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THE PHILOSOPHY OF SOCRATES

A Collection of Critical Essays
Edited by Gregory Vlastos



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MOLERN STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY

AMELIE OKSENBERG RORTY, GENERAL EDITOR

The Philosophy of SOCRATES

A Collection of Critical Essays

EDITED BY GREGORY VLASTOS

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Socrates may have a special role to play, this fact being known and accepted by readers. In any case, the ancients were notoriously lax, to our mind, in matters of quotation and attribution, and though these points are different, they are related. When Polycrates wrote his indictment of Socrates he had no hesitation in making the real prosecutor, Anytus, his mouthpiece, and gave no indication that this was a fiction, for later generations accepted it as historical, though the speech refers to the rebuilding of the Long Walls five years after Socrates' trial.²¹ For the attitude to quotation, note the way Niceratus, introduced as an expert on Homer, makes no objection when Socrates misquotes Homer to him at Xenophon's *Symposium* 8.32.

But we cannot just point to a "special role" and leave it at that. There are presumably limits even to ancient tolerance, and, more important, there are the questions of how such a convention grew up in the first place,²² and why Socrates was chosen, and why abandoned—which returns us to Schleiermacher's question.

On the whole Xenophon has been badly treated in the pages of Socratic historians. "Few scholars show at their best in dealing with Xenophon," says G. C. Field (*Plato and his Contemporaries*, p. 140). But it must be added that Xenophon does not show at his best in writing the *Memorabilia*. It is a dreary and moralising work, with the avowed aim (I 3.1) of showing how "useful" Socrates was to his associates as a moral guide, both by precept and by example. Its first two chapters form a separate entity, which may be referred to as the *Defence*²³ and which starts by quoting and answering the

²¹ R. Hackforth, *The Composition of Plato's Apology*, p. 5. For the contents of Polycrates' attack see Chroust, chap. 4.

²² Works like Xenophon's *Hiero*, whatever its date, bring in characters long since dead and so are hardly evidence of a convention allowing liberties to be taken with Socrates.

²³ This term is sometimes used, as by Chroust, for the *Apology*. The indictment is also quoted at *Apol.* 10 and, with differences, Plato's *Apol.* 24B. Taylor (*Var. Soc.*, p. 6) thinks Xenophon, being

start putting forward positive views they are of a kind now generally regarded as Platonic rather than Socratic. Apart from the fact that Aristotle distinguishes between Plato and Socrates, the early dialogues differ from the later (those after and including the *Meno* and *Gorgias*) by more than mere omissions; and it would be odd that Plato should keep Socrates' views in reserve for so long and come to reveal views of his own even later still.³⁴ Xenophon, on the other hand, makes Socrates give dogmatic expression to "improving" sentiments. It has been disputed whether this is due to Xenophon's own purposes and deficiencies or whether it represents a more faithful picture of Socrates than the more negative and probing mind we see in the early works of Plato (N. Gulley, *CQ*, 1952, pp. 74-75).

Xenophon himself portrays Socrates as using the question and answer method (see especially *Mem.* IV 2), while Plato seems to attribute it to the historical Socrates at *Crito* 50C. But Xenophon goes even further at *Mem.* IV 4.9-10,³⁵ where Hippias bursts out against Socrates' habit of "laughing at others and asking questions and probing everyone, while never consenting to defend a position yourself or reveal your own opinion about anything"—an impression one hardly gets from the rest of Xenophon!³⁶ On the other hand, Plato's *Apology*

³⁴ For the Burnet/Taylor view that Plato's portrait of Socrates is substantially accurate throughout see J. Burnet, *Greek Philosophy, Thales to Plato* and A. E. Taylor, *Varia Socratica and Socrates*, as well as their editions of various dialogues. For criticisms of it see, e.g., W. D. Ross in *Proc. of the Class. Assoc.*, 1933, L. Robin in *Rev. des Et. gr.*, 1916 (reprinted in *La Pensée hell.*, pp. 138-76). J. W. Miller (in *Rev. of Met.*, 1953) supports the Burnet/Taylor view by studying the dramatic dates of the dialogues, but though he makes some interesting points he does not answer the objections (and his own discussion of Recollection unduly ignores the *Euthyphro*).

