

## Chapter 20

### Sokrates

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#### 1. The Problem and the Sources

Sokrates wrote nothing for publication. So we are compelled to rely on the impression that he made on others, and on what they wrote about him. He was an important philosopher who made, started, or completed a revolution in philosophy (which verb you use depends on how you define the “revolution” that you are interested in — for this present book “completed” is best). But he was a philosopher of the *spoken* word; and those who wrote about him while he was alive, were comedians interested in his notoriety rather than in his thought and work. Those who wrote from memory after he died, on the other hand, were deeply influenced by the way in which he came to his death. He was executed (like Antiphon) as an ideological traitor. But, unlike Antophon, he had *done* nothing political (either in his opinion or in ours). He was *guilty by association* with traitors (Alcibiades, Kritias). Those who remembered him, for the most part thought he was a very good man — and a good citizen — so their record was colored in different ways by the determination to prove that the verdict against him was a terrible mistake. His death obscured, or in a measure distorted, the memory of Sokrates in life.

But then too (quite apart from that defensive prejudice) the living Sokrates was a complex character, a hard man to know and to represent truly. He was a puzzling eccentric, a man of quicksilver, a human chameleon who changed his spots according to the company he was in. People

saw what they wanted to see in him, because that was what *he* intended. He pretended to believe things that he did not believe, and to support positions that he did not hold. One did not know where one was with him.

Finally, therefore, his “philosophy” was difficult to grasp, and to state truly, no matter how hard one tried. If he had thought that the truth could be put down on paper adequately, he would no doubt have made the attempt himself. But the truth he was interested in was the very one that Gorgias said “is not” — or at least, it cannot be communicated. It was not important to Sokrates that you should understand “his position” — in such a way that you could put together what he was saying today, with what he said yesterday, and write down what he “really meant.” What he “really meant” was that you should explore and examine *yourself* and your own life. The consequence is that those who tried hardest to represent him (and his philosophizing) as it truly was, have told us as much about themselves, as they have about Sokrates — and sometimes *more*. (The study both of Gorgias, and of the Socratic record will teach you why there is no help for this.)

With this preamble, let us now examine the record. There are *three* “portraits of Sokrates” that have come down to us in full color and detail: that of Aristophanes, that of Xenophon, and that of Plato. (There were other pictures, both in life and after death, but they survive only in fragments.) Aristophanes knew Sokrates in the prime of life, and brought him to the comic stage in his forties. But Aristophanes was a public entertainer; and although he was a deeply thoughtful and serious observer of life, he was no disciple of Sokrates. He used Sokrates to present a comic caricature of the philosophers in general; and he did not approve of the philosophic movement in any respect. The title of this book comes from Aristophanes’ greatest comic assault on the philosophers. Instructed by “Sokrates,” the old peasant Strepsiades proclaims in the *Clouds* that “Zeus is not, and the Whirlwind is now ruling in his place” (*Clouds* 381; cf. 827-8). “Sokrates” himself first appears, raised aloft in a basket, studying the “Clouds” who are the new subordinate Goddesses (under the universal rule of the Whirlwind). The Clouds have a double significance: they signify first the divinity of the Air, and the transformation of the elements in natural philosophy, and secondly the divinity of speech, and the transforming might of “hot air” in Sophistic rhetoric. So, later on in the

play, “Sokrates” organizes a great debate between the *Just Logos* and the *Unjust Logos*; and at the end of it, the *Just Logos* has to admit that it is beaten.

This was a lampoon upon the philosophers in general, and we may wonder whether the audience regarded it as a portrait of Sokrates at all. But they recognized him, and they must have seen some appropriate measure of truth and justice in the caricature. For the *Clouds* crystallized the popular image of Sokrates; when he was on trial for his life, twenty-four years later, Plato makes him refer to it as the source of a general reputation which he denounces as quite false (*Apology* 18b, 19bc, 23d). In 423 BCE, no one worried about that. Plato’s “Sokrates” (at least) clearly thought that the *Clouds* was a good joke. Probably Sokrates himself liked it better than most of the audience, who placed it last in the competition — a judgment about which Aristophanes jokingly complained the following year in the *Wasps* (1037-59).<sup>i</sup> In the *Symposium*, Plato’s “Sokrates” is very friendly with “Aristophanes.” Plutarch’s story that Sokrates said the comic theater was just “a big symposium” is a fiction that visibly displays its own origin.<sup>ii</sup> But it is a most fortunate falsehood. We have to look for an important foundation of truth in the main assumptions and implications of Aristophanes’ play. For if they were not at least half-true, he could not have used Sokrates as the symbolic representative of the whole cultural movement that he wanted to raise a laugh about.

