night, totally indifferent to everything around him (Symposium 220c–d). This ‘ascetic’ Socrates, especially as presented by Antisthenes – rejecting conventional comforts and conventional behaviour – became an inspiration for the ‘Cynics’ of later centuries (see Cynics).

8. Socrates in the history of philosophy

Looking back on the early history of philosophy, later philosophers traced to Socrates a major turn in its development. As Cicero puts it: ‘Socrates was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens... and compel it to ask questions about life and morality’ (Tusculan Disputations V 10–11). Previously it had been concerned with the origins and nature of the physical world and the explanation of celestial and other natural phenomena. Modern scholarship follows the ancients’ lead in referring standardly to philosophers before Socrates collectively as ‘Presocratics’ (see Presocratic philosophy). This includes Democritus, in fact a slightly younger contemporary of Socrates; Cicero’s verdict needs adjustment, in that Democritus, independently of Socrates, also investigated questions about ethics and morality. With the sole exception of Epicureanism, which developed separately out of Democritean origins, all the major movements of Greek philosophy after Socrates had roots in his teaching and example. This obviously applies to Plato, whose philosophical development began with a thorough reworking and assimilation of Socratic moral inquiry, and through him to Aristotle and his fellow members of Plato’s Academy, Speusippus and Xenocrates and others, as well as to later Platonists. Among Socrates’ inner circle were also Aristippus of Cyrene, who founded the hedonist Cyrenaic school (see Aristippus the Elder; Cyrenaics), and Antisthenes, an older rival of Plato’s and major teacher in Athens of philosophical dialectic. Both of these figure in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* (Antisthenes also in his *Symposium*), where they are vividly characterized in conversation with Socrates. Another Socratic, Euclides, founded the Megarian school (see Megarian school). These ‘Socratic schools’ developed different themes already prominent in Socrates’ own investigations, and competed in the claim to be his true philosophical heirs (see Socratic schools; Dialectical School).

In the third to first centuries bc, both the Stoics and their rivals the Academic sceptics claimed to be carrying forward the Socratic tradition. In both cases this was based upon a reading of Plato’s dialogues and perhaps other eye-witness reconstructions of Socrates’ philosophy. The Academic Arcesilaus interpreted the Platonic Socrates as a sceptical inquirer, avidly searching but never satisfied that the truth on any disputed question had been finally uncovered. He could point to much about Plato’s Socrates in support: his modest but firm denial that he possessed any knowledge, and his constant practice of inquiring into the truth by examining others’ opinions on the basis of ideas which they themselves accepted, without formally committing himself to these ideas even when he was the one to first suggest them. Arcesilaus, however, applied his sceptical Socratic dialectic to more than the questions of ethics and human life about which Socrates himself had argued, making it cover the whole range of philosophical topics being investigated in his day. The Stoics read the dialogues (especially the *Euthydemus* and *Protagoras*) quite differently. They found Socrates espousing a complete doctrine of ethics and the psychology of human action. He posed his questions on the basis of this doctrine, leaving the respondent (and the reader) to recover for themselves the philosophical considerations underlying it. They thus

emphasized the conceptions of virtue as knowledge, of virtue as unified in wisdom, and of voluntary action as motivated always by an agent's beliefs about what is best to do, that emerged through Socrates' examination of Protagoras (see §§6–7). They thought these constituted a positive, Socratic moral philosophy, and in their own moral theory they set out to revive and strengthen it with systematic arguments and with added metaphysical and physical speculations of their own. Later Stoics regularly referred to Socrates as a genuine wise man or 'sage', perhaps the only one who ever lived. He had brought to final, systematic perfection his knowledge, along Stoic lines, of what is good and bad for human beings, and what is not, and therefore possessed all the virtues and no vices, and lived unwaveringly the best, happy life, free from emotion and all other errors about human life. It is a tribute to the complexity and enigmatic character of Socrates that he could stand simultaneously as a paragon both of sceptical, non-committal inquiry and life led on that uncommitted basis, and of dogmatic knowledge of the final truth about all things human.

The figure of Socrates has continued to fascinate and to inspire ever-new interpretations of his innermost meaning. For Montaigne, he proved that human beings can convincingly and attractively order their own lives from their own resources of mind, without direction from God or religion or tradition. In the nineteenth century Kierkegaard and Nietzsche offered extensive interpretations of him, both heavily dependent upon Hegel's absolute-idealist analysis. Hegel interpreted Socrates as a quintessentially negative thinker, aiming at making people vacillate in their superficial moral beliefs and endorse none of them wholeheartedly, thus hinting that the truth, although universal and objective, lies deep within the freedom of their own subjectivity. For Kierkegaard he represents, on the contrary, the possibility of living wholeheartedly by occupying an unarticulated position somehow beyond the negative rejection but expressed through it: 'infinite absolute negativity'. In *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (The Birth of Tragedy) Nietzsche treats Socrates principally as having poisoned the 'tragic' attitude that made possible the great achievements of classical culture, by insisting that life should be grounded in rational understanding and justified by 'knowledge'; but his fascinated regard for Socrates led him to return to him repeatedly in his writings. Socrates was paradigmatically a philosopher whose thought, however taken up with logic and abstract argument, is inseparable from the search for self-understanding and from a deeply felt attachment to the concerns of human life. His power to fascinate and inspire is surely not exhausted.

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