XVII.—The Evidence for the Teaching of Socrates

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Dramatized conversation was a traditional method of rendering abstract ideas, as examples from the poets and historians show. Hence the "Socratic Logoi," whether of Xenophon or Plato, owe their form to literary reasons, and not to a desire to represent the historic Socrates. It is only modern prejudice and literary fashion which prevents the fact from being appreciated.

If these *logoi* are eliminated as primary evidence, we are left with the *A pology* and *Clouds*, which are likely to be historical in a sense in which none of the other material is. These two sources yield a simple and consistent set of ideas which can safely be labelled "Socratic."

The major material for reconstructing the life and teachings of Socrates is supplied by the dialogues of Plato and some of the writings of Xenophon, supplemented by a play of Aristophanes and some remarks of Aristotle. But there is today no agreed method by which this material can be appraised, and in consequence the problem of who was the historic Socrates has been reduced to hopeless confusion. The old orthodoxy relied mainly on Xenophon. The heterodoxy of the Burnet-Taylor theory utilised the whole of the Clouds plus Plato's early and middle dialogues. Average opinion now hovers uneasily between these two extremes. Socrates is represented today as either a scientist, or a moralist, or a metaphysician, or a mystic, or as a combination of some of these, according to the personal preferences of his interpreter. The confusion can be illustrated by comparing two recent works on the subject, A. E. Taylor's Socrates and A. K. Rogers' The Socratic Problem: the former represents Socrates as a scientist and a metaphysician; the latter regards the science and metaphysics as Platonic, and represents Socrates only as a moralist and mystic. This is not to say that the two interpretations do not overlap. But their difference in emphasis is obvious.

The reason for this confusion is that there is at present no

accepted criterion by which the available evidence can be evaluated. The orthodox preference for Xenophon did at least provide such a criterion. No one today is probably quite satisfied with it. But nothing has taken its place. Every interpreter is left free to pick out of the available material what he thinks is suitable to his own conception, and the portraits of Socrates which result are not history but subjective creations.

The chief obstacle in the way of establishing a sound criterion of evidence is the modern illusion that because Plato and Xenophon chose to represent Socrates as a central figure in dramatized conversations, they were inspired by a desire to reconstruct the master's personality. Their method of writing philosophy is not the normal method today. We therefore assume that they had some ulterior motive in so writing, beyond the mere presentation of their own ideas. But this is not so. The dialogue form was chosen for traditional reasons. Acted drama, or dramatized conversations, was the traditional Greek method of discussing and analysing moral ideas.

This instinct to dramatize, and hence to subordinate the writer's own personality, can be traced from Homer onwards, whose reflections on right and wrong and human destiny are spoken through his characters. Even Hesiod's Theogony is in effect a dialogue between himself and the Muses, the Muses supplying all the doctrine. In the Works and Days, it is true, he descends to personal exhortation, but a vestige of the dramatic instinct persists: he carries on his conversation with his brother. Epicharmus, if our evidence is to be trusted, was among the earliest to undertake analytical discussion of abstract moral problems. His medium was the comic stage. and the audience that listened to these discussions filled the theatre at Syracuse. It is hard to decide whether he was more of a dramatist or a philosopher. His successor Sophron of Syracuse may or may not have been a moral philosopher, but he was at least responsible for one thing: he developed the dialogue form for purposes of reading, as distinct from acting, thus perfecting an instrument for the use of philosophic writers of the fourth century. It is no accident that Plato is reported to have been very fond of Epicharmus' plays, since he adopted the technique of the Sicilian mime in constructing his Socratic conversations.¹

It was always moral ideas, concerning the destiny and behaviour of man, which found their most appropriate expression in such dramatization. This, I would suggest, is one of the main reasons for the preëminence of dialectic in Greek philosophy, not least in the pages of Plato, who converts it from a mere literary technique into a philosophical method. If the stage was the earliest vehicle of what could be called moral discussion, it would be natural to develop such discussion by depicting characters with antithetical opinions, whose repartee would amuse an audience, and might incidentally develop a point of view.² As the interest in ideas increased, the dramatic purpose was gradually forgotten. On the other hand, the speculation concerning physical nature, non-humanist and non-moral, which became traditional very early in Ionia, did not develop out of a dramatic form, simply because its subject matter had nothing to do with human character. The two different traditions unite in Zeno, who applied the dialogue technique to discussion of purely physical problems, and hence produced a purely undramatic dialectic.3 Plato, turning his back, at least in the early part of his career, on the philosophy of nature, and concentrating once more, with a new precision, on the problems of man, reverted to the drama.