Xenophon and Plato knew Sokrates only in his later years. Xenophon was away on campaign in the East when Sokrates was brought to trial. As a friend of Sokrates he had contributed in a small way to the prejudice against him, because he joined the expedition of the Persian Cyrus (in 401 BCE). He is careful to tell us that Sokrates advised him not to go (*Anabasis*, 311, 5). But the Athenians (who banished Xenophon for his “Medism”) would not generally have known that; and probably they would not have been much impressed. For all the friends of this man Sokrates were tainted by political unreliability.

Xenophon was a country gentleman, of considerable intellectual ability, and remarkable leadership capacities, but of firmly commonsensical conservative opinions. He was constitutionally impervious to the open-minded cut and thrust of philosophical speculation or rhetorical dialectic,

being completely “conventional” (both in the ordinary and in the special Sophistic sense). One of his “Socratic” works — the *Oeconomicos* — is a dialogue about farming. This was a subject that Xenophon knew well, and cared deeply about; but it must be doubted whether the talkative city-dweller Sokrates knew very much about it, and it is probable that he cared very little.<sup>iii</sup> Xenophon’s *Apology* has to be based upon what he could either have read, or heard in exile, concerning what Sokrates said at his trial; and his *Symposium* is projected back into the time before he was old enough to be a proper “hearer” of Sokrates. Only the *Memorabilia* pretends to be a direct memory of Sokrates’ conversations; and we do not know how long the acquaintance on which the memories were based lasted. (Reckoning from Xenophon’s fourteenth birthday, it *could* have been almost fifteen years.)

Plato was born in 428/7. So, reckoning from the fourteenth birthday of that precocious genius, Plato was also acquainted with Sokrates (in a philosophical way) for the last fifteen years of his life — and, unless we have Xenophon’s birthday wrong, he did not know Sokrates any earlier than Plato. Apart from the witness of Aristophanes, it is Sokrates in his fifties and sixties that we know.<sup>iv</sup>

Given the kind of men that they clearly were, it is certain that the witness who could put Sokrates on paper best would be the one who most resembled him; and there is no doubt that Plato was that witness, in spite of the many ways in which he differed from, and went beyond, his best and closest philosophical instructor. Plato himself (consciously following the model of Sokrates) said that “there is not and will not be any written work of Plato’s own. What are now called his are the work of a Sokrates embellished and modernized” (Letter II, 314c).<sup>v</sup> But we should take note that this statement itself acknowledges that the “Sokrates” of the dialogues is a *fiction*. If we want to arrive at a reliable conception of the historical original, we must use the rest of the record as well as we can to remove the Platonic “embellishments” and “modernizations.” (That is what I shall try to do here.)

Finally, we have in Aristotle a witness who had, in some small measure, our own concern for the historical truth. For Aristotle, Sokrates was an historical person, a man who died before he was born; and he had no personal interest in “justifying” him, or hallowing his memory. He could talk to the older generation, who had known Sokrates personally; and he was certainly interested in the question of how far “Sokrates” had been “embellished and modernized” in Plato’s dialogues. He was in a better position than we are to solve this “Socratic problem.” We must suppose that he *tried*, at least, to talk to Plato about it; whether Plato gave him any “straight” answers remains uncertain. But we must always remember that Aristotle himself was a great philosopher; and he was almost as different from Plato (or from Sokrates in those respects in which Plato and Sokrates were alike) as Xenophon was from all three of them. Aristotle had his own view of what philosophy was, and what constituted a contribution to it. His solution of the “Socratic problem” satisfies many scholars who agree with him about that. But if what we want (as historians) is to grasp what *Sokrates* meant by the “philosophizing” that he told his judges he would never stop doing, then perhaps Aristotle’s solution is not really the final answer.

## 2. The life of Sokrates from the outside

Quite a lot of facts about the life of Sokrates can be stated with fair certainty. Some of it is less certain (because of the character and prejudices of the sources). But we know more about Sokrates than we do about almost any of the philosophers who wrote their thoughts down. He was born (almost certainly) in 470 or 469 BCE.<sup>vi</sup> His father, Sophroniskos, may have been a sculptor or stone-mason. His mother may *perhaps* have been a midwife named Phaenarete (*Theaetetus*, 149a).<sup>vii</sup> The family was not rich or noble; but neither were they poor, and they had some well-born friends. Sokrates *chose* his own poverty, and he kept his noble friends.<sup>viii</sup> He may have learned stone-carving, but he did not practise it.<sup>ix</sup> He was married first to Xanthippe; and then later to Myrto; at the end of his life he had three sons, of whom the eldest (Lamprokles) was still under twenty, and the youngest quite a small child. Xenophon is our best authority for Xanthippe’s

shrewishness — which is not at all surprising, when we consider how her husband habitually behaved.<sup>x</sup>

