

SOCRATES

"True philosophers are always occupied in the practice of dying."

Phædo.

I

PHILOSOPHY did not begin with Socrates. But with Socrates, as we shall see, it not merely entered upon a new road but took the direction which, in spite of numerous setbacks, it has since followed. This remarkable man wrote nothing.¹ He had few possessions. For the greater part of his life he did not work for his living. But his influence upon a few contemporaries, some of them gifted statesmen and writers, was such that we know a fair amount about his character, his habits, and the events of his life. Above all we know something of the way he thought and the way he believed men should be trained to think. And we are aware that his ideas inspired, not merely two other great philosophers in the next generations, but all those who have since endeavoured to think in a philosophical or orderly manner. Possibly no other man, with the exception of the founders of the great religions, practised what he preached so thoroughly and consistently as this intrepid, somewhat uncouth figure of fifty-century Athens.

From what sources do we learn about Socrates? We owe most of what we know about him to two men, Plato (429-347 B.C.) and Xenophon (430-357 B.C.). But, even so, our knowledge is limited. Both of these men were junior to Socrates by about forty-five years. Save for the last decade of his life, therefore, the authorities are few and of doubtful value. The great comedian, Aristophanes (*b.* 448), introduces Socrates into one of his plays, *The Clouds*, with the object of poking fun at him. But the Socrates who is ridiculed by Aristophanes and his contemporary, *Ameipsias*, is already a man in his middle forties. Of Socrates as a youth we have no authentic picture. We have to go upon what he tells us, or rather upon the account put into his mouth by the two friends of his old age.

Socrates was born near Athens in the year 469 B.C., ten years after the battle of Salamis, in which the Athenians, aided by the

¹ Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher (first century), alone maintains that Socrates occasionally wrote down his thoughts (*Discourses*, Book II, Chapter I, 5). His poetic compositions in prison may have been purely extempore effusions.

Spartans, crushed the sea-power of Xerxes, the Persian king. Socrates' father, Sophroniscus, is reputed to have been a sculptor, but on this point there is some uncertainty. (Our only authority for the statement is a third-century writer, Timon of Phlius.) That he was a friend of Aristides, Commander of the Athenians at the battle of Plataea (479) and nicknamed "The Just", we know for certain. His mother, Phænarete, was by occupation a midwife, or at least she was accustomed to act as one; and it is interesting to remember that, according to Plato, Socrates used to describe his method of extracting knowledge as a kind of intellectual midwifery. From later writers we deduce that, if in fact his father's calling was that of a sculptor, the son not merely followed the same trade but excelled in it. A sculptured group representing the Three Graces and preserved in the Acropolis was supposed to have been the work of the young Socrates, and was exhibited as such up to the time of Pausanias, the geographer (late second century A.D.).¹ So far as we know, Socrates followed no other profession, except that for which he later became renowned. But the circumstances which induced him to become a "free-lance" philosopher—perhaps the last of that category and without doubt the greatest—will be described in due course.

If we possess scant information about the events of the life of Socrates, we do not lack impressive evidence as to his outstanding character. In the first place he seems to have been one of the toughest physical specimens of his time. Winter and summer, year in and year out, he apparently wore the same light garment, with neither shirt nor shoes. Accustomed to an outdoor existence, he was always to be seen either in the streets, in the market-place, or in the gymnasium, hobnobbing with young and old. Neither heat nor cold appeared to worry him. Even his bitterest enemies testify to his great physical courage. He served as a hoplite or foot-soldier in several military campaigns. He was at Samos, between 441 and 440, at the battle of Potidæa (432-430), at Delium (424) and probably at Amphipolis (442? or 437-436?). At Potidæa he saved the life of Alcibiades, the headstrong young Athenian politician, who repaid the compliment at Delium, and whose tribute to the philosopher's bravery is recorded in Plato's *Symposium*:

"I was wounded," recounts Alcibiades, "and he would not leave me, but he rescued me and my arms; and he ought to have

¹ Diogenes Laërtius (third century A.D.), author of *Lives of the Philosophers*, records the tradition. Archæologists now suggest an earlier sculptor.

received the prize for courage which the generals wanted to confer upon me on account of my rank, and I told them so, but he was more eager than the generals that I and not he should have the prize. There was another occasion on which his behaviour was very remarkable—in the flight of the army after the battle of Delium. He and Lactes were retreating, for the troops were in flight, and I met them and told them not to be discouraged, and promised to remain with them; and there you might see him, just as he is in the streets of Athens, stalking like a pelican, and rolling his eyes, calmly contemplating enemies as well as friends, and making very intelligible to anybody, even from a distance, that whoever attacked him would be likely to meet with a stout resistance.”

Alcibiades also records how, one morning during the expedition to Potidæa, Socrates was pondering a problem which he could not resolve. “He would not give it up, but continued thinking from early dawn until noon—there he stood fixed in thought; and at noon he was noticed, and the rumour ran through the wondering crowd that Socrates had been standing and thinking about something ever since the break of day. At last, in the evening after supper, some Ionians out of curiosity brought out their mats and slept in the open air in order to watch him and see whether he would stand all night. There he stood until the following morning; and with the return of light he offered up a prayer to the sun and went his way.”

Not merely did Socrates live in a condition of which many a slave would have been ashamed; he was for most of his life desperately poor. Indeed, his extreme poverty was the principal source of the mockery of contemporary comedians. Aristophanes goes so far as to represent him, most unfairly, as a mad, impoverished star-gazer who was prepared to give instruction for money in a bogus kind of philosophy. As to star-gazing, both Xenophon and Plato witness to the great interest he displayed in astronomy and geometry, but, unlike the Sophists or professional teachers of philosophy, Socrates never taught for gain. On this subject he spoke feelingly to his accusers at the end of his trial: “If I had gained anything, or if I had been paid for my preaching, there would have been some sense in my doing so; but now you see not even the imprudence of my accusers dares to say that I have ever taken or asked for pay from anyone; of that they have no witness. And I have sufficient witness to the truth of what I say—my poverty.”