³⁵ Mentioned but dismissed by Gulley (p. 75, n. 1), who seems to ignore that Plato's insistence on Socrates' agnosticism also comes in the *Apology* (20C ff.).

³⁶ Deman (*Témoignage*, p. 69), commenting on Aristotle's reference to Socratic irony at *Nic. Eth.* 1127B22 ff., refers to *Mem.* I 2.36 for something similar. Cf. in Plato *Theaet.* 150C.

IV

Plato himself, as we have seen, is naturally regarded as our main source for Socrates, though only in his earliest dialogues. This does not, however, mean that nothing in the later dialogues can be used. The change in Socrates' role in the dialogues is a gradual one and the fact that he is sometimes abandoned shows that Plato thought of himself as in some sense following Socrates for the rest of the time. In fact, if we look at the occasions where Socrates is decisively abandoned we find that they consist of a set-piece funeral oration (*Menexenus*), an essay in cosmology (*Timaeus*), studies in logic and dialectic, albeit with a political application (*Sophist* and *Statesman*), and the second-best political constitution (*Laws*). Socrates as champion of the Forms is criticised by Parmenides, who later gives way to the Eleatic Visitor (no doubt simply for reasons of dramatic chronology), and Socrates attributes the mystical climax of the *Symposium* to a priestess, a fact against rather than for a mystical conception of the historical Socrates of the kind suggested by Rogers. It is clear from this that Plato did not make a definite decision to abandon him. He appears in the late *Philebus*, presumably because of its ethical nature, and there is possibly even a hint (*Statesman* 258A; cf. F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 168-69) that he was already planned for the leading role in the unwritten *Philosopher*. The appearance of logic and dialectic in the *Philebus* suggests that his subordination in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* was due not to these but to the criticism and modification of the theory of Forms, which by this time was associated with his name. But this does not mean that Plato thought of the theory as historically belonging to Socrates. To us monism is a defining characteristic of the Eleatics, but the Eleatic Visitor is willing enough to criticise it, because Plato chooses an Eleatic simply as representing the logical outlook. Similarly, he chooses Socrates as embodying the

philosophical spirit and not because he held particular doctrines.

The comparison of Socrates to a midwife in the *Theaetetus* (149A ff.) is so apt for what seems to emerge as our general picture of Socrates that one feels tempted to say that if Plato had not written it we would have had to invent it. In fact the *Theaetetus*, despite its late date and un-Socratic subject matter, still has much of the spirit of the Socratic dialogue in its negative nature and in Socrates' insistence that Theaetetus produce the hypotheses for discussion. Similarly, the passage in the *Meno* (84D ff.) where Socrates extracts a geometrical theorem from a slave is set in a context of trying to prove the theory of Recollection which, like an interest in mathematics, is unlikely to have belonged to Socrates himself. But the general procedure by which Socrates tries to make his interlocutor come up with the answer for himself³⁸ can still be eminently Socratic. Contrast the procedure of Plato himself, with or without Socrates, in works such as the *Republic* or *Laws*, or even the *Sophist* or *Phaedo*.³⁹

³⁸ The charge that Socrates relies unduly on leading questions is misguided. The dialogue has to be kept reasonably short, but the point is that once the slave gets the answer he is convinced of it. If Socrates made a slip and got the answer wrong himself the slave could in theory correct him. Contrast the way the slave is simply told what "diagonal" means at 85B.