The dialogue form, then, is not inspired by any desire to

¹ Aristotle, Poet. 1447b, 2. Burnet, Phaedo (Oxford, Clarendon, 1911) introduction, xxxi, and Taylor, Varia Socratica (Oxford, Parker, 1911), 55 assume that the mime was "realistic." Aristotle cites it as an example of the exact opposite: cf. Ross' edition of the Metaphysics (Oxford, Clarendon, 1924) I, introduction, xxxvii.

² Cf. Epicharmus, frags. 1 f. (Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker⁴ (Berlin, Weidmann, 1922) 1, 13b, 1 f.).

³ Cf. Diog. L. VIII, 57, 'Αριστοτέλης δ' ἐν τῷ σοφιστῷ φησὶ πρῶτον 'Εμπεδοκλέα ἡητορικὴν εὐρεῖν, Ζήνωνα δὲ διαλεκτικήν (Aristotle, frag. 65 Ross): see also Plato, Parmenides 135d.

portray character. It was a standard literary method of expressing moral philosophy. It is true that actual historical figures of the fifth century are portrayed in the dialogues. But here again we do not make enough allowance for Greek tradition in these matters. Every time a Greek went to a play, he saw represented not some fictitious character, the creation of the artist, but a thoroughly familiar one, known to him from the legends of childhood. Yet the dramatist was expected to adapt this given character to his own purposes. He was expected to work up particular concrete situations in his own way, and allow his puppets to converse in what manner suited him. In this way, Epicharmus may have made Odysseus the mouthpiece for some amateur philosophizing; 4 Euripides certainly did not set the fashion in this regard. Such characters, it is true, were mythical, and therefore more easily treated as types. But the historians give us historical figures treated in the same way. Herodotus, for example, tells a tale of Cyrus and Croesus,⁵ which may have been suggested to him by something he heard, but which he at any rate works up into a situation where he is enabled to give dramatic expression to a few sentiments concerning human destiny. we have Croesus on his pyre, carrying on what amounts to a conversation, despite the painful circumstances, with the victorious Cyrus. This conversation is in turn the report of another conversation, this time between Croesus and Solon. which had happened long ago. This is almost in the Platonic manner. The classic example of this dialectical use of historical material is of course the Melian dialogue.⁶ Thucydides may have had leanings towards scientific history, but the Greek instinct was too much for him. He selects a particular situation in Athenian history as a suitable setting for the dramatic presentation of the eternal human problem, might versus right. It is inconceivable that such a discussion was

⁴ Diels, op. cit. (see note 2) 13b, 4: cf. Croiset, Hist. Litt. Gr. III, 471.

⁵ Hdt. 1, 86.

⁶ Thuc. v, 85.

held in the circumstances; it is thus that the historian chooses to record his own reflections. For that matter, does anyone believe that the funeral speech is any safe guide to the sentiments, let alone the style, of Pericles? Yet Pericles was as near to the readers of Thucydides as Socrates was to the readers of Plato, and probably a good deal nearer.

The case of Pericles in this instance illustrates another fact. Reverence for a great historic figure now dead was no guarantee that a later generation would take any trouble to report him accurately. The reverse was rather the truth. Socrates was very quickly exalted into the position of a sort of saint. It was this very exaltation which in the eyes of the next generation depersonalised him. He changed from a human being into the champion of a cause, and as such lent himself to just that sort of dramatic treatment which the Greeks accorded their heroes—a treatment the reverse of historical in our sense of the word.

I conclude that the "Socratic Conversations" were a literary medium used to express the ideas of the writer, not of his characters, and that any reader of such conversations in the classical period would not expect otherwise. I have by implication classed Xenophon with Plato in this discussion. I do this because his "Memoirs" are really disguised conversations. The narrative and descriptive material in them bears a small proportion to the whole and in some important respects is obviously vitiated by his apologetic purpose. One may suspect that only controversy could at this date have impelled any Greek to attempt deliberate biography.

