



The Philosophy of Socrates

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In their sketches of the life of Socrates, Xenophon (*Socr. Memorabilia*) and Plato (*Apolog.*) are at one on all essential points. Socrates was born at Athens about the year B.C. 471. His father, Sophroniscus, was a sculptor, and his mother, Phanaenarete, a midwife. In youth he was trained to his father's calling, and he is said to have shown some skill in the practice of it. It is probable, however, that he gave himself early in life to philosophical investigations. The story that he was a pupil either of Anaxagoras or of Archelaus rests upon no good authority. He seems however, to have been well acquainted with the earlier philosophical systems of the Greeks. The meeting between Socrates and Parmenides mentioned by Plato may be accepted as historically true.

Socrates served as a soldier in the military expeditions of Potidaea, of Delium, and of Amphipolis, but he declined to take any further part in political affairs. His mission he believed to be the education of youth, and this duty he believed to have been assigned him by an oracle. (Plato, *Apol.* p. 21.) He did not invite pupils, but allowed any one who chose to listen to his instructions. His personal demeanour and his mode of life were calculated to attract attention, and to win favour. His external appearance bespoke his poverty and simple habits, while his peculiarities of face and manner, his practice of staring about him, and of halting suddenly as he walked, could not fail to attract notice. He esteemed it a desirable thing to have few necessities. By the dignity and the gentleness of his disposition he drew to himself a large number of youths and men, many of whom he formed to higher aims, and trained to become distinguished citizens. To the boastful Sophists he opposed his plain common sense, his "irony," and his strength of character; but for all this he was himself represented on the stage as a Sophist. He believed that he had by him a "Demon" whose warning voice directed him what to do and what to avoid.

In his old age, shortly after the expulsion of the Thirty Tyrants, the democratic party, represented by Miletus, brought a charge against him which was supported by the democratic politician Anytus, and the orator Lycon. The charge was to the effect that Socrates had offended by rejecting the gods recognised by the state, and by introducing a new and strange Demon, and that he had furthermore offended by corrupting the young men. The charge was, therefore, the same as had been made at an earlier period by Aristophanes, in the *Clouds*. After a bold and somewhat haughty defence of himself, Socrates was declared guilty by the judges and condemned to die by poison. He submitted his conduct but not his convictions to the sentence of the tribunal. He refused the means of escape provided for him by Onto, and in the presence of his disciples, and friends who had assembled in his prison, he drank the poisoned draught (B.C. 399). His death, justly glorified by his followers, secured for his teaching an universal and enduring recognition.

The Socratic Method

Socrates pursued in his instructions a double purpose. His first object was to form his disciples to a higher morality, and to save them from the libertinism to which they were led by the teaching

of the Sophists. For this end he insisted specially on self-knowledge, for he saw clearly that the man who knows himself is the only man who can bridle and control his appetites and passions. Hence the well-known maxim "*Gnôthi seauton*," know thyself. Socrates was not blind to the necessity of self-knowledge as a means to the attainment of truth, but in framing this maxim he had in view primarily ethical considerations.

The second object of Socrates was to lead his disciples to a clear and certain knowledge of truth. In pursuance of this purpose he invented a peculiar method of instruction which has been called by his name, and the essential character of which is implied in the name *Euristic* (method of discovery) which is sometimes given to it. He did not lay down fully formulated principles, but endeavoured by continued questioning to lead his hearers to discover for themselves the principles he had in view. The tendency of the Socratic method was at once positive and negative.

Beginning with commonplace things and every day events, he interrogated his pupil regarding them, and out of every answer given drew material for a new question, till he at last obliged him to confess that what he had taken for truth was not really true. Throughout the interrogatory, however, he was careful to express deference for the superior intelligence and wisdom of his pupil, till they finally gave way under the dialectical test applied to them. In this negative process consisted the Socratic "Irony" (*eirôneia*). But his method led to positive results also. Socrates endeavoured by the same plan of continued questioning to lead his disciples to the discovery of positive truth. He named his method *Maieutic*, or intellectual midwifery, as it aimed at bringing truth into life in the minds of his pupils, and in this respect he found an analogy between his task and the duties undertaken by his mother.

We may observe that the method of Socrates is wholly inductive. In his questioning he endeavours to pass by induction from the particular to the general. The object of the entire method, as far as it aims at a positive result, is to gain clear and accurate notions of things as they exist, in order to attain thereby to objective truth — to universal principles. Aristotle has justly observed (Met. 13, 4) that we owe to Socrates the method of Induction and Definition.... Induction from the particular to the general, and the clear definition of general notions to which this process leads, was established by the Socratic method, and in this consists its lasting importance to philosophical science.

Philosophical Tenets

With regard to the peculiar philosophical tenets of Socrates, we know only what his disciples have told us; he was not, as we know, a writer.

Religious Beliefs.—As far as his teaching regarding the Divine Nature can be gathered from these accounts, he seems to have held with Anaxagoras that God is a spirit who rules the world. He grounds his belief in the gods on the teleological argument furnished by the structure of living organisms in which the parts serve the requirements of the whole, taking as the basis of his reasoning the principle that whatever exists for a useful end must be the work of intelligence. (Xenoph. Memorab. I. 4, 4 sqq. IV. 3, 3 sqq.) Just as in our own actions we are ourselves guided by reason, so the entire world is guided by the Divine Reason. The Wisdom (*phronêsis*) which rules in all that exists determines everything according to its good pleasure, it frames and upholds the universal order....Socrates combats the belief which attributes human passions to the gods, but he does not seek to destroy the old mythology, or even to explain it allegorically. The gods, like the human soul, are invisible, but their operations give unmistakable evidence of their existence. The gods are omniscient and omnipresent, they govern all things according to the rules of righteousness, and have their sufficiency in themselves. (Xen. Mem. I. 3, 3. IV. 3, 13.)

The Soul.—Regarding the immortality of the soul, Socrates expresses himself doubtfully,

in the Apology of Plato. But his conviction that the present life would be little worth, and not at all preferable to death, if the life to follow did not furnish more favourable conditions for human effort is proof of his leanings on this question. His own boundless trust in the care of the gods for the just man, and the unanimity among his followers on the point (Plato Phaed.; Xenoph. Cyrop. VIII., 7, 3 sqq.) sufficiently confirm the view that Socrates held the soul to be immortal. He expressed no definite view regarding the soul's condition after death; he was satisfied to maintain that the soul of the just man is set free by death from the embarrassments of the body and enters into the fuller enjoyment of truth.

Ethics.—The Supreme Good of man is happiness. Not a happiness that depends on some accident of fortune (*eutuchia*) but the happiness attained by action and knowledge (*eupraxia*). This happiness is attained through assimilation with the Divinity. External goods avail nothing; to have no need of anything is a divine attribute, to want as little as possible is the nearest approach to the Divinity. Scientific knowledge is a further condition of this assimilation with the Divine Nature. Practical excellence is identified with this knowledge. Both in one make Wisdom. Wisdom must therefore be the ultimate end of man's moral action. In his moral life he must strive after knowledge, and true knowledge is the knowledge of the Good — the knowledge of that Divine Reason which governs all things. This leads immediately to moral goodness, for theoretical knowledge and practical excellence are ethically one. What is good is at the same time useful.

In the light of these principles, the further ethical teaching of Socrates, especially his theory of Virtue, becomes easily intelligible. Virtue and Knowledge are one. The knowledge of what is right, and the doing of it, are inseparable, because they are identical. It follows at no man can knowingly do wrong; for if he knows what is good, he also chooses it. The man who acts wrongly does not act so with deliberation, but in ignorance: he is deficient in perfect knowledge of what is good. The evil doer is only involuntarily (*akôn*) wicked. It may even be said that the man who knowingly is guilty of lying, or other misdeeds, is better than the man who unwittingly lies, or otherwise does wrong (Xen. Mem. III. 9, 4; IV. 2, 20. Plat. Gorg., p. 461. Apol. p. 25. Prot. p. 345. Arist. Eth. Nic. VII. 3). As a consequence of its identity with the knowledge of what is good, Virtue is one, and is a matter of instruction.

Political Philosophy.—The State is of divine institution. The true rulers are those whose rule is guided by understanding. The laws are either written or unwritten. The latter are the rule and standard of the former; their divine origin is manifested by the fact that any violation of them entails a punishment determined by Nature itself.

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