³⁹ A further reminiscence of the genuine Socratic maieutic method can perhaps be seen in Xenophon's *Economicus* 15.10 and the ensuing discussion. Socrates is there reporting Ischomachus, but the fact that Xenophon was unwilling to make Socrates actually own a farm, and so replaces him, does not preclude Xenophon's still using some of the lessons he learned from Socrates. But it is of course possible, especially if the *Economicus* is a late work, that this is a lesson he learned via Plato. Of course even in the most genuinely Socratic writings one must be careful about how much can be attributed to Socrates. The dialogues are clearly not verbatim reports. For instance much of the argumentation in the *Protagoras* may represent real Socratic arguments, but we surely cannot attribute to Socrates the slippery business around 350C, which is presumably required in some way by Plato's dramatic context.

Unlike Xenophon Plato does not speak in his own person.⁴⁰ The dialogues are either presented simply as such, or else are introduced by one of the speakers, or else are set within another dialogue which may or may not be introduced by one of its speakers. Socrates is confronted with a fair number of the Sophists (Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Prodicus, Thrasymachus, Critias, Euthydemus), mostly in quite early dialogues (including *Rep. I* as early in spirit if not in composition); whereas Xenophon mentions few Sophists apart from Antiphon and Hippias (his Euthydemus is presumably different from Plato's), but pays more attention to people like Aristippus and Antisthenes, generally numbered among Socrates' followers, though Xenophon does not entirely treat them as such. But their choice of interlocutors does perhaps fit Xenophon's desire to show Socrates as "useful" and Plato's desire to show him as educative⁴¹ but also critical if not revolutionary.

There are two places outside the *Apology* where Plato seems to be speaking of the real Socrates: Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium* (215A ff.) and Socrates' "autobiography" in the *Phaedo* (96A ff.). Both come from dialogues outside the first period, but it is the latter which has led to most controversy. However, of the three main things which it attributes to Socrates (an early scientific period, an interest in teleological explanation, and the theory of Forms with an associated philosophical method), we have already seen that there is no good evidence to attribute the first (in any significant sense) or the last to Socrates. There is little positive reason therefore to attribute the second to him either, though

⁴⁰ Except, of course, in the *Epistles*, or such of them as are genuine. He mentions himself as present at Socrates' trial and offering to contribute to a fine (*Apol.* 34A, 38B), and as absent through illness from the execution (*Phaedo* 59B). Incidentally, the appearance of Plato's own name at 38B is as near a guarantee as we can have that Socrates did propose a fine of thirty minae, whatever Xenophon (*Apol.* 23) may say.

⁴¹ *Apol.* 19D9 is not inconsistent with this if one considers what $\pi\alpha\iota\delta\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\iota\nu$ means there.

it might seem to be rather vaguely confirmed by Xenophon (*Mem.* I 4, IV 3).⁴² It is tempting to think that the autobiography is really Plato's.⁴³ But *Epistle* 7 and the dialogues in general, though perhaps not inconsistent with this, suggest rather that Plato had a *later* scientific period and an early political impulse, and there is no real reason to treat the autobiography as any less fictional than the rest of the *Phaedo*.

If we use Plato as a source we must obviously ensure that he does not contradict himself in what he tells us. The relations in this respect between the *Phaedo* passage we have just been discussing and the *Apology* have been treated by, among others, Hackforth (*The Composition of Plato's Apology*, pp. 160 ff.). The *Protagoras* (351B ff.) appears to attribute to Socrates a hedonism notably absent from, and indeed contradicted in, the *Gorgias* (492D–500A), *Republic* (583B–8A), and *Philebus* (31B–55C). This has been hotly discussed (for some references see Gregory Vlastos' *Introduction* to the Liberal Arts translation of the *Protagoras*, p. xl, n. 50, N. Gulley in *CR*, 1962, pp. 38–40), but here I shall only mention the need to compare the *Protagoras* with other *early* dialogues. N. Gulley, in *Phronesis*, 1965 (cf. his book *The Philosophy of Socrates* [1968]), contrasts the form the Socratic paradox takes in the *Protagoras* and in the *Gorgias*, attributing the former to Socrates and the latter to Plato.