If, however, we are to assume that one of Plato's purposes in writing such dialogues as the *Charmides*, *Symposium*, or

⁷ Many of the abstract ideas, as well as their antithetical arrangement, appear unadorned by genius in the $\dot{\epsilon}\pi\iota\tau\dot{\alpha}\phi\iota\sigma$ of Gorgias (Diels. op. cit. 76b, 6). The shorter speech inserted fourteen chapters later (Thuc. II, 60-64) is much more convincing as a specimen of what Pericles' style may have been.

⁸ E.g. the divine sign wherever mentioned is credited with positive powers, in flat contradiction of the *Apology: Mem.* 1, 1, 2-9; IV, 3, 12 f., 8, 5 f.: *Apology* 31c-d, 40a-b.

Phaedo was to recall a historic situation, we are compelled to convert him from a philosopher into an antiquarian, who carefully reconstructed the manners and opinions of an age which Burnet argues was dead by the time he wrote.9 I totally disbelieve this judgment; in my opinion the controversies which are argued in Plato's pages are the controversies of his own day, dramatized through the mouths of men mostly dead who had initiated these controversies, and had become as it were the canonized representatives of philosophical tendencies. Arguing from the contrary assumption, the Burnet-Taylor theory presents to us a Socrates who is not only a cosmologist and a mathematician, but a metaphysician, the author of the theory of Ideas. To arrive at this conclusion. the authors of it have to involve themselves in a maze of special pleading, 10 and fly in the face of some express testimony of Aristotle's.11 "It seems unthinkable," argues Burnet in discussing the Phaedo, "that Plato should have invented a purely fictitious account of his revered master's intellectual development, and inserted it in an account of his last hours on earth." 12 This only means that such a method is unthinkable to Mr. Burnet. Rogers, again, assumes for his own purposes that what Socrates says in the Symposium is a record of his own opinions. For otherwise Plato "shifts to an intentional and thorough-going falsification when he introduces the hero of the dialogue. Such a procedure must have confused his contemporaries as much as it confuses the modern reader." 13

⁹ Burnet, op. cit. (see note 1), introduction, xxxiv-xxxvi, and article "Socrates" in Hastings, Enc. Rel. and Eth. xI.

¹⁰ Burnet, for example, (introd. to *Phaedo*) dismisses the references to the Clouds in the Apology as "persiflage"; Taylor (Var. Soc. 158) renders . . . καὶ ἄλλην πολλήν φλυαρίαν φλυαροῦντα, ὧν ἐγὼ οὐδὲν οὕτε μέγα οὕτε μικρὸν πέρι ἐπατω (Apol. 19c) as "I can make neither head nor tail of this nonsense," when the plain sense is "I am innocent of all knowledge of these matters."

¹¹ Met. A. 987b, 1, M. 1078b, 28 and 1086b, 2: cf. the discussion of these in Ross. op. cit. (see note 1) introduction, and in Field, Socrates and Plato (Oxford, Parker, 1913).

¹² Op. cit. (in note 9), 668.

¹³ The Socratic Problem (New Haven, Yale Press, 1933), 8.

The use of "falsification" begs the whole question, as though the choice before a Greek writer were deliberate and faithful reporting *versus* deliberate lying.¹⁴

We have to remember that classic Greek literature was characterised by an entire absence of what we would call fiction, that is, drama or narrative built around purely imaginary characters. This absence of pure fiction guaranteed that historical characters would be treated in a fictional manner, or what we would call such, and that this would happen without any problem of historic honesty or dishonesty being raised thereby. It was the Alexandrians, influenced by the disciples of Aristotle, the compilers of the first histories of philosophy and science, that first became interested in biography. The "facts" so called that they began to collect were really inferences which they painstakingly drew from sources which were not written in a biographical spirit at all. They do not seem to have been much more capable of appreciating this than we are, and a mass of apocryphal anecdote is the result.¹⁵ Correspondingly it was in the same period that the purely fictional romance with invented characters made its appearance. Factual biography and fictional narrative became, as it were, separated off from each other.