Instead of following his father's craft, the young Sokrates became an enthusiastic student of natural philosophy. He studied with Anaxagoras (perhaps) and with Archelaos (certainly). But then, quite suddenly, he began going about discussing the nature of virtue, and the goals of human life, with anyone who was willing to answer him. He went to argue with (and listen to) every Sophist who came to the City; and he gathered a "following" mainly among rich young men. By 425 BCE he was quite notorious in Athens; and in the competition of 424 the comic poets were all making fun of him. So it is quite probable that his "conversion" was then the latest news. In the *Apology* he claims that he began his quest for wisdom because the Delphic Oracle confirmed for one of his most enthusiastic disciples (Chaerephon) that no one was wiser than Sokrates.<sup>xi</sup> But for that to have happened, he must have been known to the Oracle as one who maintained that "No man is wise, but only God." So we can be fairly sure that the Oracle actually came after the "conversion" — and perhaps right then in 424 BCE.

Sokrates probably did military service before the great War — which began when he was nearly forty. But he served during the War in three campaigns, with considerable distinction both for bravery, and for disciplined endurance.<sup>xii</sup> He was remarkable for his feats of concentration and physical endurance even after his military days were over.

In 406 BCE after the naval victory of Arginusae, there was a motion to try all of the generals together for failing to rescue drowning Athenian sailors. This was contrary to law, and Sokrates (as one of the allotted committee for deciding the agenda of the Assembly at that moment) stood out alone against the popular demand. He mentions this in the *Apology* as evidence that he was wise to avoid political involvement; it coheres with the other story of how he disobeyed the order of the Thirty (in 404 BCE) to go with four others to bring in Leon of Salamis for execution. His young followers had political ambitions and he was willingly helping them to prepare for public life; but he avoided it himself — as far as avoidance was consistent with his civic duty.<sup>xiii</sup>

The restoration of the democracy was what saved Sokrates from punishment by the Thirty. But it only put him in peril again, as someone who had for years been associated with the democracy's worst enemies. Alcibiades, who was popular enough to be elected as a general for the Sicilian expedition, fled to Sparta when his enemies managed to involve him in the religious scandal over the mutilation of the Hermae; and then after his recall, he fled again to Persia. He had associated with Sokrates, all through his younger years (and he was about twelve years older than Plato). Kritias and Charmides, who had also associated with Sokrates, were both prominent members of the tyrannical government; and Kritias had also been involved in the religious scandal. (That they were all "atheists" together was not an unreasonable assumption.)

Plato himself says that the leaders of the restored democracy were very moderate and reasonable. They passed an "Act of Oblivion" in 403 BCE. But they wanted this obstinate old man, who was certainly no friend of the doctrine of democratic equality, to leave the City. He was a "philosopher"; he had probably associated with Anaxagoras in the old days, before Anaxagoras was banished; and he had studied with Archelaos after that.<sup>xiv</sup>

His supposed interest in natural philosophy was very old and stale news by 399 BCE. But for years Sokrates had run after every Sophist who came to town; and he was instructing the rich youngsters, just as they did. He took no money for it, and he was obviously quite poor.<sup>xv</sup> But what difference did that make? Here was Meletos, a foolish and opinionated religious conservative, who was quite prepared to believe everything that Aristophanes had implied about Sokrates more than twenty years ago. The City had got rid of Anaxagoras, and then of Protagoras, by an accusation of impiety. It would be easy to convict Sokrates on the same charge; and even more probably a conviction would not be needed. Sokrates would follow the example of Protagoras and get out of town before he came to trial; if he did not, then, like Anaxagoras, he could be exiled. Anytos, an important leader of the restored democrats, had only to support Meletos, and the thing was done.

Alas for this moderate and reasonable estimate of the probabilities. The old man proved to be not only obstinate, but as fanatical as Meletos about his religious duty, and patriotically devoted to the City for which he had risked his life several times. He laughed scornfully at the suggestion that he was an atheistic naturalist, like Anaxagoras; he said he was no Sophist, and did not claim to teach anyone anything; he insisted that for years he had been obeying the “command” laid upon him by the Oracle at Delphi, which had declared that no one was wiser than he, by trying to find out what wisdom was, and whether anyone else knew the answer to that question, because he was well aware that he did not. He had concluded that the Oracle was right — in its usual riddling way — because he was the only one who was well aware of his human limitations; and whatever his judges might say he would go on “loving wisdom” (and spreading the love of it) in this way. When the large jury found him guilty (by a fairly small majority) of “not believing in the Gods of the City, but introducing other Gods; and corrupting the young,” he did not propose exile instead of the death penalty demanded in the indictment. He suggested, in his usual ironical way, that (if only he could have made the jury understand his mission) he might have been maintained at public expense like an Olympic victor; but since they had condemned him, and it was now his duty to propose a *penalty*, he was willing to pay a fairly heavy fine (mostly subscribed by his rich friends). Not surprisingly, he was condemned to death; and in due course, he carried out the sentence obediently by drinking hemlock.<sup>xvi</sup> His most important follower (Plato) was turned from all thoughts of a political career by this experience.<sup>xvii</sup>

