



Socrates

John Marshall

Socrates, son of Sophroniscus a sculptor and Phaenarete a midwife, was born at Athens in or about the year 469 B.C. His parents were probably poor, for Socrates is represented as having been too poor to pay the fees required for instruction by the Sophists of his time. But in whatever way acquired or assimilated, it is certain that there was little of the prevalent culture in cultivated Athens with which Socrates had not ultimately a working acquaintance.

Among a people distinguished generally for their handsome features and noble proportions, Socrates was a notable exception. His face was squat and round, his eyes protruding, his lips thick; he was clumsy and uncouth in appearance, careless of dress, a thorough ‘Bohemian,’ as we should call him. He was, however, gifted with an uncommon bodily vigour, was indifferent to heat and cold, by temperament moderate in food and drink, yet capable on occasion of drinking most people ‘under the table.’ He was of an imperturbable humour, not to be excited either by danger or by ridicule. His vein of sarcasm was keen and trenchant, his natural shrewdness astonishing, all the more astonishing because crossed with a strange vein of mysticism and a curious self-forgetfulness. As he grew up he felt the visitation of a mysterious internal voice, to which or to his own internal communings he would sometimes be observed to listen in abstracted stillness for hours. The voice within him was felt as a restraining force, limiting his action in various ways, but leaving him free to wander about among his fellows, to watch their doings and interpret their thoughts, to question unweariedly his fellows of every class, high and low, rich and poor, concerning righteousness and justice and goodness and purity and truth. He did not enter on his philosophic work with some grand general principle ready-made, to which he was prepared to fit the facts by hook or by crook. Rather he compared himself to his mother, the midwife; he sought to help others to express themselves; he had nothing to tell them, he wanted them to tell him. This was the irony of Socrates, the eternal *questioning*, which in time came to mean in people’s minds what the word does now. For it was hard, and grew every year harder, to convince people that so subtle a questioner was as ignorant as he professed to be; or that the man who could touch so keenly the weak point of all other men’s answers, had no answer to the problems of life himself.

In striking contrast, then, to the method of all previous philosophies, Socrates busied himself to begin with, not with some general intellectual *principle*, but with a multitude of different *people*, with their notions especially on moral ideas, with the meaning or no-meaning which they attached to particular words,—in short, with the individual, the particular, the concrete, the every-day. He did not at all deny that he had a purpose in all this. On the contrary, he openly professed that he was in search of the lost universal, the lost *law* of men’s thoughts and actions. He was convinced that life was not the chaos that the Sophists made out; that nobody really believed it to be a chaos; that, on the contrary, everybody had a meaning and purport in his every word and act, which could be made intelligible to himself and others, if you could only get people to think out clearly what they really meant. Philosophy had met her destruction in the busy haunts of men; there where had been the bane, Socrates’ firm faith

sought ever and everywhere the antidote.

This simple enough yet profound and far-reaching practice of Socrates was theorised in later times as a logical method, known to us as *Induction*, or the discovery of universal laws or principles out of an accumulation of particular facts. And thus Aristotle, with his technical and systematising intellect, attributes two main innovations in philosophy to Socrates; the *Inductive* process of reasoning, and the establishing of *General Ideas* or Definitions upon or through this process. This, true enough as indicating what was latent in the Socratic method, and what was subsequently actually developed out of it by Aristotle himself, is nevertheless probably an anachronism if one seeks to represent it as consciously present in Socrates' mind. Socrates adopted the method unconsciously, just because he wanted to get at the people about him, and through them at what they thought. He was the pioneer of Induction rather than its inventor; he created, so to speak, the raw material for a theory of induction and definition; he knew and cared nothing about such theories himself.