In spite of his straitened circumstances, which the abandonment of a regular profession increased, Socrates was married rather late in life to a woman called Xanthippe. Of the character of this woman, who bore him three sons, we know extremely little, though Xenophon hints that she was a hot-tempered creature.¹ A remark in Aristotle's book on Rhetoric suggests that the boys grew up to be nondescript men, without a spark of their father's genius. The last occasion on which we hear of Xanthippe is when she paid a brief visit to her husband in prison, bringing the youngest of her children with her. Although Socrates's attitude to his wife might suggest that his was a cold and reserved temperament, we learn from other sources, particularly Plato and Æschines, that the reverse was true. Even if we admit that he exercised considerable self-control, it is a mistake to regard him as a self-denying, ascetic kill-joy. He was by temperament ardent, prone to gaiety, with an irrepressible sense of humour (manifested not least in his final speech to his friends), and a healthy contempt for those who, like Antisthenes and the disciples of Pythagoras, identified wisdom and sanctity with dirt, vermin and squalor.

But to return to the circumstances of his life. Between the first performance of Aristophanes' play *The Clouds* (423 B.C.) and the trial of Socrates (399), great changes had occurred in Athens. There had been a political revolution in consequence of which the Democratic party had returned to power. Although a firm supporter of democracy (he could hardly be otherwise), Socrates had a number of friends, like Critias and Alcibiades, who were associated with the old order. And so the gentle and not too bitter burlesque of Socrates in Aristophanes' play (which, being a failure on its first production, the author rewrote in somewhat stronger terms) was taken more seriously a quarter of a century later. Nor was Socrates under any illusion as to the harm done to him, albeit inadvertently, by Aristophanes; he deliberately referred to the play in his last speech, chiding his judges for repeating as literally true that which had been originally intended as pure jest.

Two questions concerning the relation between Aristophanes and Socrates are still a source of perplexity to us. The first is at what point their friendship, or at any rate their respect one for the other, began to cool; and the second is what Aristophanes, still a comparatively young man, was doing at the time of the trial of

¹ He says that she was "the most insupportable woman that is, has been, or ever will be" (*The Banquet*).

Socrates. We know that Aristophanes and Plato remained on terms of friendship long after Socrates' death—and this is surely incompatible with their holding opposite views about the man whom Plato, for one, regarded as “the most righteous of the whole age”. It is possible that at the time of the trial Aristophanes was absent on military service. At any rate there is no record that he intervened or showed any particular interest in the shameful proceedings taking place in the court at Athens.

Although the motives for the final arrest of Socrates were probably semi-political, Socrates himself had throughout life taken little part in politics. As he pointed out to his judges, the holding of political office was directly contrary to his principles. A man so much in the public eye, however, could not avoid becoming involved indirectly in political controversies. For one complete year, 406–405, he was a member of the Council of 500, where his influence was all for moderation. When the victors of the battle of Arginusæ were being tried, he alone opposed the condemnation of the generals. Under the Reign of Terror of the Thirty Tyrants in 404, his stubborn refusal to agree to the arrest of Leon, who had incurred public displeasure at the time, nearly cost him his life. Certainly, had it not been for the counter-revolution of the Democrats, he would have been indicted for disobedience. And that is another reason why it cannot be maintained that he was a whole-hearted sympathizer with the old order.

Nevertheless, although the Democrats proclaimed a general amnesty soon after their return to power, and although Socrates was known to have had nothing to do with the outrages and tyrannies of the old régime, he was summarily charged with impiety in the year 399 on two main counts: first, that he had been responsible for “corrupting” the youth of Athens; and secondly, that he had neglected the traditional gods by introducing in their place a variety of religious novelties. What exactly lay behind these allegations? To answer this question, we must go back to the time when Socrates was a young man.

At what age Socrates first became conscious of the promptings of a divine or supernatural voice, rather like the traditional voice of conscience only much more authoritative, we do not know. Although he frequently referred to this mysterious power, he himself could never make up his mind when first he became accustomed to obey its injunctions. As in most cases of this kind, the experience probably began much earlier than he realized, growing more

insistent with the dawn of adolescence, when the sense of right and wrong is sharpened. What distinguished the "voice" or "demon" of Socrates from other "inner" oracles is that it afforded him warnings of a particular kind. It gave him negative information, never positive. It told him not to do things; it never told him what he should do. It was a check, not a prompter.

Thus, early in life, Socrates, otherwise the most humble of men and without riches or power save the friendship of certain distinguished contemporaries, became possessed with the idea that he was entrusted with a divine mission. Whatever his critics and later accusers might say, his belief in God and spiritual values, and even his reverence for the traditional deities of his country, were never for a moment in doubt. He was by disposition a religious man. Unlike the common people of his day, however, he refused to credit with literal truth the mythology and legend so deeply interwoven with the traditions of Greek society. Such tales of gods and goddesses he ascribed to poetic invention; but he saw no harm in their being handed down from generation to generation, just as he saw no harm in the poetic fancies they had inspired. And, sceptic though he was, he refused to ignore the testimony of supernatural signs and portents, oracles and seers, for was he not himself given to mystical transports, being to that extent a disciple of the cults of the Pythagoreans and of the Orphic mysteries?

Indeed, it was to the deliverances of an Oracle that he owed what he believed to be a striking confirmation of his missionary status. One day, he tells us, a friend of his, Chærephon by name, visited the famous Oracle at Delphi for the express purpose of asking whether any man was wiser than Socrates. Without hesitation, the Oracle replied that no one was wiser. Now the Oracle at Delphi was famous for a command that it issued to all those who came to seek its aid. This command was the single motto "Know Thyself". In what sense, then, did the Oracle intend its statement regarding Socrates to be interpreted? Why was Socrates to be judged wiser than any man living (and perhaps dead)? The answer was not that Socrates knew everything, but that on the contrary he knew little or nothing; that he was in fact abysmally ignorant. But the difference between Socrates and other people was that whereas they were ignorant but thought themselves wise, Socrates was ignorant and knew himself to be so. In other words, Socrates "knew himself" in the true sense.

The Oracle's revelation caused Socrates to ponder deeply. If

the statement were true, it must be acted upon; for the words of an Oracle represent a command, a summons to action. And so, after due reflection, Socrates made up his mind that his true vocation in life, the work to which he must henceforth devote himself, was to examine, analyse, and if necessary expose, the wisdom of those whom the world called wise.

And that was how the trouble started. His fellow-citizens did not welcome this relentless inquisition into what they believed, or what they supposed themselves to believe. It seemed quite uncalled for. To them Socrates was the worst sort of busybody—a man who asked intricate questions with no other motive than that of satisfying an insatiable curiosity. It was this very “disinterestedness” of Socrates that upset them most of all. What was the object of it? The man did no work. He had nothing to offer. His one object was to disturb people’s preconceived opinions. And no one was proof against him.

As for Socrates himself, he realized early in his new career that he was likely to provoke much enmity. But this did not deter him. According to the account in Plato’s *Apology* he tried his first experiment upon a politician who was “thought wise by many and still wiser by himself”; but he soon took his leave. “Although I do not suppose that either of us has any knowledge of goodness and beauty,” he said to himself, “I am better off than he is, for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows: I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter point I seem to have slightly the advantage of him.” But, as a result of this difficult interview, the politician came to hate him bitterly, and so did many others who were in the audience at the time. Thoroughly baffled, he then went elsewhere to one “who had still higher pretensions to wisdom”, but fared no better and made another enemy in consequence. And so he passed on from one man to another, from the poets to the artisans and to those practising intermediate trades, probing and drawing out of them admission after admission as to the shallowness of their wisdom, exposing their downright ignorance, and on each occasion asking himself on behalf of the Oracle whether he would prefer to be as he was, “neither having their knowledge nor their ignorance”, or to be like them in both, and always answering that he was better off as he was.

However much they feared and hated him, the contemporaries of Socrates were finally obliged to admit that he was a very shrewd man. But this was not the impression he necessarily wanted to

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create. For it was a constant source of embarrassment to him to find that his hearers always considered him to be possessed of the wisdom which he found wanting in others. In this they laboured under a misapprehension. "The truth is," he explained, "that God only is wise; and by his answer" (*i.e.* through the medium of the Oracle) "he intends to show that the wisdom of men is worth little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name by way of illustration, as if He said, he is the wisest who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing." And recalling the accusation that he was no better than the Sophists, he added: "My occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty through my service of the god."

The legal prosecutor of Socrates was a man named Meletus, a writer of inferior tragedies and a thoroughly worthless fellow, probably bribed to participate in this folly; but the enemy behind the scenes was Anytus, a wealthy Athenian who had played a leading part in the overthrow of the Thirty Tyrants by the Democrats. Lycon, an orator by profession and a friend of Anytus, was another of Socrates's accusers. As for his judges—men with little public experience but with a number of private scores to pay off—they had themselves not long returned from banishment. Nevertheless, it must not be supposed that Socrates's prosecution was simply the consequence of a political reversal of fortune. Under the rule of the Thirty Tyrants, he had fared little better. In fact, Critias, the leader, had gone so far as to issue a proclamation stipulating that Socrates, and indeed the Sophists in general, were to desist from the work of teaching; and we have already referred to those earlier occasions on which he acted contrary to the wishes and orders of the authorities. In the turmoil of political reaction, however, a man's precise status and reputation under the former régime are rarely assessed with impartiality; nor was it so with Socrates.

To the credit of the Tribunal, the initial vote cast against Socrates after his "trial" was very far from unanimous. Two hundred and eighty votes were cast against him and two hundred and twenty in his favour.¹ The accusers thereupon asked for a sentence of death to be pronounced. In all cases of this kind, how-

¹ The jury consisted of 500, and Plato affirms that Socrates was condemned by a majority of 60.

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ever, it was the custom of Athenian law for the accused to be allowed to make a counter-proposal, following which the judges might be induced to modify their sentence. Socrates took full advantage of this privilege, but in his own fashion. He suggested that, instead of being punished, he should first be proclaimed a public benefactor, and thereafter maintained, as was the custom with celebrities, at the public expense. As a "token" fine, however, he suggested that he should pay 1 *mina*.

Couched in typically ironic terms, no statement was better calculated to arouse the wrath of Anytus and his colleagues. The feeling of the court immediately went against Socrates. Nor did the action of his friends in suggesting a fine of 30 *mina* serve any purpose. The court had been insulted, the accusers made to look foolish just as Socrates's interlocutors had in the past been held up to ridicule. Socrates was proving himself incorrigible. As a result, a greatly increased majority demanded the imposition of the death sentence.