### 3. The life of Sokrates from the inside

At his trial Sokrates denied indignantly that he was a natural philosopher, and challenged anyone to say when they had heard him talking about the things that the “Sokrates” of the *Clouds* was studying in his basket. But in the *Phaedo* Plato makes him say that as a young man he was keen on natural philosophy; that he was excited about Anaxagoras’ book, and studied it with high hopes. Moreover, his association with Archelaos is independently confirmed by a near contemporary.<sup>xviii</sup> Was he lying in court to save his skin? Not at all. Sokrates was a master ironist, and we can hardly



blame him for using his gift in his own interest for once. If some greybeard takes up his challenge, saying “I remember when . . .” it will help his case rather than hurt it. They are not trying the young man of thirty who was no threat to the democracy, or to anyone’s ethics. He had not started going about talking to all and sundry at that period. Anyone who *does* remember is more likely to see how absurd an accusation based on the memory of those days is (and it is no surprise that Sokrates is not a Kantian about truth-telling).

For us, too, it does not matter much that once upon a time Sokrates was interested in the disagreement between Anaxagoras and Archelaos about whether *Nous* was separate, or just something produced by a specific balance of the “all-things-together.” We shall see, in due course, why the mature Sokrates was bound to agree with Anaxagoras about this; but our proper concern is with his “mission” in supposed obedience to Apollo. He “corrupted the young” by impressing upon them that the most important thing for them to do in life was to “care for their souls.” He always insisted that he did not *teach* anybody anything. My expression “impressing upon” identifies a conversational procedure in which the young man first agrees to the verbal proposition that the soul is important (as a truism, that he already knows, but has not seen the full significance of); and then examines what the proposition means. The “examination” typically takes the form of an inquiry about what a certain “virtue” or “excellence” — some desirable property or disposition of the soul — *is*. If the interlocutor is already wishful to achieve this excellence — or if there is a shared impression that he already possesses it, and needs only to develop it further — nothing needs to be said about the importance of the soul. That preliminary agreement can be taken for granted. But in any case the inquiry continues until some proposition is reached which seriously conflicts with the initial position agreed upon. Then a decision has to be reached about which view is to be given up (or how the two views are to be conciliated).<sup>xix</sup>

Aristotle says that Sokrates “sought for definitions because he was seeking to syllogize” (*Metaphysics* 1087 b 17). He identified virtue with knowledge, so that the different virtues became “kinds of science.” Hence, said Aristotle, he was guilty of “eliminating the irrational part of the soul, and with it emotion and moral character” (*Magna Moralia*, 1182a 20). This is all of it quite subtly mistaken. Sokrates was interested in defining and syllogizing (and in training his young

friends to think logically). But that was not his *object*.<sup>xx</sup> His object was to “raise consciousness.” Far from “eliminating moral character,” he wanted to make it *self-conscious*. Like Protagoras, he was an *advanced* teacher of virtue. His pupils had already had the moral training that everyone gives to everyone else (and especially to those younger) all the time. If he refused to call what he was doing “teaching,” it was because the “virtuous knowledge” that he wanted to bring about must be self-developed from within. He did not “eliminate the irrational part,” because he simply refused to divide the soul in that way. (Aristotle is right in saying that Plato — who was interested in education as a social institution — did that later). Sokrates’ belief that “Virtue is knowledge” was founded on the Apollonian conviction that the true fulfilment of human virtue could only come about when it “knew itself.” Everyone must know himself virtuously — and if we may trust Xenophon we can write “herself” (*Symposium* 2:10). What we have to know (in obedience to the God) is “all the virtue that we have in us” — whatever that is.

