

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELE

VOL. XXXVIII (No. 9)

SEPTEMBER, 1924

(No. 820)

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LAST HOURS OF SOCRATES

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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THE LEGEND OF SOCRATES

BY JONATHAN WRIGHT

THERE is now, as there always has been, when civilization was virile, a searching of the moral law under which man lives to render life more conformable to rules that promise happiness to the individual and success to the social organization. In the past history of Christian culture there have been innumerable experiments to formulate new rules. Some of these have endured. Many have perished. With the decay of primitive faith in Christian tenets of creed and the efficacy of ritual, with a marked diminution in the birth of new faith in some of the altered details of the old has grown the tendency to search history for shreds of ethical rules laid down before as well as since Christianity came into the world. For the most part this may be in the way of curiosity and research, but there is often a manifest desire that they shall be utilized in lighting up difficult and complicated problems of modern life. Much of this has continued to come, as it has always come, from oriental sources more or less directly. India still feeds western lands with esoteric inspiration and impulses of thought.

The reversion, mild enough as yet in its manifestations, to the study of classical literature is very likely to some extent a part of this re-examination of the old, to some extent a dissatisfaction with the results of the materialism of science. It can not be said that the classicism, which came in with the renaissance among the humanities, was kept alive chiefly by a desire to study the moral law of the ancients. It lasted for two or three hundred years when religious strife and fanaticism were at their worst. Nevertheless, the comparatively recent relaxation of intolerance in most Christian creeds has gone hand in hand with the drift from materialism, the secret grudge against science, and has furnished an opportunity for the

revival of interests in the classics which scarcely existed a generation or two ago. Partly at least to this revival we owe the appearance of a recent book¹ on the legend of Socrates and the sources of Platonic thought by Professor Dupréel in Belgium, a stronghold of the Catholic Church. How far the impulse of the mind of the author to approach with hostility the idea of the existence of a real Socrates like the Platonic Socrates is due to a subtle atmosphere of jealousy of a rival of Christ in the affection of Christians, it is quite impossible to say. It is sufficient however to remark that absolutely no overt evidence of this can be adduced from the book itself and it is very probable that the learned author is entirely unconscious of any such impulse. The thought will obtrude itself however when the critical reader observes with what readiness he grasps every hint, with what tenacity he holds to every more serious reason for believing there was no real estimable Socrates, that he was only the figment of Plato's imagination as we know him.

Much of the old classicism, which flourished before the advent of modern science almost a hundred years ago, has slumbered under the ashes of neglect which then began to fall upon it. For much like the half of that time the love of the classics has slept a sleep, until within a few years, like the sleep of death. The suddenness with which the awakening has come is to be explained by the persistence of living embers which have never been extinguished. We turn with interest then to a treatise which reminds us, by its lack of sympathy with the legend of Socrates, that he has always been looked upon by the Christians as second only to Christ in the value of the moral ideas he set afloat in the world. Grudgingly the author has to acknowledge that the real Socrates was much concerned with these at least in a general way. This halting admission has its significance, it might seem.

It is not likely that the new interest in the literature of ancient Greece will bring about a Neo-Platonism much resembling the old, but in denying there ever was a real Socrates like the Platonic Socrates Dupréel will encounter the same kind, though of course not in the same degree, of resistance as those who in the past have denied the existence of a real Christ, but he will have the acquiescence of a certain number of naturally skeptical men who believe in the reality of neither and of a large number of men whose real intelligence is so lacking as to entitle them to no serious attention. Like

¹ *La Légende Socratique et les sources de Platon, par Eugène Dupréel.* Bruxelles, 1922.

Christ, possibly Socrates has also grown for us into a sort of myth and for the same reason. Neither of them left behind any writings of their own. Possibly this has heightened the stature of Socrates, but like Christ, Socrates has had historians who knew him in the life and we have their records of his spiritual and moral precepts. We have been accustomed to regard Plato as the chief of these historians. Dupréel tries to trace practically all of the "legend" of Socrates to him. Practically he is the only one. Dupréel says from his account of Socrates all others have originated, even those of Xenophon and Aristotle. Plato created him. The real Socrates was something quite different, quite inferior, perhaps like the one Aristophanes hung in a basket on the stage, we may conjecture.

In our resentment we are inclined to suspect that the Belgian professor has been betrayed into that aberration of the mind, into that tendency at least, which makes of history a myth,—“all history is bunk.” This is but another aspect of the doctrine of Protagoras, with which we shall find Socrates laboring—man is the measure of all things. If that is so then every event appeals differently to recorders as it occurs—every record as read appeals differently to each reader—of course history is “bunk.” What else could it be? This is plain enough. We know too the error of those who wish on every occasion to furnish up a myth into history. Thus everything goes down into a welter of agnosticism. The modern historian of Socrates can scarcely expect to escape the pitfalls hidden by the atmosphere of his environment which emanates from a dominant religion if not from that which emanates from the meticulous scientific scrupulosity of historical research and analysis. It is to the latter Dupréel is chiefly devoted. But even Troy became a myth until Schliemann dug it out. Modern Egyptology gets on the trail of many a personage who has been a myth but Prester John still eludes historical research. It is inevitable, too, that one who dwells so much in the minds of men as Buddha, Christ, Socrates, should become something of a myth. Homer's heroes are still myths for us, but Troy has regained something of its reality. All national heroes tend toward apotheosis or oblivion. We struggle to know even the real Washington—the real Lincoln. One impudent author after another, oblivious to or ignorant of Protagoras and his doctrine, tacks “the real” on his biography of our heroes.

How shall we succeed in differentiating in this legend of Socrates the real man from the Platonic? Dupréel seems to think that must have always been the question. Was it otherwise with Hercules?

But so far as we know none of the immediate successors of Plato who was his pupil ever questioned the essential justness of the pupil's marvelous portrait of him. Plato,—no one doubts it,—Xenophon and Aristophanes knew a real Socrates and Plato, who knew him best and was most capable of dealing with his philosophical and personal attributes, was the one the next generation followed in their estimation of Socrates. It all seems extremely simple, but Dupréel gives us the impression Plato destroyed a real man and created one out of his own mind and out of fragments of the real man. We know well that is what every historian, unconsciously as a rule, begins to do, even he who first records. He distorts somewhat at the start his hero out of the shape of the real man. He distorts too the shape of the real world of life and if he is a great artist in literature, like Macaulay, all the more. But the historian of contemporary lives and events hand us no aberration from reality such as Dupréel charges on Plato, even if he writes as an artist and not primarily as an historian. Supreme artist as he was he could not have carried his art so far, we are forced to believe, so soon after the real Socrates had drunk the hemlock. Real art has to have more of reality than that. We should too certainly have had some protest, some shaft of ridicule, left to us directed against Plato. Aristophanes put the comic Socrates himself on the stage when Plato was but seventeen years old. Would the comic writers of the fourth century have been less lenient towards Plato than those of the fifth towards Socrates himself? Surely not if the contemporaries of Plato had not been imbued with the greatness of the real Socrates. Even Punch mourned at the bier of Lincoln. Who, especially among the Athenians, would not have made a burlesque out of the Platonic Socrates, if he had been a joke? Aristotle was Plato's disciple for a long time, seventeen years the records say, and he was born fifteen years after the death of Socrates (399-384 B. C.). He attributes, apparently, much of Plato's doctrine, aside from his ethics, to Socrates. Is it possible Plato during all this time of Aristotle's apprenticeship did not betray to his pupil the "real" Socrates, a creature quite inferior to the created Socrates?

If we find so much in a general way to object to the iconoclasm Dupréel exhibits towards the legend of Socrates it is very different as to the origins of Platonic philosophy. Of this, more in detail, I shall have something to say elsewhere. Here I only desire to refer to that immediately concerning the personality of Socrates. It is preposterous to think Plato had no background for his philosophy,

no soil from which he cultivated it, no predecessors who sowed the seeds and planted the plantain trees for Socrates to sit under. Dupréel makes use of Diels, Burnet, Gomperz, Grote, Zeller, authors much before his time, just as Plato doubtless did of Hippias and Prodicus and Protagoras and Gorgias and many more. The *Dissoi Logoi* are notes taken of lectures given in Athens by the sophists antedating Plato, and Dupréel sees on comparing them with the dialogues of Plato they are sprung from the same sources. Plato creates a mythical Socrates and makes him superior to Protagoras and those teachers from whom the lecture notes are taken but we infer Socrates in real life was incapable of such refutations of any original theory. This we gather from Dupréel's early pages and in his last pages we find him disposed to insist Plato has mingled no originality of his own thought in his dialogues with what he has received from his predecessors. He says almost as much of Aristotle. He intimates that all these thoughts existed before his time and Plato took them and polished them with his superb art so that they have thus been preserved for us. They owe their existence today to the setting he gave them.

The note book, *Dissoi Logoi*, seems to represent the kind of discussion, two sides to every question, among the sophists before Plato and it seems from this and much other evidence that the method of the Platonic Socrates is but their echo, but if he makes victorious the doctrines he espouses it is not clear at all that the real Socrates "entertained none of these doctrines." As we have no writings of Socrates himself it is difficult to see how even an author so learned as he of the University of Brussels knows whether he did or did not hold such opinions, if we ignore the testimony of Plato and Xenophon, who were at least his contemporaries and are said to have been his disciples. If all the legend of Socrates started with Plato and we do not believe Plato's legend, we certainly can not be very learned in the matter of the real Socrates. Suffice it to say Plato makes us believe every man of us should hold such doctrines and in fact that is the reason we do hold them. And Plato originated nothing, but borrowed it from the age in which Socrates lived? What did Socrates believe anyhow?

As to the form of short term dialogue, Dupréel says in the *Menexenus* and the *Banquet* Socrates is making fun of Aeschines, also a writer of dialogues, a sophist Plato disliked, though he is said to have been also a disciple of Socrates. It seems there was an historical Socrates, whom Dupréel can not evade. We are not willing

to give him up. It seems he had disciples besides Plato and Xenophon. What did he teach them? Plato was a rich man and an aristocrat. The world of letters and philosophy and influence was open to him. He might have had instruction from Protagoras and Prodicus and Hippias and Gorgias, even from Parmenides, if they were professors of learning in his youth, but from such as these high-priced instructors how could Socrates get his lore? How even from Anaxagoras, the high-placed friend of the noble Periclés? Why should the son of a stone mason and a midwife have had such advantages? Was it Socrates furnished Plato with doctrines and if so where did he get them? To a professor worthily filling a post in the University of Brussels this *does* seem a problem. How could Connus and Prodicus and Parmenides and Anaxagoras have been his teachers? Socrates must have had some real opinions as he was a real man. He was put to death for them like a real man. We assume, therefore, he held his opinions firmly and if Plato was his pupil he taught them to him. Plato may have taken liberties with his name. It is related Socrates before his death joked about the young man putting thoughts in his mouth which had never occurred to him. I suppose there can be no doubt of that, but such doctrine as Plato did get from an untutored son of a mason and has given us were worth dying for and Socrates was a real man. That is about the essential part of any legend.

In the *Menexenus* he says he learned wisdom from Aspasia, the siren who captivated Pericles with it as well as with her beauty. In the *Banquet* it was some fair Diotima he mentions, who had charms for laying the plague in Athens and who taught him the charms of love, evidently like Aspasia, a high-placed dame among the mistresses of Athens. Dupréel says he was making fun, we have noted, of Aeschines who had shown these heroines in such a shining double light they were ridiculous, but the joke could only have been a good one if there had been a real pug-nosed, poverty-stricken Socrates in a ragged cloak and bare feet who went around the markets, known to everyone, stopping reverend professors of philosophy and bothering them and angering them by backing them into back alleys of subtle argument. The gilded Aspasia and the faith curist Diotima teaching such a figure as the real Socrates wisdom and love *would* have been a joke, but it argues for a real Socrates not so very unlike the Platonic Socrates or it would have been no joke at all to the contemporary readers of the *Banquet* and the *Menexenus*. Like other good jokes it was repeated in one of them with variations from

the other. That argues a public who knew both the tatters and the wisdom of Socrates. If Socrates had not been what he was, a personality that worried the trustees of the sophist faculties into wishing him hung, it would not have been a good joke at all for Aristophanes to hang him up in a basket toward the clouds to snuff fresh air, when Athens had its fresh air fad away back in the time of Diogenes Appolonius, a Socrates very like the jokes which flow from his own mouth through Plato in the dialogues.

Plato makes a warrior of Socrates—a hoplites in armor when he was a young man and Dupréel remarks Socrates, the real man, could have been no hoplites, for they must have been rich, as they had to buy their own armor. Plato is here caught making a slip, making an aristocrat out of a penniless man, the poor son of poor parents. I am not versed in such matters, but in the Peleponnessian war there were 30,000 Athenian hoplites, according to Thucydides. This began in 431 B. C., when there were 40,000 citizens. In 480 B. C. there were 30,000 citizens and 12,000 hoplites.² Aristotle³ says the hoplites were composed of rich men. In the *Banquet* Alcibiades is made to say Socrates distinguished himself at the battle of Potidaea which we know took place in 429 B. C. When the army force of the Athenian hoplites was three-fourths the number of citizens, the rich man we may be sure found a way to put a poor man in full panoply. We know of such things ourselves. The contempt with which Socrates in the *Euthydemus* speaks of war as nothing but a chase of men to deliver them over to the politicians who enslave them is a talk we know of too, from recently returned soldiers, but it is conceived with a different feeling from that of the care and attention and honor he gives to its military defenders in the *Republic*. It is this way also in the *Charmides* of looking on war and other arts from an utilitarian point of view which Dupréel says Plato borrows from Prodicus and in which he had the support of Hippias. So the pacifists were a party in Greece before Plato. Alcibiades tells in the *Banquet* how Socrates at Potidaea was a brave soldier, bore fatigue without flinching, endured the heat and cold without apparently noticing them, went barefoot in the snow. No one ever saw him drunk there or elsewhere. He held his liquor like a gentleman. We get the touch of the artist in all this. It is the hand of Plato, but it is not impossible even with the inconsistencies noted. The men who go to war hate it most, they may be the bravest of the brave.

² *Le Travail dans la Grèce anienne*, par G. Glotz, 1920; *Les démocraties antiques*, par A. Croiset, 1920.

³ *Politics*, VI, VII.

but they talk one thing and do the other from compulsion or duty or shame.

What a picture we get of Athens in the *Banquet*—a cross section of a marvelous life? We see Socrates standing in a doorway across the street, motionless and with fixed gaze listening in a trance to what his guardian demon is saying to him. The inspiration of the prophet and the poet was so interwoven with other interests—what we might charitably call the recreations of intellectual life—that it took a hue from the many contacts it had with its environment of every kind and we note them all in the dialogues. The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker, the musician, the actor and the rhetorician are cheek by jowl with the philosopher and the researcher. No civilization like that has arisen elsewhere so to guide humanity along the paths which matter and that did not endure. In the talk of the sophist and the play of wit across the proscenium of the stage philosophy and science were comrades with pot making and shoe making, with carousing and debauchery. The jibes of Aristophanes and the retorts of Socrates in the *Banquet* were the interplay of minds in daily social contact of hail fellows well met, hardened to the play of thrust and parry of the rudest kind without loss of temper and self-respect, a democracy worth living in. Think of Alcibiades reeling in drunken revelry, held on his feet by the flute-playing girl, his arm around her, telling in his maudlin pathos of Socrates saving his life on the field of battle, of his moralities and his philosophies. Think of Socrates insisting to the few still awake, after the band of revellers have broken in and made the confusion chaotic and departed, that the genius of comedy is the same as that of tragedy. As they probed the depth of thought and feeling think of Socrates drinking Alcibiades and Aristophanes under the table at cock crow and going home to Xanthippe in the grip of the morning after a dip in the bath at the gymnasium. The post prandial vinous intellectuality of a very recent epoch stands out in all its hideous boredom in our memories, but Plato has made the *Banquet* immortal, not by the sublime dialogue there more than by the art of its setting. Scores of dialogues may very likely have been written before and after by other hands. In some of them Socrates has figured, but they have all perished except Plato's—all but a few miserable fragments, or such as have been thought might possibly have been from the hand of the master. Shakespeare has been dead three hundred years, Plato two thousand years more. There is no third.