The world of letters has ever since set a value on the actual record of a man's personal life. Today it sets a higher value than ever. A large part of modern literature is directly or indirectly biographical. In a spirit and temper quite alien to that of classic Greece we seek to know the historic Socrates in relation to his environment, to understand his psychological development, to discover the influences which produced him. The result is such a life of Socrates as A. E. Taylor's, in which

¹⁴ Cf. similar reasoning by Field, who says, op. cit. (see note 11) 4, concerning the *Memorabilia*: "There are only three alternatives: either it is substantially true, or else Xenophon is deliberately lying, or else he is very ignorant."

¹⁵ The stories for example about Anytus' son (based on the *Meno*) and Xanthippe (inferences from the *Phaedo*, aided by imagination) and perhaps the assertion that Socrates was a disciple of, *i.e.* had "heard" Archelaus (an inference from *Phaedo* 97b?).

a hundred and thirty pages are devoted to the life, and forty-four to the thought of the philosopher. This proportion is the exact reverse of the one observed by the disciples of Socrates. To amass enough biographical material to fill the record, a desperate use has to be made of what authorities we have.

Plato was not interested in men, but in ideas. He constructs dramatic situations which will allow him to expose through the medium of a conversation some abstract problem. He projects this conversation into the past, often taking care to underline the fact, as for example in the introductions to the Symposium and Phaedo.16 This projection has the same effect as that achieved by the tragic dramatist who used a conventionalized character drawn from mythology: it enabled Plato to subordinate character to ideas, expressing his ideas through the mouths of historic figures who were just remote enough to avoid intruding as a distraction in his educative mime. By way of contrast, one may compare the modern attitude as it is illustrated by the technique of Lytton Strachey, the writer who perhaps has developed the art of biography to its logical conclusion. He deliberately exposes the private life and inner emotions of his subject, rather than the public career which everyone knows. He is interested, for example, to let us see Queen Victoria less as a queen and more as a lover of her husband, or Florence Nightingale less as the "lady with the lamp" than as an imperious invalid on a couch, ordering Arthur Hugh Clough to tie up brown paper parcels for her. If we are in sympathy with the modern mood, we applaud the method because we feel that it is in the minute revelation of individual character that truth and meaning is to be found. cannot imagine an attitude more alien to that of Greece, as long as the city state still retained significance; and Plato is a child of the city state, remote in spirit from that individualism

 $^{^{16}}$ Symp. 172c, παντάπασιν ξοικε σοι οὐδὲν διηγεῖσθαι σαφὲς ὁ διηγούμενος, εἰ νεωστὶ ἡγῆ τὴν συνουσίαν γεγονέναι ταύτην ἢν ἐρωτᾶς, ὤστε καὶ ἐμὲ παραγενέσθαι: Phaedo 57a . . . οὕτε τις ξένος ἀφίκται χρόνου συχνοῦ ἐκεῖθεν ὅστις ἃν ἡμῖν σαφές τι ἀγγεῖλαι οἶος τ'ἢν περὶ τούτων.

which later became dominant and rendered the biographical point of view in literature popular.

One is at liberty to imagine Plato giving us a conversation between Queen Victoria and Thomas Huxley, on the suitable subject of "What is piety?" The queen and the scientist meet in the grounds of Windsor Castle. The queen's interest is in the state religion and its maintenance in the established church. The scientist argues that all ethical and moral concepts require a scientific basis. The clash of these two points of view allows Plato to add a few light touches of character drawing. After protracted argument Huxley retires leaving the queen sadder but a little wiser.

I do not think myself that we can say that the conversations of Socrates with the sophists had any more basis in historical fact, but one may imagine a Burnet of many centuries later, as he studied the literary remains of our vanished civilization, arguing with great effect that of course the conversation is historical: Victoria must have met Huxley. His post as inspector of salmon fisheries, a royal appointment, would render such a meeting almost inevitable. If confirmation were wanted, one could see it in the altered policy of the state towards the dissenting denominations towards the close of the century, which reflects the impression that this conversation had made.

Socrates then would remain an important but well nigh unknown quantity in the history of philosophy, but for two facts. Plato besides his dialogues wrote a speech. And a comic dramatist chose to pillory Socrates in a play nearly thirty years before his death. My thesis is that these two works, and these alone, if rightly used, provide us with a criterion for distinguishing the teaching of Socrates. Aristotle adds a little, which reinforces conclusions drawn from the speech and the play, but is in itself inadequate.