The attitude of Sokrates towards “syllogizing” can be seen in the fact that although “Virtue is knowledge” he refuses to affirm that it can be taught. He does not say that it *cannot* be taught either. To leave us puzzling about the teachability of virtue is the best way of teaching it (*Protagoras* 360e-361e).<sup>xxi</sup> As for definitions, Sokrates is quite indifferent about the question of whether a “perfect definition” is even possible. Those who become fixated on the achievement of perfect definitions, he will send to Prodikos — who clearly believes that they are possible, and has a systematic project into which they will fit. A “perfect definition” would be of no use to Sokrates, because his problem is to escape from the impasse identified by Gorgias.<sup>xxii</sup> I cannot communicate my own experience to someone else at the level of concrete feeling. So I cannot cause a word or expression (especially a psychological expression) to mean for the other exactly what it means for me. Communication between us must always begin from propositions and conventions that we agree about verbally; and whatever progress we may make must always start from this *ad hoc* foundation. The “definitions” that we start from may be as “perfect” as any we shall ever get; but we must find every “imperfection” in them that we can. It is serious engagement in the development of virtue-consciousness that matters.

Plato seems to have accepted (for *his* Sokrates) the syllogistic consequence that if “Virtue is knowledge” then “Vice is ignorance.” But the attitude of Sokrates was probably dialectical in this context also. He does agree with Protagoras that “Knowledge is a principle of command,” and that it would be absurd for knowledge, if it were present, to be dragged about like a slave, by pleasure or some passion (*Protagoras* ). This means that he has to maintain that Alcibiades did not have “self-knowledge” in the proper sense. Plato gives us (at the climax of the *Symposium*) a vivid image of the man Alcibiades who — as we might say — “knows himself very well.” But he does not “know himself” in the way that Apollo intends; and this is represented by his speaking his self-knowledge under the influence of Dionysos (i.e., when he is *drunk*). Plato himself was deeply troubled by the implication that if “Vice is ignorance, and hence involuntary,” punishment must appear to be unjust.<sup>xxiii</sup> If he had been more willing to compromise with the Protagorean doctrine that “Man is the measure” he would have seen that the proper way out is to regard punishment as part of education, and not as part of the cosmic justice of equal retribution.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Did Sokrates himself believe that we can achieve and use divine (or absolute) measures? He certainly believed that we have to keep on trying; and an objective (or “divine”) standard of virtue is what we are trying for. Did he believe that our efforts should go on for ever, because the “soul” that we have to care for is “immortal”? In the *Apology* he leaves the question open; but he emphasizes that he must obey the God rather than the Athenians; and he says that the judges who have condemned him stand in greater peril than he does (*Apology* 28e, 29d, 30d, 41d, 42a; *Phaedo* 61d-62c). In the *Phaedo* Plato provides Sokrates with a string of “proofs.” In the light of Aristotle’s testimony, we must assume that the “kinship with the Forms” argument belongs to Plato himself, and not to Sokrates. But it is interesting to notice that Sokrates seems to know more about Philolaos’ doctrine of suicide than the official disciples, Simmias and Kebes. Either Plato first heard of the Pythagorean doctrines through Sokrates, or at least when he did learn of them, he thought that there was a close affinity between the view that we belong to the Gods like serfs, and Sokrates’ conception of his service to Apollo.<sup>xxv</sup> Sokrates’ supposed enthusiasm in his younger days for the book of Anaxagoras probably reflects an early conviction that the intellect was properly “pure,” and not a function of the bodily mixture (as Archelaos thought). Xenophon reports that Sokrates said

that the mind controls the body, just as the divine wisdom controls the Universe (*Memorabilia*, I, 4, 17; cf. IV, 3, 13 ff.). This was the general consensus of the natural philosophers from Anaximenes to Anaxagoras; the Sophists had destroyed it, and Archelaos (like the Atomists) agreed with them. Only Diogenes tried to maintain the old orthodoxy.

In the *Apology*, Sokrates is at least clear about what he *means* by immortality; what he thinks worth wishing and hoping for is the opportunity to continue his mission by conversing with all the heroes in the other world. It ought to be evident to anyone who studies the *Phaedo*, that no proposition about the soul can be proved which will guarantee *that*. What takes the place of a proof for Sokrates is his “divine sign.” He experiences a kind of “forbidding command” that tells him *not* to do things. He regards this as the voice of God; and he is convinced that no harm can come to his soul as long as he obeys his *daimonion*.<sup>xxvi</sup> We must conclude, I think, that he does not *know* what the relation of his rightly commanding intellectual soul to the divine soul of the world actually is. He is only certain that all will be well for it, as long as he does not do what is *wrong*; and the forbidding voice of his “little inner spirit” will protect him from that.

His most famous ethical paradox was that “No one voluntarily does wrong.” Unlike the proposition that “Doing injustice is worse than suffering it,” this is not *simply* true. It *becomes* true, when one commits oneself to the elenctic quest for wisdom. For then, one is continually brought face to face with the fact that doing injustice is worse than suffering it; and for someone who knows that, it becomes impossible to do any injustice wilfully. Sokrates is absolutely confident that he personally has not done, and cannot do, any voluntary injustice. Whatever wrongs he may have done are quite involuntary, and he will be eager to amend his ways, if anyone can show him the error in them.