There is no doubt that Socrates had, as the phrase goes, asked for it. He entertained no fear of death. But he had also made it clear that if by chance the judges should decide to let him go free, he would not merely revert to his previous mode of life but interpret the acquittal as a direct invitation to do so. If, on the other hand, they refused to tolerate his public teaching and interrogating, his probing into questions of justice and virtue, or his mixing freely with the impressionable young men of Athens, then, said Socrates, "I should reply: Men of Athens, I honour and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting anyone whom I meet and saying to him as my habit is: You, my friend—a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens—are you not ashamed of trying to get as much money and honour and reputation as possible, while remaining careless and indifferent to wisdom and truth and the greatest perfection of your soul? . . . For I know that this is the commandment of God; and I believe that no greater good has ever happened to Athens than my service to God."

Whether the moving speech delivered after the passing of the sentence was that actually spoken by Socrates, or whether it was put into his mouth by his disciple Plato, we shall never know. All we know is that the thoughts expressed therein are such as Socrates must certainly have tried to put into words, for they are

in harmony with everything he is reported to have said and done in the course of his career. They represent not merely one of the greatest speeches ever uttered, but one of the profoundest statements of that view of life which, perfected in the Christian teaching, still forms the moral basis of our civilization. Socrates had reached the age when he no longer wished to prolong his life, if to do so meant enforced silence and ostracism. Consequently, his final words to his judges dwell upon the theme of death and the fear of death, and form a kind of summing-up of his life's teaching, and of what is sometimes called the "perennial philosophy".

"There is great reason to hope," he said, "that death is good; for either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. . . . Now if death is like the former, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night. But if death is the journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead abide, what good, my friends and judges, can be greater than this? If indeed, when the pilgrim arrives in the world below, he is delivered from the professors of justice in this world, and finds the true judges who are said to give judgment there . . . that pilgrimage will be worth making. What would not a man give if he might talk with Orpheus and Musæus and Hesiod and Homer?"¹

"I myself, too, shall have a wonderful interest in there meeting and talking with Palamedes, and Ajax the son of Telamon, and any other ancient hero who was unjustly sentenced to death; and there will be no small pleasure, I think, in comparing my own suffering with theirs. Above all I shall then be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge, as in this world so also in the next; and I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise and is not. . . . What infinite delight would there be in talking with them and asking them questions! In another world they do not put a man to death for asking questions; assuredly not. For besides being happier than we are, they will be immortal, if what is said is true. So, my judges, you too should face death confidently and reflect on this one truth, that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. He and his are not neglected by the gods; nor is my own approaching end a matter of mere chance.

"I see clearly that the time has arrived when it was better for

¹ Greek poets, the first mythical.

me to die and be released from trouble. And so I am not angry with those who condemned and those who accused me; they have done me no harm, although they did not mean to do me any good; and for this I may gently blame them. But I have a favour to ask them. When my sons are grown up, punish them and trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing—then reprove them, as I have reproved you, for not caring about that for which you ought to care, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing. And if you do this, both I and my sons will have received justice at your hands. The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better only God knows.”

With these calm and noble words Socrates passes out of public life. But fortunately we have a record, again due to the artistry of Plato, of what happened to Socrates and his small circle of loyal friends, in the interval between his trial and his death. In fact we are much better informed about these last days than about the whole seventy-three years that preceded them.

It was the custom in Ancient Greece for a man condemned to death to drink a draught of hemlock within twenty-four hours. Such would have been Socrates's fate but for an interesting circumstance. It so happened that the sacred ship from Delos¹ had not yet returned, and there was no question of an execution taking place before its arrival.

In this way Socrates's life was prolonged by thirty days, during which time he devoted himself, with all his former enthusiasm, to philosophical speculation and also apparently to his first essays in writing poetry. The poetry, it is sad to say, has not survived; but the philosophizing is preserved in two immortal dialogues of Plato, the *Crito* and the *Phædo*. Crito was, next after Plato, Socrates's most loyal friend. He it was who had offered to stand surety for his master when the latter, half in earnest, had suggested that his sentence should be commuted to the payment of a fine. In a last passionate display of devotion, Crito now tried to persuade the condemned Socrates to make his escape, and went to great trouble to prepare a stratagem to deceive the gaolers. Somewhat to the surprise of his friends, Socrates refused to contemplate any such action. And he proceeded to defend his decision by an argument

¹ An island sacred to Apollo. The custom was to celebrate the deliverance of the city by Theseus.

concerning the duty of obedience to the laws of the state which, read out of its context, might strike the modern reader as unnecessarily submissive. He points out, however, that if a man has lived in a particular city, and has accepted its constitution and protection for the greater part of his life, he has no right to try to evade its ordinances when they are invoked, however unjustly, to condemn him to imprisonment or death. If he did not approve of the laws of his country, he could long ago have taken his leave and made his home elsewhere—a practice rather more open to a Greek, provided he had sufficient means, than to a modern national.

Having lived in Athens through so many different régimes and having survived them all, Socrates had no intention of taking flight at the eleventh hour. "Listen, then, Socrates," he imagines the Laws as saying, "to us who have brought you up. Think not of life and children first, and of justice afterwards, but of justice first, that you may be justified before the rulers of the world below. . . . Now you depart in innocence, a sufferer and not a doer of evil; a victim not of the laws but of men. But if you go forth, returning evil for evil, and injury for injury, breaking the covenants and agreements which you have made with us and wronging those whom you ought least of all to wrong . . . we will receive you as an enemy. . . . Listen, then, to us and not to Crito."

And so, reconciled to his fate and with a profound peace in his soul, Socrates made a habit each day of receiving his friends, in discoursing with them, and answering their questions. In due time, the sacred ship from Delos arrived; and Plato recounts in the *Phædo* how the loyal company assembled earlier the next morning, only to be kept waiting rather longer than usual. For the prison officials were closeted with their charge, giving him instructions as to his last moments, and taking off his chains. Xanthippe, his wife, had also been summoned to bid him farewell. When Crito and his friends entered (Plato, incidentally, was not able to be present on this last occasion, owing to illness), Xanthippe burst into loud lamentations and had to be led away. Socrates looked up at the visitors with a quizzical expression, slowly rubbing his bruised leg. The removal of his chains had set a train of thought going.

"How singular is the thing called pleasure," he reflected, "and how curiously related to pain; for a man never feels both at the same instant, and yet he who pursues either is generally compelled to take the other; their bodies are two but they are joined by a single

head." And, warming to the theme, he went on to express his regret that Æsop had not composed a fable on this matter, showing how God, in order to reconcile the strife between pleasure and pain, had decided to fasten their heads together.

Soon the conversation took a more serious turn. The sense of death oppressed the company; Socrates alone, whose end was to come that same day, proclaimed his unshakable conviction that the soul, purged of its sins, was destined for immortality. His discourse on the subject, which is preserved for us in the *Phædo*, culminates in the statement that if a man shall "cast away the pleasures and ornaments of the body as alien things which do him harm rather than good, and pursue the pleasures of knowledge", he may well be "confident about his soul".

By this time the day was wearing on, and Socrates suggested that he should take a bath, in order to save the women the trouble of washing his body after death. Crito, anxious not to waste a moment, begged him first to tell them whether there was anything they could do either for him or for his children. How, for instance, did he wish to be buried?

Socrates's reply was characteristically simple. He told his friends merely to "take care of themselves", and to remember what he had tried to teach them. As to how he should be buried, he replied: "In any way you like; but," he added, with a touch of whimsical humour, "you must get hold of me, and take care that I do not run away from you." And, turning from Crito to the others, he remarked: "I want you to go bail for me now, as at the trial he (Crito) went bail to the judges for me; but let the promise be of another sort; for he was surety for me to the judges that I would stay here, and you must be my surety to him that I shall not stay, but go away and depart."

Then he got up and went into the next room, followed by Crito. Phædo and his companions stayed where they were, talking of their sorrow; for, as he observed, Socrates "was like a father whom we were losing, and we were going to be orphans for the rest of our lives". When Socrates had bathed, he received for the last time his family, commending them to the care of Crito; and finally, just when the sun was sinking, he returned to the others.

After the performance of these last rites, the atmosphere changed. Few words were spoken. Then, as if to break the tension, the jailer entered. He was clearly much affected by the scene, and addressed Socrates in a tone almost of apology. Accustomed to be

greeted by an outburst of rage or grief on the part of the prisoner, he hardly knew how to disclose his mission to one whom he described, quite unaffectedly, as "the noblest and gentlest and best of all who ever came to this place". "I am sure," he added, "you will not be angry with me; for others, as you are aware, and not I, are to blame. And so good-bye, and try to bear lightly what must needs be—you know my errand." Then he suddenly burst into tears and hurried out.

Socrates remarked upon his courtesy. And then, turning to Crito again, he requested that the poison should be prepared.

Crito still saw no reason for haste. Most condemned persons, he pointed out, were accustomed to defer the fatal drink as long as possible, employing their last hours with eating and drinking and, in some cases, with other pleasures. Again Socrates shook his head. There was nothing, he insisted, to be gained by waiting. His life was already forfeit. And he had no wish to prolong unnecessarily the sufferings of his companions. He would therefore drink the hemlock without further ado.

Realizing that the old man's mind was quite made up, Crito directed one of the servants to summon the jailer once more. When the latter entered carrying the cup of poison, Socrates, still without turning a hair, said to him: "You are an expert in these matters, my friend. Tell me what I must do."

The jailer answered that, having drunk the poison, he must walk about the room until his legs began to grow heavy and then lie down. The poison would then do its work. So saying, he handed Socrates the cup.

Socrates received it quietly; but suddenly, as if in an after-thought, he exclaimed: "What about making a libation out of the cup?" meaning that he considered it appropriate to pour away some of its contents, as was the custom, in honour of the gods. When the jailer replied that he had prepared, according to official instructions, no more than was absolutely necessary, Socrates nodded in understanding, and, calling upon the gods to prosper his journey to the other world, he resolutely drank the poison in one draught.

It was a tragic moment. And those in the room who had hitherto managed to control their feelings could restrain themselves no longer.

Several minutes elapsed before they realized that one of their company had retained his full composure. This was Socrates

himself. "What are you doing, you strange people?" he asked. "I sent the women away that they might not strike this false note. Be quiet then and have patience."

These words, criticizing their demonstrativeness, calmed them in an instant. And then, almost incredulously, they beheld Socrates arise from his couch and begin to pace about the room, methodically acting upon the jailer's instructions. And so he continued, in the unbroken silence, until in due time his legs grew heavy, and he was obliged to lie down. Pressing one of his feet, the jailer asked whether he could feel anything. Socrates replied that he could not. The jailer continued to feel his limbs until it was obvious that a general numbness was creeping up his frame. Just before the poison took effect, however, Socrates, uncovering his face for an instant, murmured: "Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?" By this he meant that he wished to do honour to the god of health, in gratitude for having at last recovered from that prolonged malady, human life.

"It shall be done," answered Crito, "is there anything else?" To this question there was no reply. When they uncovered Socrates again, the life had ebbed completely.

In recounting the life of Socrates, the concluding words of the *Phædo*, addressed to a common friend, form the most fitting close: "Such was the end, Echecrates, of our friend; of whom I may truly say, that of all the men of his time whom I have known, he was the wisest and justest and best."