The Apology is the only work of Plato's which in form is not a conversation. I take this one departure from literary practice to be deliberate. It indicates that for once he is

interested in something other than an abstract problem. Furthermore, the Apology presents Socrates in a situation which was part of his public career, not of his private life. It was indeed the only situation of all those in the dialogues which a reader twenty years after would instinctively think of as historical. Thirdly, it is only in the Apology that Plato refers to his own presence at the scene portraved, and he does so twice.¹⁷ He specifically eliminates himself from the Phaedo, 18 which was perhaps the one other dialogue which a contemporary reader might have been tempted to regard as in any sense historical. I therefore take the Apology to be Plato's one deliberate attempt to reconstruct Socrates for his own sake, and am willing enough to believe that the motive behind the attempt was to refute other pamphlets on the same subject. This is not to say that it is reporting. On the contrary, it is very unlikely to be. I would be prepared to go further for example than Hackforth, who in his Composition of Plato's Apology attempts to distinguish between the forensic portions actually delivered to the jury and those added by In order to value the Apology as a historical document, it is not necessary to assume that Socrates spoke any of it. Such reporting implies a more violent departure from Plato's normal practice than I think he would have been capable of. I take the speech to be rather a conscious attempt on his part to sum up the significance of his master's teaching, utilizing for that purpose a dramatic situation which was historical, and which everyone knew to be so.

A. E. Taylor rightly pointed out, in his *Varia Socratica*, the unique importance of the *Clouds* as evidence for the teaching of Socrates. It is the only contemporary evidence we have, and is contributed by a non-philosopher. Unfortunately, Taylor tended to discredit the evidence he had rediscovered by his extravagant use of it. Obsessed with the idea that fifth-century Greeks were interested in the objective portrayal

^{17 34}a, 38b.

^{18 59}b.

of individual character, he takes practically everything in the Clouds to be a reminiscence of the historic Socrates, and does this with the less excuse because in this case his authority, while not a philosopher, is a comic dramatist, with an axe of his own to grind. A dramatist's first purpose is to amuse; his second may possibly be to instruct or preach a moral, his third and last, if he has it at all, is to render a historical picture. take it that Aristophanes chose Socrates primarily because he was amusing. He seems to declare the fact himself, when the chorus, addressing Socrates for the first time at line 359, says "O high priest of ingenious nonsense, declare to us thy need. For there is none other of the highfalutin professors of the present day that we would rather listen to, except Prodicus. We would listen to him because of his wisdom and doctrine, but to you, because you strut along the streets shooting sidelong glances, going barefoot, putting up with all kinds of trouble, and maintaining a stern front under our protection."

The play then used Socrates because he was an eccentric with eccentric habits.¹⁹ Now, part of a man's eccentricity consists in the phrases he uses, the jargon in which he expresses his ideas, and to some extent the ideas themselves, if he has any, though a dramatist is an unsafe guide to what his victim's ideas may be, as he will select only what is superficial. It is reasonable to suppose that the *Clouds*, in addition to parodying the personal habits of Socrates, would contain a large amount of his phraseology, which, if recovered, would be a valuable guide to his ideas and methods. But the play itself provides no criterion by means of which we can separate it out.

But this difficulty disappears if we regard the content of the *Apology* as in some sense a formal definition of what Socrates taught and believed, and supplement this outline by anything in the *Clouds* which is not contradicted in the *Apology*. Probably the biggest single mistake made by Burnet and Taylor was to ignore the contradictions that there are. I am thinking of

¹⁹ Cf. Apol. 34b, άλλ' οὖν δεδογμένον γέ ἐστι τὸν Σωκράτη διαφέρειν τινὶ τῶν πολλῶν ἀνθρώπων.

two statements in the Apology in particular; first, that Socrates was utterly ignorant of the so called science of his day, and second, that he never taught a formal body of doctrine at all, let alone an esoteric doctrine.²⁰ These two statements, unless the Apology distorts the historic facts, destroy the portrait of Socrates the scientist, the Orphic teacher, the metaphysician, which has been laboriously constructed during the last thirty years. But if the Apology is a distortion, then surely the dialogue material on which the biographically minded are driven to rely is scarcely likely to be less so. We would then be left with no evidence at all.