A story which may or may not be true in fact is put in Socrates' mouth by Plato, as to the cause which first started him on his "search for definitions." One of his friends, he tells us, named Chaerephon, went to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, and asked whether there was anybody wiser than Socrates. The answer was given that there was none wiser. This answer was reported to Socrates, who was much astonished, his own impression being that he had no wisdom or knowledge at all. So with a view to prove the oracle wrong he went in succession to various people of eminence and reputation in the various walks of life,—statesmen and poets and handicraftsmen and others,—in the expectation that they would show, on being questioned, such a knowledge of the principles on which their work was based as would prove their superior wisdom. But to his astonishment he found one after another of these men wanting in any apprehension of principles at all. They seemed to work by a kind of haphazard or 'rule of thumb,' and indeed felt annoyed that anything more should be expected of them. From which at the last Socrates came to the conclusion that perhaps the oracle was right in this sense at least, that, if he himself knew nothing more than his fellows, he was at least conscious of his own ignorance, whereas they were not.

Whether this tale may not itself be a specimen of Socrates' irony we cannot tell, but at all events it illustrates from another point of view the real meaning of Socrates' life. He, at least, was not content to rest in haphazard and rule of thumb; he was determined to go on till he found out what was the law or principle of men's acts and words. The ignorance of others as to any such law or principle in their own case did not convince him that there was no such law or principle; only it was there (he thought) working unconsciously, and therefore in a way defencelessly. And so he compares himself at times to a gadfly, whose function it is to sting and irritate people out of their easy indifference, and force them to ask themselves what they were really driving at. Or again, he compares himself to the torpedo-fish, because he tried to give people a shock whenever they attempted to satisfy him with shallow and unreal explanations of their thoughts and actions.

The disinterested self-sacrificing nobility of Socrates' life, thus devoted to awakening them that sleep out of their moral torpor; the enmities that his keen and trenchant questionings of quacks and pretenders of every kind induced; the devotion of some of his friends, the unhappy falling away of others; the calumnies of interested enemies, the satires of poets; and lastly, the story of the final attack by an ungrateful people on their one great teacher, of his unjust condemnation and heroic death—all this we must pass over here. The story is in outline, at least, a familiar one, and it is one of the noblest in history. What is more to the purpose for us is to ascertain how far his search for definitions was successful; how far he was able to

Take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them;

how far, in short, he was able to evolve a law, a universal principle, out of the confused babel of common life and thought and speech, strong enough and wide enough on which to build a new order for this world, a new hope for the world beyond.

We have said that Socrates made the individual and the concrete the field of his search. And not only did he look to individuals for light, he looked to each individual specifically in that aspect of his character and faculty which was most particular to himself. That is to say, if he met a carpenter, it was on his carpentering that he questioned him; if a sculptor, on his practice as a sculptor; if a statesman, on his statesmanship. In short, he did not want general vague theories on subjects of which his interlocutors could not be supposed to have any special experience or knowledge; he interrogated each on the subject which he knew best.

And what struck him, in contrast to the confusion and uncertainty and isolation of the sophistic teaching 'in the air,' was that when you get a man to talk on his own trade, which he *knows*, as is proved by the actual work he produces, you find invariably two things—*first*, that the skill is the man's *individual* possession no doubt, the result of inborn capacity and continuous training and practice; but *second*, that just in proportion to that individual skill is the man's conviction that his skill has reference to a *law* higher than himself, outside himself. If the man whom Socrates interviewed was a skilful statesman, he would tell you he sought to produce obedience to *law* or right among the citizens; if he was a skilful sculptor, he produced *beautiful* things; if he was a skilful handicraftsman, he produced *useful* things. Justice, beauty, utility; these three words in different ways illustrated the existence of something always realising itself no doubt in individuals and their works, but nevertheless exercising a governing influence upon these to such a degree that this ideal something might be conceived as *prior* to the individual or his work; or secondly, as *inherent* in them and giving value to them; or thirdly, as coming in at the end as the *perfection* or completion of them. This law or ideal then had a threefold aspect in its own nature, being conceivable as Justice, as Beauty, as Utility; it had a threefold aspect in relation to the works produced in accordance with it, as the cause *producing*, the cause *inhering*, the cause completing or *perfecting*.