II

MORE than any other man of his time, and possibly more than anyone before or since, with the exception of certain great religious leaders, Socrates lived his own philosophy. It was he, indeed, who, in criticizing the Sophists, laid such emphasis upon the necessity of realizing virtue in practice. Mere exhortations to moral virtue, so easy to give and so comfortable to listen to, were not enough. The injunction to "Know Thyself" imposed upon the devotee of philosophy a discipline more rigorous than anything hitherto either recommended or followed. But it also implied a new theory of human conduct. Virtue, that is to say, was the consequence of self-knowledge; and moral goodness was the greatest value in the universe.

In following this line of thought, Socrates was, in effect, inaugurating a new departure in philosophy. During the centuries before he embarked upon his mission, many thinkers of great originality had appeared on the borders of the Ægean, though our records of their thought are scanty and in most cases garbled. We know enough of their ideas, however, to form a general picture of what it is that they were trying to find out about the world. We know that certain things interested them in particular, that certain problems baffled them, and that by certain aspects of reality they were left apparently unmoved. Above all we know that their attitude to the universe was characterized by an intense desire to discover the ultimate *constituents* of matter and life. They were in fact the first philosophers of Nature, or, as we should call them to-day, the first natural scientists.

Of Thales of Miletus, who lived about 600 B.C., we know no more than that he was the first investigator of the natural world to have worked out a coherent, if elementary, science of matter.

His chief claim to fame is his assertion that the immense variety of the natural world ultimately sprang from one element or principle. To us, this way of regarding the world of Nature may not commend itself very strongly; but that is merely because we have been long accustomed to think of the universe, if not as composed of a single material, then at least as a coherent whole. To the early Greeks, this latter was an idea of brilliant originality. Now the element or *ἀρχή* from which everything else originated was, according to Thales, water. Water is that which envelops the earth. The earth, in fact, may be said to float upon an ocean infinite in extent, and to derive its nourishment, like a huge organism, from this circumambient flood.

A disciple of Thales, Anaximander, while accepting the view that everything in Nature derived from a single principle, differed from his master on the question of what this principle was. Instead of water, Anaximander maintained that the generative element was the boundless atmosphere itself, from which everything was formed by gradual separation and into which everything was finally resolved. Pursuing his speculations into what we should to-day call the Origin of Species, Anaximander made some suggestions as to the evolution of man which have a surprisingly modern ring; but with this aspect of his work we are not at the moment concerned. Yet a third philosopher, Anaximenes, also from the town of Miletus, modified the principle of Anaximander

to the extent of calling the generative principle air or "breath". In other words, the philosophers of the so-called Ionian School were serious philosophers of Nature, and their overriding aim was to explain how Nature *came into being*.

The philosophers who followed these pioneer thinkers were concerned, as might be expected, with the problem of evolution itself. Whereas their predecessors had established, or at least postulated, the fact that all things developed from some primal substance or element, men such as Xenophanes (a contemporary of Anaximander), Parmenides, Zeno (fifth century B.C.), and Gorgias (485-380?) concentrated upon the problem of how such development, process, or "becoming", took place. Thus they set to work to analyse a concept which had been arrived at by a process known as abstraction. Moreover, in the few fragments that we possess of the work of Parmenides (who expounded his thought in the form of a philosophical poem called *The Way of Truth and the Way of Belief*), we witness the first attempt of a Greek philosopher to engage in a form of thought which, for reasons to be discussed later, came to be described as "metaphysical".

The conclusion at which Parmenides arrived, however, was the startling one that change was not a fact but an illusion. And he supported his contention by the logical argument that what exists can never either cease to exist or become anything different. For if it changes, it must have changed either from itself or from nothing. If it has changed from itself, however, it can have undergone no fundamental change at all; and as for the notion that it has come from nothing, that is preposterous. Being, therefore, must be eternal, infinite and unchanging. Zeno, who followed Parmenides's line of thought, illustrated the theory by the famous example of an arrow travelling through space. The arrow, he contended, must reach its destination by passing through an infinite number of successive points, each of which it occupies in turn. This can only mean that at every single point in its course the arrow is at rest. The "movement" of the arrow is therefore something which exists wholly in our imagination. It has no reality in itself.

Zeno's pupil Gorgias (483-375 B.C.) carried this argument a stage farther. In fact, he tipped it over into the abyss of absurdity. It is all very well, he argued, to maintain that Being is both infinite and eternal. That which is both infinite and eternal obviously cannot be located anywhere, since to locate it in space would be to

render it finite, while to locate it in time would be to render it temporal. If, therefore, Being is both infinite and eternal, it cannot enjoy any existence whatever. And that is as much as to say that Being and Nothing are identical.¹ Clearly this is the *reductio ad absurdum* of Parmenides's theory.

Now if you push an extreme argument far enough, it turns into its opposite. And that is precisely what happened with the argument that all change is an illusion. The philosopher Heraclitus, who lived at Ephesus in the fifth century B.C., countered the ideas of Parmenides, Zeno and Gorgias with an argument that has exerted a profound effect on philosophical thought down to our own time.² It is perfectly true, he argued, that Being and Not-Being are the same, because changeless Being is itself an illusion. The world that we know is always in a state of change or flux; that is its most obvious characteristic. We can never grasp anything and say "this is unchanging or stationary", because that which we intend to grasp has already suffered change by the time we are able to set our hands upon it. Reality is a stream into which we cannot plunge twice. Everything flows. We can arrest the flow only in thought. Consequently the idea of permanence is something that we have ourselves invented; but it would be foolish to imagine that reality exhibits any permanence beyond the fact that it is in a permanent state of flux.³

To outline the thought of all the pre-Socratic philosophers, of whom there were a great many, would take too long; but it is impossible to understand the work of Socrates, and the great revolution in thought that he effected, without referring to one more distinguished name, a name familiar to all, even school-children: Pythagoras. Born at Samos in the early sixth century B.C., Pythagoras was a man of such influence over his contemporaries that he inspired a school of philosophers who interested themselves in almost every form of speculation—mathematics, music, medicine, religion. This school or Order had flourishing branches at Crotona, Tarentum, and later at Athens and Thebes; and historians are still debating how far Pythagoras himself was responsible for some of the ideas defined by later historians and philosophers as "Pythagorean".