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Finally we come to Aristotle,⁴⁴ our only substantial

⁴² Perhaps Xenophon's teleological arguments were not as trite then as they have since become. Cf. his rather cogent arguments against Anaxagoras in *Mem.* IV 7.

⁴³ The discovery of Anaxagoras through his writings rather than through personal contact suits this view well, especially if the copies were secondhand or remainders going cheap (cf. L. R. Shero in *Class. Wkly*, 1941–42, pp. 219–20).

⁴⁴ For Aristotle see T. Deman's extremely useful collection and commentary, *Le Témoignage d'Aristote sur Socrate* (1942), and for

equal impartiality and inexorability. He denies that he resembles Daedalus, who made statues move; for the logoi run away without his agency, and he would rather they remained (*Euthyph.* 11D). His language implies that he himself did not foresee the course the argument has taken, but was led along by it blindfolded; and that for all he knew the argument might have turned out a proof instead of a disproof of the original thesis. He even implies at times that there is no refutation at all, of anybody or by anybody or anything. There is only a company of persons engaged in determining the truth-value of a proposition, engaged in an impersonal elenchus in the wider sense.

This denial that he is conducting an elenchus is insincere, and constitutes what is known as the Socratic slyness or irony. The arguments could not be so workmanlike and purposeful, the results could not be so invariably negative, by divine inspiration or by mathematical probability. When we examine one of the arguments in detail, and see just what its logical structure is, we become convinced that from the very first of the secondary questions Socrates saw and intended the refutation of the primary answer. There is an elenchus in the narrower sense; and it is Socrates' own work. When he says of an answer 'Well, that is good enough' (*Grg.* 498A), he gives away the fact that, though the answerer has not admitted as much as he expected, he has admitted enough for his downfall. In reality Socrates is always doing what he does openly in *Republic* I 348-49, looking for a way to persuade the answerer that his thesis is false (348A4); and if the answerer refuses to grant him a premiss (348E) he keeps the conversation going somehow (348E-349B) until he has thought of another starting-point which the answerer will admit and which will serve to refute him. The statements that he is 'seeing whether the answer is true' are insincere. So are the earnest requests for instruction by which he obtains the primary answer. So are his occasional invitations to reciprocity in elenchus (e.g., *Grg.* 462A); he makes them

337A). Socrates refuses to make any contribution himself; but when any other person makes one he pulls it to pieces. He ought to realize that questioning is easier than answering (336C). Thrasymachus believes that Socrates deliberately tries to make trouble in arguments (341A). However that may be, there is no doubt that the actual result is sometimes the conversion of a pleasant discussion into a quarrel. Even in the *Laches*, where the elenchus is unusually benign in tone, its first effect is to make two old friends quarrel. In the *Apology* Plato makes Socrates attribute his unpopularity to the elenchus (e.g., 21C-D-E, 23A).

Plato also tells us that this elenchus is very amusing to the bystanders (*Sph.* 230C), especially to the young and rich (*Ap.* 23C, cf. 33C), and that young men treat it as a game and imitate it in and out of season (*Rp.* VII 539B). This effect would naturally increase the anger of the victim against Socrates.

PLATO'S DISCUSSIONS OF THE ELENCHUS

The picture which we have so far obtained of the Socratic elenchus is by no means a favourable one. This elenchus involved persistent hypocrisy; it showed a negative and destructive spirit; it caused pain to its victims; it thereby made them enemies of Socrates; it thereby brought him to trial, according to his own admission in Plato's *Apology*; and so it brought him to his death.

The question thus arises what Plato conceived to be the justification of the elenchus. For what end was it worth while to be so destructive and insincere, and to incur so much enmity?

Plato certainly thought that it could be justified. He did not regard it as a deplorable defect in Socrates' character, to be explained by medical or psychological doctrines but not to be justified. He held that it had a sufficient reason and was a valuable procedure, to be retained in spite of some undesirable consequences. Fur-