We may therefore conceive Socrates as arguing thus: "You clever Sophists, when we let you take us into the region of abstract talk, have a knack of so playing with words that in the end we don't seem to know anything for certain, especially on such subjects as we have hitherto thought the most important, such as God and right and truth and justice and purity. We seem to be perfectly defenceless against you; and what is more, any smart youth, whose opinion on any practical matter no one would think of taking, can very soon pick up the trick from you, and bewilder plain people really far wiser than himself by his clever argumentation; all going to prove that there is nothing certain, nothing real, nothing binding; nothing but opinions and conventions and conscious or unconscious humbug in the universe.

"But when I go and have a quiet talk with any man who really is a known master of some craft or skill, about that craft or skill, I find no doubt whatever existing in his mind about there being a law, a something absolutely real and beautiful and true in connection with it. He, on the contrary, lives with no other purpose or hope or desire but as far as he can to realise in what he works at something of this real and beautiful and true, which was before him, will be after him, is the only valuable thing in him, but yet which honours him with the function of, in his day and generation, expressing it before the eyes of men."

"Have we not here a key to the great secret? If each man, in respect of that which he knows best because he lives by it and for it, knows with intimate knowledge and certainty that there

at least there is a Law working, not himself, but higher and greater than he,—have we not here a hint of the truth for the universe as a whole; that there also and in all its operations, great as well as small, there must be a Law, a great Idea or Ideal working, which was before all things, works in and gives value to all things, will be the consummation of all things? Is not this what we mean by the Divine?”

Thus Socrates, despising not the meaner things of life, but bending from the airy speculations of the proud to the realities which true labour showed him, laid his ear, so to speak, close to the breast of nature, and caught there the sound of her very heart-beats.

“Virtue is knowledge,” thus he formulated his new vision of things. Knowledge, yes; but *real* knowledge; not mere head-knowledge or lip-knowledge, but the knowledge of the skilled man, the man who by obedience and teachableness and self-restraint has come to a knowledge evidencing itself in *works* expressive of the law that is in him, as he is in it. *Virtue is knowledge*; on the one hand, therefore, not something in the air, unreal, intangible; but something in me, in you, in each man, something which you cannot handle except as individual and in individuals; on the other hand, something more than individual or capricious or uncertain,—something which is absolute, over-ruling, eternal.

Virtue is knowledge. And so if a man is virtuous, he is realising what is best and truest in himself, he is fulfilling also what is best and truest without himself. He is free, for only the truth makes free; he is obedient to law, but it is at once a law eternally valid, and a law which he dictates to himself. And therefore virtue is teachable, inasmuch as the law in the teacher, perfected in him, is also the law in the taught, latent in him, by both individually possessed, but possessed by both in virtue of its being greater than both, of its being something more than individual.

Virtue is knowledge. And therefore the law of virtuous growth is expressed in the maxim engraved on the Delphic temple, ‘Know thyself.’ Know thyself, that is, realise thyself; by obedience and self-control come to your full stature; be in fact what you are in possibility; satisfy yourself, in the only way in which true self-satisfaction is possible, by realising in yourself the law which constitutes your real being.

Virtue is knowledge. And therefore all the manifold relations of life,—the home, the market, the city, the state; all the multiform activities of life,—labour and speech and art and literature and law; all the sentiments of life,—friendship and love and reverence and courage and hope,—all these are parts of a knowable whole; they are expressions of law; they are Reason realising itself through individuals, and in the same process realising them.

It must not be imagined that anywhere in the recorded conversations of Socrates can we find thus in so many words expounded his fundamental doctrine. Socrates was not an expositor but a questioner; he disclaimed the position of a teacher, he refused to admit that any were his pupils or disciples. But his questioning had two sides, each in its way leading people on to an apprehension of the ideal in existence. The first side may be called the negative or destructive, the second, the positive or constructive. In the first, whose object was to break down all formalism, all mere regard for rules or traditions or unreasoned maxims, his method had considerable resemblance to that of the Sophists; like them he descended not infrequently to what looked very like quibbling and word-play. As Aristotle observes, the dialectic method differed from that of the Sophists not so much in its form, as in the purpose for which it was employed. The end of the Sophists was to confuse, the end of Socrates was through confusion to reach a more real, because a more reasoned certainty; the Sophists sought to leave the impression that there was no such thing as truth; he wished to lead people to the conviction that there was a far deeper truth than they were as yet possessed of.