What chiefly distinguishes the Pythagorean school from that

¹ This argument was revived, as we shall see, by the German philosopher Hegel.

² See the chapter on Bergson.

³ Heraclitus also had some interesting things to say about the concept of unity in diversity and vice versa.

initiated by Thales is its emphasis upon mathematics as the "key" to the nature of reality. Whereas the Ionian School had been obsessed, as we have seen, with the *material* constituents of Nature, the Pythagoreans were more interested in the types of order or *form* to be found in Nature. The basis of geometry, astronomy and music was harmony and proportion; and harmony and proportion were ultimately reducible to Number. Number, in fact, assumed for the Pythagoreans an almost mystical significance.

Both Socrates and Plato were greatly influenced by the doctrines of the Pythagorean school, above all those concerning the nature and destiny of the human soul. With thinkers such as Democritus (460 B.C.), however, Greek thought took a decidedly materialistic direction. Born at Abdera (in Thrace), Democritus was the founder of the school of Atomists; and although most of his writings—and he is said to have written a great deal—have perished, we can learn something about his theories from the great poem of his disciple Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*. According to Democritus, both matter and mind were composed of atoms; and these constituent atoms, though varying in shape, were by nature indestructible. Even the gods themselves were formed of combinations of atomic particles, their so-called immortality being due to superior and therefore more lasting combinations than those of mortals. Nevertheless, we cannot suppose that such combinations will last indefinitely; for death will one day overtake even the most transcendent of Beings. Only the individual atom, then, is assured of immortality. Although its partnership with other atoms may be dissolved, it will remain free to enter into other partnerships, and so on for ever. About 2,360 years after the birth of Democritus, his theory of the hard, indestructible nature of the atom received striking refutation in practice.

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The thinkers whose work we have outlined in the foregoing pages were not isolated figures, speculating in the void and exerting little influence upon the ordinary people of their day. Some, like Gorgias, held important public positions. Many were skilled in various sciences, such as medicine or astronomy, and became renowned for their spectacular cures and prognostications. Empedocles of Agrigentum (450 B.C.), poet, orator and seer, was such a one. Others, like Anaxagoras, who began teaching at Athens

about 460, were friends and advisers of the great statesmen of the time. In an age when the sources of knowledge were so few and there was no higher education, the sage or wise man was a figure of eminence, whether he taught what was popular, or whether, like Anaxagoras and Socrates, he defied current beliefs and incurred the odium of the authorities.¹ The fame of a great teacher would spread so rapidly that young men, anxious to acquire wisdom, would travel great distances to attend his lectures, and sometimes to consult him upon subjects not always strictly philosophical. The Greek world was already famous for the wisdom of its Oracles. These philosophers were living, moving and sometimes equally expensive oracles. For there were not a few charlatans among them. Inevitably, in time, there grew up schools of *professional* wise men, or, as they were known by their contemporaries, Sophists: individuals who went into the business of purveying wisdom for gain, charging high prices for instructing pupils in the art of persuasion and rhetoric. At their best, the Sophists induced people to examine their own consciences, to revise their everyday assumptions, to curb their prejudices, and so to broaden their outlooks, with a view to influencing their conduct of affairs. At their worst, they imparted nothing more than intellectual "sales talk", casuistry, logic-chopping and quibbling—in short, the art, so cruelly ascribed by Aristophanes to Socrates in *The Clouds* of "making the worse cause seem the better".

The first well-known figure in ancient Athens to impart knowledge and instruction for gain was a Sophist called Protagoras (481-411 B.C.), a friend of Democritus, about whom Plato wrote an entertaining and not too friendly dialogue. Plato pictures Protagoras as always surrounded by a group of earnest young men who listened in awe to his least remark, firmly believing that, in return for a moderate sum of money, he would make them wise. For the disciples of the Sophists appeared to labour under the delusion that wisdom, at least as possessed by these professional teachers, was a commodity capable of being transferred *en bloc* from one person to another. The teaching of Protagoras possessed all the attractions of being somewhat daring and "advanced"; hence its fascination for those who, like the smart young men of Athens, wished to emphasize their superiority over the masses. The promoter of scepticism is not necessarily an evil influence in society, for no society can afford to dispense with

¹ Anaxagoras's works were publicly burned in Athens in 411.

healthy criticism, however disturbing its initial impact; what is important is that the critic shall be animated by the right motives. As for the Sophists, their motives were frequently tainted with mischief; for their aim was not so much to enlighten as to bewilder. They wished to inspire awe instead of respect, or rather to enforce a reluctant respect by a display of intellectual virtuosity.

According to Socrates and Plato, such was the underlying motive that inspired the Sophists Protagoras and his colleague Hippias. The scepticism of Protagoras took the form of casting doubt upon the power of the human intellect to arrive at truth; an entertaining but dangerous doctrine. Every man, Protagoras argued, has nothing but his own senses upon which to rely; but your senses and mine may register different conclusions, and which of us is to claim that he is the more trustworthy in his impressions? The answer must seemingly be that both are right, because each has reached his own truth, so that there are an infinite number of possible "truths".