The essence, then, of what Socrates believed and taught is contained within the limits of the *Apology*; this can be supplemented by a good deal of Socratic language and method from the *Clouds*. What Aristotle has to say merely confirms this evidence in two particulars.²¹ Having thus constructed a definite picture of what Socrates' ideas were, and also what they were not, we are able to take the dialogues of Plato and disentangle from them the Socratic ideas which in part they use.

This criterion enables us to define the field of Socraticism fairly precisely. I can only indicate the results summarily. Certain negative conclusions seem definite: the science and atheism of the *Clouds* is eliminated. So also are the formal theories of psychology and politics, the doctrines of immortality, and the technical use of the Forms which occur in the early and middle dialogues of Plato. But the positive outlines of Socrates' thought emerge equally definitely: Burnet made a great contribution to the history of philosophy when he defined Socrates' central idea as the notion of the rational soul and its supreme importance.²² To this we can add, as

²⁰ Apol. 19 c-d, 26 d, 33 b.

²¹ See note 11.

²² "The Socratic Conception of the Soul," in the *Proceedings of the British Academy* VIII, 235–260, and article "Soul" (Greek) in Hastings, *Enc. Rel. and Eth.* xI, 741.

part of the same idea, the doctrine that the attainment of knowledge of the self, i.e. of self consciousness, is the supreme and only duty of man, a duty to be achieved by introspection. The Socratic method of doing this was to examine propositions —what we would class as moral propositions—which to Socrates were thoughts, the products of soul, but could vary in quality according to the goodness or badness of soul, and had to be improved so that therewith the soul was improved. The method of improvement, again, was to ask, "What does this proposition mean?", and in supplying the answer to trace deductively a series of conclusions which were then compared with other conclusions drawn from inductive illustrations, or, as we might say, from common sense or at least common experience. If the two sets of conclusions did not fit, the original proposition had to be improved so that they would. In order to have a standard basis of comparison, Socrates also assumed that everything had to stand the test of being "good," without distinguishing between the morally good and the useful and pleasant. That is, he could be interpreted as setting up a single standard of value as the soul's equipment in passing judgment in any situation or on any statement. This simple and consistent little system of ideas—though it should not really be called a system at all—had two by-products: he discovered that the proper function of the soul is to think,23 and that the objective of exact thought is the elaboration of essential definitions. Such is the contribution of Socraticism to philosophy: every element in this summary appears in the Apology, and is backed up and sometimes explained more

²³ I.e. supreme virtue consists in the actual exercise of mental powers for their own sake to the limit: cf. in particular Apol. 29e and 38a and the use of φροντίζειν passim in the Clouds. This is not the same thing as "Virtue is knowledge," i.e. an exact science. It was Plato himself who in the "early" dialogues set about trying to produce this formula. The implications achieved in the Protagoras became accepted by Aristotle and later authorities as Socratic, and thus the famous paradox became traditional as Socratic doctrine; cf. Arist. Eth. N. 1116b, 4, 1145b, 23, Eth. E. 1216b, 6, 1230a, 4, 1246b, 33; (Arist.) Mag. Mor. 1, 1, 5-7; Diog. L. 11, 31.

precisely by corresponding expressions in the *Clouds*.²⁴ One may add two more elements, from the *Apology* alone: an unquestioned assumption that the good was also the will of God, and that therefore its pursuit through introspection and definition was also a moral imperative: and a hope, but not a conviction, that soul persisted beyond death, still exercising its proper function of thinking, and preoccupied with its own self-consciousness.

As can be readily seen, Platonism consisted mainly in working out the implications of these ideas in the fields of psychology, politics, epistemology, and, finally, cosmology. But in so doing Plato transcended Socraticism, which in the last resort was only a method, and produced a set of positive results. Nevertheless, the harvest gleaned by Socrates was not a meagre one, if it is judged in its historic setting. European thought has accepted what he gave it so readily and without question that it has grown unconscious of the gift, which is perhaps why modern historical criticism has sought to put into his mouth a set of doctrines which may seem more elaborate, in keeping with the intellectual elaboration of our day, but are scarcely more imposing.

²⁴ For soul cf. lines 94, 329, 415, 420, and also *Birds* 1553 ff.: self-knowledge, 242, 385, 695, 842: the "proposition," 489, 757: ζήτησις, 728, 737, 768: ἀπορία, 703, 743: ἐπαγωγή, 1427: essential definition, 194, 250, 479, 742, 886.