A specimen of his manner of conversation preserved for us by Xenophon (*Memor.* IV. ii.)

will make the difference clearer. Euthydemus was a young man who had shown great industry in forming a collection of wise sayings from poets and others, and who prided himself on his superior wisdom because of his knowledge of these. Socrates skilfully manages to get the ear of this young man by commending him for his collection, and asks him what he expects his learning to help him to become? A physician? No, Euthydemus answers. An architect? No. And so in like manner with other practical skills,—the geometrician's, astronomer's, professional reciter's. None of these he discovers is what Euthydemus aims at. He hopes to become a great politician and statesman. Then of course he hopes to be a just man himself? Euthydemus flatters himself he is that already. "But," says Socrates, "there must be certain acts which are the proper products of justice, as of other functions or skills?"—"No doubt."—"Then of course you can tell us what those acts or products are?"—"Of course I can, and the products of injustice as well."—"Very good; then suppose we write down in two opposite columns what acts are products of justice and what of injustice."—"I agree," says Euthydemus.—"Well now, what of falsehood? In which column shall we put it?"—"Why, of course in the unjust column."—"And cheating?"—"In the same column."—"And stealing?"—"In it too."—"And enslaving?"—"Yes."—"Not one of these can go to the just column?"—"Why, that would be an unheard-of thing."

"Well but," says Socrates, "suppose a general has to deal with some enemy of his country that has done it great wrong; if he conquer and enslave this enemy, is that wrong?"—"Certainly not."—"If he carries off the enemy's goods or cheats him in his strategy, what about these acts?"—"Oh, of course they are quite right. But I thought you were talking about deceiving or ill-treating friends."—"Then in some cases we shall have to put these very same acts in both columns?"—"I suppose so."

"Well, now, suppose we confine ourselves to friends. Imagine a general with an army under him discouraged and disorganised. Suppose he tells them that reserves are coming up, and by cheating them into this belief he saves them from their discouragement, and enables them to win a victory. What about this cheating of one's friends?"—"Why, I suppose we shall have to put this too on the just side."—"Or suppose a lad needs medicine, but refuses to take it, and his father cheats him into the belief that it is something nice, and getting him to take it, saves his life; what about that cheat?"—"That will have to go to the just side too."—"Or suppose you find a friend in a desperate frenzy, and steal his sword from him, for fear he should kill himself; what do you say to that theft?"—"That will have to go there too."—"But I thought you said there must be no cheating of friends?"—"Well, I must take it all back, if you please."—"Very good. But now there is another point I should like to ask you. Whether do you think the man more unjust who is a voluntary violator of justice, or he who is an involuntary violator of it?"—"Upon my word, Socrates, I no longer have any confidence in my answers. For the whole thing has turned out to be exactly the contrary of what I previously imagined. However, suppose I say that the voluntary deceiver is the more unjust."—"Do you consider that justice is a matter of knowledge just as much (say) as writing?"—"Yes, I do."—"Well now, which do you consider the better skilled as a writer, the man who makes a mistake in writing or in reading what is written, because he chooses to do so, or the man who does so because he can't help it?"—"Oh, the first; because he can put it right whenever he likes."—"Very well, if a man in the same way breaks the rule of right, knowing what he is doing, while another breaks the same rule because he can't help it, which by analogy must be the better versed in justice?"—"The first, I suppose."—"And the man who is better versed in justice must be the juster man?"—"Apparently so; but really, Socrates, I don't know where I am. I have been flattering myself that I was in possession of a philosophy which could make a good and able man of me. But how great, think you, must now be my disappointment, when I find myself unable to answer the

simplest question on the subject?”