Such a theory, it is obvious, leads us nowhere. All authorities, being equally useful, become equally useless. Truth has been shattered into a myriad particles, each of which neutralizes and dulls the brilliance of the others. The result is not illumination but obscurity. And the student who set out to find a sure guide to conduct, retires in a state of mental befuddlement. In return for his money, he possesses nothing but a store of useless jargon. He has bartered good coinage for the "spide" of intellectual conceit. Such was the effect of the Sophistic teaching.

Of Protagoras and his colleagues at least it may be said that they stumbled upon an important truth without knowing it. In their attack upon the lofty but vague speculations of their predecessors and contemporaries, they laid bare the fact, so rightly insisted upon by Socrates, that "the proper study of mankind is man". Where they erred was in their excessive emphasis upon that which distinguished and separated one man from another. When Socrates set out to discover the meaning of the Delphic Oracle's maxim "Know Thyself", on the other hand, he began by considering human nature in general. His argument was as follows. To lay bare the secrets of the universe, its origin and destiny, must assuredly take centuries of patient investigation; perhaps those secrets will never be fully revealed to man, given faculties of such limitation as those with which he is endowed. But man can here and now embark upon the road to self-knowledge. He

does not need complicated instruments for that. In reflecting upon his own conduct, in examining the discrepancy between what he is and what he ought to be—what he does and what he ought to do—he will find mental occupation sufficient to enlist his energies to the full.

Thus Socrates laid the foundations of a science which his successors, Plato and Aristotle, and their successors in turn up to our own day, have developed and debated, though never fundamentally altered; namely, the science of human conduct or, as the text-books call it, Ethics. To Socrates, the science of conduct was that to which man should devote his most earnest attention, because by no other path could true wisdom be found; and by calling Ethics a science, Socrates meant to imply that it was governed by principles of universal validity, so that what was good for one was good for all, and what was my neighbour's duty was my duty also. Socrates was therefore not merely the founder of the science of ethics; he was the first great opponent of the doctrine most destructive of rational morality, namely, ethical *relativism*.

In seeking to prove the existence of a law for mankind transcending personal differences—a law valid at all times and places, and one which imposes its own rewards and punishments by conferring or withholding happiness—Socrates was in effect contending that, beneath the mass of opinions and prejudices entertained by mankind, something in the nature of a “universal conscience” existed, and, despite external pressure, never ceased to carry weight and authority. The crucial problem was how to break through the overgrowth of opinion and prejudices and contact the root itself: to shut out the clamour and hear the “still, small voice”.

Socrates claimed—and he made good his claim in action—that this could best be done by endeavouring to discover, through a technique of questioning, what precisely each man's personal opinions were, and how far he was prepared to go in backing them by argument. And the kind of individual whom he found to respond most satisfactorily to this treatment was he who imagined, at least to begin with, that his views were absolutely proof against argument; in short, the man who, far from wishing to acquire wisdom, was convinced that he already possessed it.

The Socratic method of examining men's everyday opinions (for these were good enough for his purpose) by means of a carefully elaborated system of questioning or, as Plato called it, dialectic,

was not instruction in the ordinary sense. Socrates was concerned less with imparting knowledge—indeed, he claimed that he had none to impart—than with exposing and expelling ignorance. His object, indeed, was to extract admission after admission from his interlocutor, until the latter, deflated in his initial belief that his ideas were sound and consistent, realized that in fact he knew very little.

“My art,” Socrates explained on one occasion, “is like that of the midwives, but differs from theirs, in that I attend men and not women, and I look after their souls when they are in labour, and not after their bodies; and the triumph of my art is in thoroughly examining whether the thought which the mind of the young man brings forth is a phantom and a lie, or a fruitful and true birth. And, like the midwives, I am barren, and the reproach often made against me, that I ask questions of others and have not the wit to answer them myself, is very just—the reason is, that the god compels me to be a midwife, but does not allow me to have children. . . . Dire are the pangs which my art is able to arouse and to allay in those who consort with me, just like the pangs of women in childbirth; night and day they are full of perplexity and travail, which is even worse than that of women.”

This method of approach entailed a view of education which differed profoundly from that commonly held at the time. Education, in Socrates’s view, implied above all the stripping away of prejudice, the probing of superficial opinions, with the object of arriving at that hard *substratum* of knowledge which everyone, if sufficiently well examined, would be found to possess. For the truth is in all of us, only it needs to be brought to birth. Education, in short, can produce nothing that is not already latent in the soul. The “idea” of justice, goodness, beauty and truth is common to all mankind; and if a man acts always with sufficient self-knowledge, he will inevitably act rightly. Those who have no “sense” of what is right or wrong are beyond the reach of rational persuasion and must be pronounced abnormal.

In preaching his new gospel, Socrates was endeavouring to fulfil a social purpose, to serve his fellow Athenians. Against the view that philosophy deals with ideas divorced from practical, everyday life, he contended that the aim of philosophy was to purify the social conscience, and thereby to strengthen the “morale” of the community. It needed strengthening then as now. In concerning himself with the problems affecting each individual man,

the true philosopher helped the society in which he lived to become conscious of itself; by shouldering the burdens of his neighbours, he assisted in making their tasks lighter; by sacrificing his life for what he believed to be the truth—albeit the unpalatable truth—he ennobled the very people who were base enough to condemn him. For, as has so often happened, the unanimous indictment of Socrates gave place, within a short time of his decease, to a violent social reaction, in the course of which his prosecutors, once the idols of the mob, became the objects of universal execration, ending their lives by being stoned to death in that same market-place where a humbler leader had taught the principles of the good life.