

PIERRE HADOT
WHAT IS ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY?

Chapter Three
The Figure of Socrates

[p. 22]

The figure of Socrates had a decisive influence on the definition of the word “philosopher” which Plato set forth in *The Banquet* — a dialogue that shows the first true awareness of the philosopher’s paradoxical situation among his fellow human beings. For this reason, we shall have to spend considerable time not on the historical Socrates, who is difficult to know, but on the mythical figure of Socrates as presented by the first generation of his disciples.

The Figure of Socrates

Socrates has often been compared to Jesus Christ. Among other analogies, it is quite true that both had immense historical influence, although they exercised their activity in times and places (a small city and a tiny country) which were minuscule compared to the world. They also had a very small number of disciples. Neither man wrote anything, but we do have “eyewitness” reports about them: Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* and Plato’s dialogues (concerning Socrates) and the Gospels (concerning Jesus). Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult for us to say anything definite [p. 23] about the historical Jesus or the historical Socrates. After they died, their disciples founded schools to spread their message, but the schools founded by the “Socratics” vary much more widely than do the various forms of primitive Christianity; this indicates the complexity of the Socratic message. Socrates inspired Antisthenes, the founder of the Cynic school, who preached tension and austerity and was to have a profound influence on Stoicism; yet Socratic ideas also shaped the thought of Aristippus, founder of the Cyreniac school, for whom the art of living consisted in taking the best advantage of each concrete situation as it presented itself. Aristippus did not disdain relaxation and pleasure, and was to have a considerable influence on Epicureanism; but he also inspired Euclides, the founder of the Megarian school, which was famous for its dialectics. Only one of Socrates’ disciples — Plato — triumphed over history, and he did so because he was able to give his dialogues imperishable literary form, or rather because the school he founded survived for centuries, thereby saving his dialogues and developing, or perhaps deforming, his doctrine. In any case, all these schools seem to have one point in common: it is with them that the idea or concept of philosophy appears. As we shall see, it was conceived both as a specific discourse linked to a way of life, and as a way of life linked to a specific discourse.

We would perhaps have a wholly different idea of who Socrates was if the works produced in all the schools founded by his disciples had survived, and, in particular, if the entire literature of “Socratic” dialogues, which represented Socrates in dialogue with his interlocutors, had been preserved. We must recall,

in any case, that the fundamental feature of Plato's dialogues — the presentation of dialogues in which Socrates almost always plays the role of questioner — was not invented by Plato. Instead, these famous dialogues belong to the genre of the Socratic dialogue, which was very much in fashion among Socrates' disciples. The success of this literary form gives us some idea of the extraordinary impression [p. 24] which the figure of Socrates, and the way he carried out his discussions with his fellow citizens, produced on his contemporaries, especially on his disciples. In the case of the Socratic dialogues written by Plato, the originality of the literary form consists not so much in the use of a discourse divided into questions and answers (dialectical discourse existed long before Socrates) as in the assigning of the central role to Socrates. The result is a unique relationship: between the author and his work, on the one hand, and, on the other, between the author and Socrates. The author pretends not to be involved in his work, apparently content merely to reproduce a debate which once opposed conflicting theses; at most, we can presume that he prefers the thesis which he makes Socrates defend. In a sense, then, he takes on the mask of Socrates.

Such is the situation we find in Plato's dialogues. Plato in his own individuality never appears in them. The author doesn't even intervene to say that it was he who composed the dialogues, and he does not include himself in the discussions which take place between the interlocutors. On the other hand, neither does he specify what, in the remarks which are recorded, belongs to Socrates and what belongs to him. In some dialogues, it is therefore often extremely difficult to distinguish what is Socratic from what is Platonic.

Thus, shortly after his death, Socrates appears as a mythical figure. And it is precisely this myth of Socrates which has indelibly marked the whole history of philosophy.

Socratic ignorance and the critique of sophistic knowledge

In the *Apology*, Plato reconstructs, in his own way, the speech which Socrates gave before his judges in the trial in which he was condemned to death. Plato tells how Chaerephon, one of Socrates' [p. 25] friends, had asked the Delphic oracle if there was anyone wiser (*sophos*) than Socrates. The oracle had replied that no one was wiser than Socrates. Socrates wondered what the oracle could possibly have meant, and began a long search among politicians, poets, and artisans — people who, according to the Greek tradition discussed in the previous chapter, possessed wisdom or know-how — in order to find someone wiser than he. He noticed that all these people thought they knew everything, whereas in fact they knew nothing. Socrates then concluded that if in fact he was the wisest person, it was because he did *not* think he knew that which he did not know. What the oracle meant, therefore, was that the wisest human being was “he who knows that he is worth nothing as far as knowledge is concerned.” This is precisely the Platonic definition of the philosopher in the dialogue entitled the *Symposium*: the philosopher knows nothing, but he is conscious of his ignorance.

Socrates' task — entrusted to him, says the *Apology*, by the Delphic oracle (in other words, the god Apollo) — was therefore to make other people recognize their lack of knowledge and of wisdom. In order to accomplish this mission, Socrates himself adopted the attitude of someone who knew nothing — an attitude of naiveté. This is the well-known Socratic irony: the feigned ignorance and

candid air with which, for instance, he asked questions in order to find out whether someone was wiser than he. In the words of a character from the *Republic*: “That’s certainly Socrates’ old familiar irony! I knew it. I predicted to everyone present, Socrates, that you’d do anything but reply if someone asked you a question.”