#### **4. Philosophy brought to earth**

The “mission” of Sokrates was a watershed in the history of thought. He did not “first call philosophy down from the heaven, set it in the cities, and even introduce it into homes” as Cicero claimed (in a passage that set the tone of the history of philosophy down to quite recent times). The Sophists had already done that. But Aristophanes rightly grasped that what they brought to Earth from the skies was the conception of the great Whirlwind itself. Already in Anaximenes, the Whirlwind has lost its ethical dimension; and (in spite of Herakleitos) this remains true for the whole Ionian tradition — which reaches the high point of its development in Anaxagoras. The Italians sought to resist this development by combining their natural philosophy with a religion similar to that which we find in the Mystery traditions. But the privileged elitism involved in any doctrine of revelation, made their resistance philosophically ineffective. The Socratic *daimonion* is the heritage of that religious tradition in his life and mission; but it is reduced to a strictly private and individual function. It does not confer upon Sokrates the social authority claimed by Pythagoras and Empedokles.

Sokrates himself could come to terms with the political democracy, because his “mission” was a democratic one. He saw himself as the servile-property of “the Laws,” just as he was (I believe) the servile-property of God (or of “the Gods” — but specifically of Apollo). His relationship to the God(s) might bring him into conflict with the policies of the City’s leaders, and cause him to be condemned unjustly. But he was the spiritual child of the Athenian Constitution, and his “mission” was to the Athenians.<sup>xxvii</sup> Therefore, he must loyally accept the verdict of the Court. Between Apollo and Athena no *real* conflict was possible (*Crito* 50e-51c).

Plato and Aristotle agreed with Sokrates that “the Good is that at which all things aim.” In order to account for Alcibiades — who *understood* Sokrates, but could not hear the “summons” of the Good properly — Plato granted that “the irrational parts” of human nature were an independent power in the human *psyche* (or, at least, that is the short and simple interpretation of his soul-theory). He could then blame Sokrates’ failure with Alcibiades upon the influence of the “people” (the *de mos*) as “the greatest Sophist” (*Republic*     ). But this was not a properly Sokratic account of the case. We find the Sokratic account in the “Myth of Er.” The doctrine of the Myth is that we are

each individually responsible for the life-choice that we make, on the basis of whatever knowledge and opportunities we have. Plato's *political* analysis of the problem (putting the blame on Protagoras) is Protagorean, not Sokratic. It is relevant for educational policy-making, but not for philosophical understanding.

This enables us to identify the true character of the Sokratic revolution. He did not "bring philosophy to Earth"; for the Whirlwind had already come to Earth, and it still reigns there. Sokrates turned philosophy towards the inner life of the intellect, and securely identified the realm of free thought. Demokritos said that "For a wise man the whole earth is open" (68 B 247); but the fate of Sokrates showed how far that is (or ever has been) from being *literally* true. It was Sokrates who correctly identified "the native land of a good soul." Those who "followed" him went in all directions from his example. Plato was only the greatest of them (and the greatest of us all). It is far more nearly true that we are all followers of Sokrates, than that we are all writing "footnotes to Plato." But we must add that for the objective "scientific" thinkers among us this is only true because (like Sokrates himself) we are also the children of Anaxagoras. In a sense, Sokrates did end "the reign of the Whirlwind," and make a new beginning. But there are no *absolute* endings and beginnings in the history of thought.

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## Notes

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- i. Aristophanes claims that the best judges were on his side; and I am sure that Sokrates was one of them. But many of the jokes probably went right over the heads of the illiterate majority.
  - ii. *Symposium*, 223cd; the Plutarch story is in Guthrie, III, 375 (compare Diogenes Laertios, 2.36).
  - iii. *Everyone* would have known more about farming than *we* do (on the average). But Plato's "Sokrates" is such a "townee" that Phaedros is amazed to encounter him in the country at all (cf. *Crito*, 52b, 53a; *Phaedo* 99a; *Phaedros*, 230cd).
  - iv. Of course the young Plato could talk to Sokrates himself about his earlier days; and in his older relatives, Charmides and Critias, he had independent witnesses. Quite probably he knew Alcibiades too. (The association of Xenophon with Sokrates was probably *not* long, and never very close. He is mainly important for what he reveals about the "Socratica" of Antisthenes — whose picture of Sokrates was the first to be published — and about the critical attack on Sokrates by Polykrates, who probably depended heavily on the writings of Antisthenes. Thus Xenophon tells us something about Sokrates in his fifties.)
  - v. If this is a forgery (as it may be), then it is a cunning one, since it pretends to have been written before the *Laws* and some other late dialogues in which "Sokrates" does not appear. But even if it is a forgery, the student of Plato will be well advised to agree with the forger.

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The opinions on the page are never (except perhaps in the case of the “Athenian” in the *Laws*) simply “Plato’s own.”

- vi. Plato makes him say at his trial (in Spring 399 BCE) that he is “more than seventy years old” (*Apology*, 17e). If we assume that Plato knew *exactly* how old he was, then he was almost certainly not yet seventy-one. This seems to me to be a reasonable assumption. (All other reports derive, probably, from Plato.)
- vii. But both the name (“Making Virtue appear”), and the occupation, are too apt to be trusted.
- viii. All of this depends on Plato alone. But if any of it were false, his fictional portrait would be spoiled; and Plato’s own family were as blue-blooded as any Athenians could be.
- ix. The fact that Sokrates said that the craftsmen were wiser than he *about their crafts* (*Apology*, 22e) does not prove that he did not have a craft of his own. His father had a civic obligation to teach him. But it is a little odd, perhaps, that Plato never makes him allude to any craft-knowledge of his own. (Nor does Xenophon; and it is likely that Antisthenes would have made a point of it, if it existed.)
- x. Plato, *Apology*, 34d, *Phaedo*, 60a; Xenophon, *Mem.* II, 2, 7; *Symposium*, 2, 10.
- xi. Plato’s Sokrates says (in the *Apology*) that he set out to “refute” the Oracle. But since he also says that it is not “lawful” (*themis*) for the God to say what is false, this usage shows that the *elenchos* does not *logically* establish what is true. G. Ryle speaks with Socratic irony when he says that Sokrates wanted first “not very piously” to show that the Oracle was



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- wrong; and then “not very piously” to show that it was right (1966, 177-8). The piety of Sokrates is not thus impugned, just as the sincerity of Meletos is not impugned by the revelation that he thinks Sokrates is *both* a philosophical atheist, *and* a believer in “new” Gods. (Compare *Apology*, 21bd, 28e and note 26 below.)
- xii. *Apology*, 28e, *Laches*, 181a, *Symposium*, 219e, 220e, *Charmides*, 153a; for non-Platonic evidence see Guthrie, III, 379 note. For earlier military service see 60 A 3 — Ion of Chios. (The physical endurance of Sokrates was vitally important to Antisthenes — who put it at the centre of his picture. The training of the body was certainly an important aspect of the Sokratic “care for the soul.”)
- xiii. Xenophon, *Mem* 1, 1, 18; I, 6, 15; 4, 4, 2-3; *Hellenica* I, 7, 12-15; Plato, *Apology*, 32a-c, 31c, *Letter* 7, 324de. (Meletos, who brought the accusation against Sokrates, may have been one of the group who *did* go to bring in Leon of Salamis. The name is too common for the identification to be certain, but the coincidence certainly suggests a reason why this episode would have influenced many of the jury in favor of Sokrates.)
- xiv. In the *Phaedo* (97b) Sokrates says he heard someone *reading* the book of Anaxagoras. We need not assume that Anaxagoras had already left the City; he belonged to the circle of Perikles (which Sokrates did not frequent). But Sokrates may have associated with him earlier. Plato’s fiction is an appropriate *mythical* representation of the relation between Sokrates and Anaxagoras — he has to account for the image of “Sokrates” in the *Clouds*. (For the connection of Sokrates with Archelaos see 60 A 3.)
- xv. He may have accepted minimal supplies sufficient to keep himself and his family alive, from his richer friends — compare Diogenes Laertios, II, 74.

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- xvi. Diogenes Laertios (II, 42) reports that forty jurors who had voted for acquittal actually voted for the death penalty rather than accept a fine. But this looks like an invention by a Sokratic enthusiast who hated the democracy. Everyone on the jury knew that Sokrates meant to go on as before. Those who were willing to let him go, would have been willing to accept a penalty that would not interfere with his “mission.” (But those who condemned him were, no doubt, highly offended to be told that a philosopher was more valuable to the City than an athletic champion. Xenophanes had few partisans among the democrats.)
- xvii. For the accusation see Xenophon, *Mem.* I, 1, 1 (also Diogenes Laertios, II, 40). For the defence, I have followed Plato’s *Apology* — which may be largely fictional. There may have been argument about Alcibiades on both sides; Kritias and the Thirty were excluded by the act of oblivion (for which Anytos himself was largely responsible). But Sokrates certainly brought up the case of Leon of Salamis. Plato thought that Anytos knew that Sokrates was not properly guilty — cf. *Apology*, 29c, *Crito*, 45e. But he was politically dangerous. No one who went in for the “care of the soul” in Sokrates’ way was a proper “democrat.”
- xviii. *Apology*, 18b, 19c; *Phaedo*, 96a-98c; 60 A 3; compare also Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV, 7, 3-5. (It *can* be argued that Sokrates would tell the truth on this issue, and that the “biographical” reminiscence in the *Phaedo* really is an account of Plato’s education; the association with Archelaos can then be accounted for by pointing to the *ethical-political* interests of the latter — see G. Vlastos, 199 . But this certainly strains the evidence rather severely.)
- xix. In the *progressive elenchos*, the first belief ‘p’ is given up, because the later beliefs