Many other questions are put to him, tending to probe his self-knowledge, and in the end he is brought to the conclusion that perhaps he had better hold his tongue, for it seems he knows nothing at all. And so he went away deeply despondent, despising himself as an absolute dolt. “Now many,” adds Xenophon, “when brought into this condition by Socrates, never came near him again. But Euthydemus concluded that his only hope of ever being worth anything was in seeing as much of Socrates as he could, and so he never quitted his side as long as he had a chance, but tried to follow his mode of living. And Socrates, when he perceived this to be his temper, no longer tormented him, but sought with all simplicity and clearness to show him what he deemed it best for him to do and think.”

Was this cross-examination mere ‘tormenting’ with a purpose, or can we discover underlying it any hint of what Socrates deemed to be the truth about justice?

Let us note that throughout he is in search of a *definition*, but that as soon as any attempt is made to define or classify any particular type of action as just or unjust, *special circumstances* are suggested which overturn the classification. Let us note further that while the immediate result is apparently only to confuse, the remoter but more permanent result is to raise a suspicion of any hard and fast definitions, and to suggest that there is something deeper in life than language is adequate to express, a ‘law in the members,’ a living principle for good, which transcends forms and maxims, and which alone gives real value to acts. Note further the suggestion that this living principle has a character analogous to the knowledge or skill of an accomplished artificer; it has relation on the one hand to law, as a principle binding on the individual, it has relation on the other hand to *utility*, as expressing itself, not in words, but in acts beneficial to those concerned. Hence the Socratic formula, Justice is equivalent to the *Lawful* on the one hand, to the *Useful* on the other.

Socrates had thus solved by anticipation the apparently never-ending controversy about morality. Is it a matter imposed by God upon the heart and conscience of each individual? Is it dictated by the general sense of the community? Is it the product of Utility? The Socratic answer would be that it is all three, and that all three mean ultimately the same thing. What God prescribes is what man when he is truly man desires; and what God prescribes and man desires is that which is good and useful for man. It is not a matter for verbal definition but for vital realisation; the true morality is that which *works*; the ideally desirable, is ultimately the only possible, course of action, for all violations of it are ultimately suicidal.

Note finally the suggestion that the man who *knows* (in Socrates’ sense of knowledge) what is right, shows only more fully his righteousness when he voluntarily sins; it is the ‘unwilling sinner’ who is the wrongdoer. When we consider this strange doctrine in relation to the instances given,—the general with his army, the father with his son, the prudent friend with his friend in desperate straits,—we see that what is meant is that ‘sin’ in the real sense is not to be measured or defined by conformity or otherwise to some formal standard, at least in the case of those who *know*, that is, in the case of men who have realised goodness in its true nature in their characters and lives. As St. Paul expressed it (Rom. xiii. 10), “Love is the fulfilling of the law.” Or again (Gal. v. 23), after enumerating the ‘fruits of the spirit’—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance—he adds, “Against such there is no law.”

In the domain of life, not less than in that of the arts, the highest activity does not always or necessarily take the form of conformity to rule. There are critical moments when rules fail, when, in fact, obedience to rule would mean disobedience to that higher law, of which rules and formulae are at best only an adumbration. The originality of the great musician or painter consists in just such transcendence of accepted formulae; this is why he invariably encounters opposition and obloquy from the learned conventional pedants of his time. And

in the domain of morals the martyrs, reformers, prophets are in like manner 'willing sinners.' They are denounced, persecuted, crucified; for are they not disturbers of society; do they not unsettle young men; do they not come, as Christ came, not to bring peace into the world, but a sword? And thus it is that the willing sinners of one generation are the martyrs and heroes of the next. Through their life and death a richer meaning has been given to the law of beauty or of rectitude, only, alas! in its turn to be translated into new conventions, new formulae, which shall in due time require new martyrs to transcend them. And thus, on the other hand, the perfectly honest sticklers for the old and common-place, unwilling sinners all unconscious of their sin, are fated to bear in history the brand of men who have persecuted the righteous without cause. To each, according to the strange sad law of life, time brings its revenges.

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