Dupréel's view that Xenophon copied his Socrates from Plato is not all borne out by reading the *Memorabilia*. It is a very dull Socrates, the Socrates of Xenophon, but the Socrates Plato scintillates. We don't swell with enthusiasm and melt into tears over Xenophon's Socrates, because he does not stand forth idealized and draped by the art of Plato. Xenophon chose badly from his memories of his talk, but there was a real Socrates who impressed him as well as Plato. The reader of the dialogues of Plato and the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon can hardly come to any other conclusion. The difference in the figure of Socrates is the difference in his creators. The real Socrates, whatever he was, was one to inspire two very talented but entirely different men, men of widely different natures and capacities. It takes a real man to do that. Xenophon was no mere copyist and his *Memorabilia*, though not an inspiration exactly, is no "second hand work," as Dupréel characterizes it. It was not Plato of course, but it was by the author of the *Anabasis*, the *Cyropaedia*, the *Hellenica*, a man thought fit to follow Thucydides as the historian of Greece, and his work has survived. He plays small along side of Plato in philosophy. This difference in the two pupils of Socrates who were inspired to tell the world that came after them about him, is all the more reason for believing in the real existence of a many-sided, marvelously-gifted Socrates who inspired such men, such antithetical men as Plato and Xenophon, each to make a hero of him after their own kind. Xenophon may have plundered Aeschines and Antisthenes for Socrates and the Socratic dialogue. I don't know about that, but he did not get Socrates from Plato.

The literary figure of Socrates may have been formed by Plato and Aeschines and Antisthenes and Aristophanes before Xenophon wrote his *Memorabilia*, but that there was not a real and a really remarkable Socrates for all these men to hang their fables on, seems absurd to a generation which is tacking every sort of a story on Abraham Lincoln. A great sculptor has even made him look like the Wall Street director of a bank—our Abe. This is one of the best Lincoln jokes the western farmer boy knows. The real Abe in bronze has been sent out of the country and stands in a Birmingham square—unexplained—in spite of the insight Mr. Roosevelt had of the hero of the Illinois prairies. Certainly no one can be very much interested in Xenophon's Socrates but one is very much in Plato's Socrates and if Plato has made an aristocratic hoplite out of a real plebian Socrates he has done no more than the artists who lend a

grace to the rail splitter in the woods along the Sangamon, which really belongs to Fifth Avenue and Beacon Street, who discovered Lincoln late.

But there is no mistaking the fact that the art of Plato has added stature to the Socratic figure. We can not believe any real man, Socrates though he may have been, could foresee the end of his argument and cling spontaneously to it through pages on pages to victory, if not over his opponent, over the mentality of Plato's readers. We can not believe that any man can thus argue with such equally convincing power on both sides of a question and then bring us satisfied after all to the view that it is beyond mortal power to answer it either way. That is Plato's genius and his is marvelous enough when written deliberately and slowly on his tablets, doubtless with many erasures and interpolations. That is the finish of the highest art, but when it is said to have been spoken extemporaneously and laid in the mouth of the best imaginable Socrates, common sense refuses to believe it of any but a god. The hero, who sees only one side of his shield, is nauseatingly familiar in every melodrama, the vacillating pedant and the political trimmer are every-day objects of epithets of contempt, and to erect into a hero a mortal man who looks on both sides of the medal—into an incomparable hero too, marching to inevitable death, stopping long enough in the portico of the King Archon to ridicule the smug Euthyphro, is a triumphant achievement of the human intellect—none greater. And at last, "The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways,—I to die and you to live. Which is better God only knows."