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- expressed ('q,' 'r' etc. which led to 'not-p') are preferred. But there is no need for this to be the case. In a full-scale (circular) *elenchos*, the parties end up quite uncertain *what* to say; and very often, Sokrates proposes something (e.g. that "doing injustice is worse than suffering it" — *Gorgias*, 474b) which is initially rejected as quite incredible, but which is shown to follow from beliefs that the other party does not want to give up.
- xx. Sokrates *did* actually teach people to syllogize *dialectically* — that is, to produce contradictions out of a set of beliefs that seemed initially to be harmoniously acceptable. But that was not what he meant to do (and he was morally justified in denying that he did it voluntarily). Engaging in dialectic for the sheer fun of destroying the confidence of a "solid citizen," was not "virtuous"; and Plato saw it as very dangerous indeed. Sokrates recognizes in the *Apology* (23cd) that some of his young imitators have been "corrupted" in this way (and that to that extent the prosecution is *prima facie* justified). Modern students who place the *elenchos* "among the great achievements of humanity" (Vlastos, 1971, 20) either take modern educational and social conditions for granted (as Aristophanes and Plato could not); or like Sokrates himself, they posit absolute sincerity as a necessary component of the *elenchos*. When all is said and done, however, we cannot doubt that Sokrates took a mischievous delight in upsetting pompous complacency, even when he knew that it would do no real good. So he did sometimes set a bad example for the intelligently critical young. (For Plato's estimate of how dangerous the example was, see *Republic* 487bc and 538c-539a. Plato does not really reject the charge of "corrupting the young." But he agrees with his "Sokrates" that the error was "involuntary," and that it deserved instruction not punishment.)
- xxi. Protagoras appears to me to have grasped the point.
- xxii. Some striking parallels have been identified between the *Apology* and the "Defence of Palamedes" (82 B 11a). See (first) C.D.C. Reeve, 1989, 7-8. The way out of the impasse is

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- by a voluntary verbal agreement with the other party (*Gorgias* 427BC) — and this is only provisionally satisfactory. (The discussion can always be reopened if there is any reason to think that the verbal agreement is not “real.”)
- xxiii. See the *Laws*, IX, 860d-861d. (My thumbnail critique of Plato is dangerously oversimplified. The interested reader should consult M.M. Mackenzie, 1981, Part III. It is quite likely that Plato *did* see what I say that he should have seen.)
- xxiv. It should be obvious that what I say about the attitude of Sokrates towards “definitions” and “syllogizing” is not valid for Plato. According to the view I am proposing, most of the arguments about the “philosophy of Sokrates” are actually discussions of the early thought of Plato. (To say this is to expose clearly how *uncertain* my hypothesis about the historical Sokrates is — and must remain. The fundamental fact upon which my hypothesis rests is that Sokrates felt no need, or duty, to record his thoughts for publication. Plato regarded the written word as only an *image* of live speech. But he *wrote* compulsively.)
- xxv. The “Sokrates” of the *Clouds* is the high priest of a mystery-religion (833-839) with initiation rites (140) and monastic seclusion (198-199). No doubt the contrast between the gregarious Sokrates and the secluded Pythagorean communities of Thebes, Phleios (and Athens?) delighted Aristophanes. But the joke is much better if they were known to agree in some important ways about the relation between us humans and the Gods.
- xxvi. Apparently, the *daimonion* was the evidence for Sokrates’ belief in “new Gods.” Sokrates causes Meletos to commit a formal contradiction by saying that he is an outright atheist who does not believe in any Gods at all; but the jury understands that the real question is whether (for Sokrates himself) the *daimonion* is the voice of Apollo (and Athena).

xxvii. He was condemned to death because this civic patriotism was not generally understood.

Loyalty to some smaller group was the norm for those who were not ideological “democrats.” (Thus the “mutilation of the Hermae” probably arose from the need to prove that one’s loyalty to a small fellowship was *absolute*.) For the “democratic” party, absolute commitment to institutions such as majority vote and the lot was regarded as

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fundamental.  
Sokrates was a  
radical  
intellectual  
critic of all  
such *absolute*  
loyalties and  
commitments.