This is why Socrates is always the questioner in his discussions. As Aristotle remarked, “He admits that he knows nothing.” According to Cicero, “Socrates used to denigrate himself, and concede more than was necessary to the interlocutors he wanted to refute. Thus, thinking one thing and saying another, he took pleasure [p. 26] in that dissimulation which the Greeks call ‘irony.’” In fact, however, such an attitude is not a form of artifice or intentional dissimulation. Rather, it is a kind of humour which refuses to take oneself or other people entirely seriously; for everything human, and even everything philosophical, is highly uncertain, and we have no right to be proud of it. Socrates’ mission, then, was to make people aware of their lack of knowledge.

This was a revolution in the concept of knowledge. To be sure, Socrates could and willingly did address himself to the common people, who had only conventional knowledge and acted only under the influence of prejudices without any basis in reflection, in order to show them that their so-called knowledge had no foundation. Above all, however, Socrates addressed himself to those who had been persuaded by their education that they possessed Knowledge. Prior to Socrates, there had been two types of such people. On the one hand, there had been the aristocrats of knowledge, or masters of wisdom and truth, such as Parmenides, Empedocles, and Heraclitus, who opposed their theories to the ignorance of the mob. On the other hand, there had been the democrats of knowledge, who claimed to be able to sell their knowledge to all comers; these were, of course, the Sophists. For Socrates, knowledge was not an ensemble of propositions and formulas which could be written, communicated, or sold ready-made. This is apparent at the beginning of the *Symposium*. Socrates arrives late because he has been outside meditating, standing motionless and “applying his mind to itself.” When he enters the room, Agathon, who is the host, asks him to come sit next to him, so that “by contact with you ... I may profit from this wind-fall of wisdom which you have just stumbled across.” “How nice it would be,” replies Socrates, “if wisdom were the kind of thing that could flow from what is more full into what is more empty.” This means that knowledge is not a prefabricated object, or a finished content [p. 27] which can be directly transmitted by writing or by just discourse.

When Socrates claims that he knows only one thing — namely, that he does not know anything — he is repudiating the traditional concept of knowledge. His philosophical method consists not in transmitting knowledge (which would mean *responding* to his disciples’ questions) but in *questioning* his disciples, for he himself has nothing to say to them or teach them, so far as the theoretical content of knowledge is concerned. Socratic irony consists in pretending that one wants to learn something from one’s interlocutor, in order to bring him to the point of discovering that he knows nothing of the area in which he claims to be wise.

Yet this critique of knowledge, although it seems entirely negative, has a double meaning. On the one hand, it presupposes that knowledge and truth, as we have already seen, cannot be received ready-made, but must be engendered by the individual himself. This is why Socrates says in the *Theaetetus* that when

he talks with other people, he contents himself with the role of midwife. He himself knows nothing and teaches nothing, but is content to ask questions; and it is Socrates' questions and interrogations which help his interlocutors to give birth to "their" truth. Such an image shows that knowledge is found within the soul itself and it is up to the individual to discover it, once he has discovered, thanks to Socrates, that his own knowledge was empty. From the point of view of his own thought, Plato expressed this idea mythically, by saying that all knowledge is the remembrance of a vision which the soul has had in a previous existence. We thus have to learn how to remember.

On the other hand, in Socrates the point of view is wholly different. Socrates' questions do not lead his interlocutor to know something, or to wind up with conclusions which could be formulated in the form of propositions on a given subject. Rather, it [p. 28] is *because* the interlocutor discovers the vanity of his knowledge that he will at the same time discover his truth. In other words, by passing from knowledge to himself, he will begin to place himself in question. In the Socratic dialogue, the real question is less what is being talked about than who is doing the talking. This is made explicit by Nicias, one of Plato's characters:

Don't you know that whoever approached Socrates closely and begins a dialogue with him, even if he begins by talking about something entirely different, nevertheless finds himself forcibly carried around in a circle by this discourse, until he gets to the point of having to give an account of himself — as much with regard to the way his is living now, as to the way he has lived his past existence. When that point is reached, Socrates doesn't let you leave until he has submitted all that to the test of his control, well and thoroughly...It is a pleasure for me to keep company with him. I see no harm in being reminded that I have acted or am acting in a way that is not good. He who does not run away from this will necessarily be more prudent in the rest of his life.

Thus, Socrates brought his interlocutors to examine and become aware of themselves. "Like a gadfly," Socrates harassed his interlocutors with questions which placed them in question, and obliged them to pay attention to themselves and to take care of themselves: "What? Dear friend, you are an Athenian, citizen of a city greater and more famous than any other for its science and its power, and you do not blush at the fact that you give care to your fortune, in order to increase it as much as possible, and to your reputation and your honours; but when it comes to your thought, to your truth, to your soul, which you ought to be improving, you have no care for it, and you don't think of it!" (*Apology*, 29d-e).

The point was thus not so much to question the apparent knowledge we think we have, as to question *ourselves* and the values which guide our own lives. In the last analysis, Socrates' interlocutor, [p. 29] after carrying on a dialogue with him, no longer has any idea of why he acts. He becomes aware of the contradictions in his discourse, and of his own internal contradictions. He doubts himself; and, like Socrates, he comes to know that he knows nothing. As he does this, however, he assumes a distance with regard to himself. He splits into two parts, one of which henceforth identifies itself with Socrates, in the mutual accord which Socrates demands from his interlocutor at each stage of the discussion. The interlocutor thus acquires awareness and begins to question himself.

The real problem is therefore not the problem of knowing this or that, but of *being* in this or that way: "I have no concern at all for what most people are concerned about: financial affairs, administration of property, appointments to generalships, oratorical triumphs in public, magistracies, coalitions, political factions. I did not take this path...but rather the one where I could do the most

good to each one of you in particular, by persuading you to be less concerned with what you *have* than with what you *are*; so that you may make yourselves as excellent and as rational as possible.” Socrates practiced this call to being not only by means of his interrogations and his irony, but above all by means of his way of being; by his way of life, and by his very being.

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src: Pierre Hadot (2004), *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, translated by Michael Chase, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge