

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.

Associates: { E. C. HEGELER.
MARY CARUS.

VOL. XXI. (No. 9.) SEPTEMBER, 1907.

NO. 616.

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The Open Court Publishing Company

LONDON: KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, TRÜBNER & COMPANY, LIMITED.

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THE MONIST

A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Philosophy of Science

DR. PAUL CARUS
EDITOR



ASSOCIATES { E. C. HEGELER
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LAST HOURS OF SOCRATES.

Frontispiece to The Open Court

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ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF SOCRATES.

BY JAMES BISSETT PRATT.

AMONG the many disputed topics of philosophy none seems to be a more unfailing source of disagreement than the question as to what was the philosophy of Socrates. If one may judge by the history of the controversy the Father of Philosophy seems to have had as many philosophies as Homer had birth places. In a rough and general way, however, we may distinguish three parties to the controversy: (1) those who accept the accounts of Plato and Aristotle but reject that of Xenophon; (2) those who follow Xenophon but reject Plato and Aristotle; (3) those who accept and reconcile all three. In the first class we may place Schleiermacher, Dissen, Ritter, Brandis, Joël; in the second class Ribbing, Strümpell, Wildauer, Ziegler, Siebeck, Döring; in the third class Zeller, Windelband, Gomperz. The first party in this discussion considers Xenophon untrustworthy because inconsistent with Plato and Aristotle; the second considers Plato and Aristotle untrustworthy because inconsistent with Xenophon. If now it can be shown that the accounts given by the three authors are not inconsistent but agree so far as they go, a long step will have been taken toward reaching a satisfactory view of the real philosophy of Socrates. Attempts at such reconciliation have of course in a general sort of way been made; but never to my knowledge have the points in the different accounts been set down in black and white so to speak, and compared with sufficient detail to make the question of agreement or disagreement perfectly clear. The purpose of this paper is therefore to analyze the accounts given by our three authors and to set down in brief headings the gist of what each has to say, and then to compare these three lists of points in respect to their agreement or disagreement. Such a method will of course be technical; and I warn the reader

therefore that this paper will hardly appeal to any one not specially interested in the philosophy of Socrates.

Before going directly at our problem I must premise that in dealing with Xenophon and Aristotle I have confined myself to the *Memorabilia*, and to the *Metaphysics* and the *Nicomachean ethics*. In dealing with Plato the question which writings to use was of course more difficult. It would require a special treatise to consider all the questions to be dealt with in choosing from among Plato's Dialogues those which are to be considered Socratic. Suffice it to say, I have adopted the view of most critics that the "lesser Socratic dialogues" (with the exception of the *Hippias Minor*) are to be regarded as attempts on the part of Plato to depict the real Socrates and his method and teachings. To these I have added the *Apology*, on the ground that Plato's purpose in it is obviously historical rather than philosophical, and also because all attacks upon its trustworthiness seem to me weak and unsuccessful. The *facts* (not the philosophy) related in the *Phaedo* I have also taken as historic,—in short I have sought to find Plato's account of Socrates's philosophy in the following dialogues: the *Lysis*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*, and *Apology*, and in the facts related by the *Phaedo*.

What then was the philosophy of Socrates according to these three different authors?

What Aristotle has to say of Socrates's philosophy is very brief but very much to the point. It is found in his *Metaphysics* I, 6; XIII, 4; XIII, 9, and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 13 and VII, 2. The passage in *Met.* I, 6 is so short and so meaty that I will quote it entire: "Socrates employed himself about Ethics and entirely rejected speculation concerning the whole of Nature: in morals indeed investigating universals and being the first to apply himself to definitions." *Met.* XIII, 4 tells us that "Socrates employing himself about moral virtues first of all explored the manner of defining respecting these...for there are two things which may be justly attributed to Socrates: inductive arguments and the definition of universals." From *Met.* XIII, 9 we learn only that Socrates was not an upholder of the Platonic Idealism, and as this is purely a negative statement we may disregard it in reconstructing his philosophy. The passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* reads, "This leads some to say that all the virtues are merely intellectual sense, and Socrates was partly right in his inquiry and partly wrong—wrong in that he thought all the virtues were merely intellectual sense, right in saying they were not independent of that faculty.... The difference between us and Socrates is this: he thought the

virtues were reasoning processes [*λογoi*, instances of knowledge] but we say they imply the possession of reason." This is further illustrated by the passage in VII, 2: "It is a strange thing as Socrates thought that while knowledge is present in one's mind something else should master him, and drag him about like a slave. Socrates in fact contended against the theory in general maintaining there is no such state as that of imperfect self-control, and that no one acts contrary to what is best conceiving it to be best, but by reason of ignorance of what is best." The other references to Socrates in Aristotle's writings add nothing as to his philosophy not given in the passages cited.

From these passages we learn the following facts:

1. Socrates emphasized ethics (Met. I, 6; XIII, 4).
2. He neglected the physical sciences (Met. I, 6).
3. He investigated "universals"—i. e., concepts. Logic seemed to him more important—or more attainable—than knowledge of the physical universe (Met. I, 6; XIII, 4).
4. He emphasized the necessity of definition. The universal concept must be clearly and sharply defined (Met. I, 6; XIII, 4).
5. In order to attain this clearness of definition he used an inductive method of argument (Met. XIII, 4).
6. For his ethics virtue was identical with knowledge (Nic. Eth. VI, 13; VII, 2).

Plato's lesser Socratic dialogues are rather disappointing to one who expects to learn from them at once the philosophy of the master. Especially is this true of the *Lysis*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, and *Euthyphro*. In none of these is any conclusion reached on the subject under discussion, and Socrates seldom seems to have an opinion of his own. Yet in spite of their indefiniteness we do gain from them a few facts of considerable importance. Thus the *Lysis* and *Charmides* show us at length Socrates's inductive methods and his constant search for definition of terms. We see also his carelessness about physical science and the value he sets upon universal concepts. This question of logical concepts is emphasized in the *Laches*: Socrates wants to know what courage is *in general*, not what particular acts are courageous. This dialogue also gives us an intimation—though a very indefinite one—that virtue is one with knowledge. The *Euthyphro* illustrates Socrates's methods and his desire for definition, as the others, and puts more clearly than they his view of the general nature of a concept. "Is not piety," he asks, "in every act always the same?" To tell what piety is it will not do to name one or two instances but one must "explain the general

idea which makes all pious things to be pious." In this dialogue also we learn something of Socrates's position on religious subjects. He tells us he cannot accept all the stories commonly told about the gods.

The Protagoras is more definite and satisfactory than the four shorter dialogues. From it we learn two very definite things about Socrates's ethics: he held that virtue was identical with knowledge and that it was based ultimately on pleasure. "No one voluntarily pursues evil or that which he thinks to be evil." "Knowledge is a noble and commanding thing which cannot be overcome and will not allow a man if he only knows the difference of good and evil to do anything which is contrary to knowledge." To know what is best and to do it are therefore one and the same, and this may be called indifferently knowledge or virtue. This knowledge moreover in the last analysis is a knowledge of pleasure and pain. "Things are good in so far as they are pleasant if they have no consequences of another sort, and in so far as they are painful they are bad." "Pleasure you deem evil when it robs you of greater pleasure than it gives." "You call pain good when it takes away greater pain than those which it has or gives pleasure greater than the pain: for I say that if you have some standard other than pleasure and pain to which you refer when you call actual pain a good you can show what it is. But you cannot."

In the Apology we have an explicit statement of Socrates's view of physical science—already in part indicated negatively by the lesser Socratic dialogues. His position is agnostic: he does not know anything about the ultimate nature of the universe, neither does he think that he knows. His wisdom is only a sort of "human wisdom." "The truth is that only God is truly wise." We have here also another incidental reference to Socrates's religious views: He tells us that he accepts the sun and moon as gods, just as his fellow citizens do. He is also evidently a devout worshiper of Apollo and believes thoroughly in the divine authority of the oracle at Delphi. This dialogue also gives us an entirely new view of Socrates's ethics. He says nothing of pleasure as the basis of virtue but maintains that "a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living and dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong." To be deprived of one's civic rights, to be driven into exile, to be killed,—these are not evils; but to inflict one of these things upon another unjustly is an evil. "No evil can befall a good man whether he be alive or dead." One more piece of information that we gain from

the *Apology* is in reference to the "daemon" of Socrates. He describes it here as a "divine something," "a familiar oracle," and says it often stops him in the midst of a speech and opposes him even about trifles and that it always forbids and never commands.

The *Phaedo*, as has been said, is not trustworthy as an account of Socrates's philosophy, but only as an account of the facts of his death. His dying command to Crito, however, to sacrifice for him to Asclepius gives us another casual indication of Socrates's position regarding the religion of his country.

If my analysis of these dialogues has been correct, Plato's account of Socrates's philosophy may be summed up in the following ten points:

1. Inductive method (seen in all six dialogues).
2. Search for clear definition of terms (all 6).
3. Agnostic position as to the physical universe and neglect of physical science (*Apol.*).
4. Importance of universal concepts (*Laches*, *Euth.*, *Prot.*, *Apol.*).
5. Emphasis given to ethical questions (all 6).
6. Virtue identical with knowledge (*Laches*, *Prot.*).
7. Hedonistic position (*Prot.*).
8. A belief seemingly inconsistent with (7), that virtue is more than pleasure (*Apol.*).
9. The Divine Voice (*Apol.*).
10. He retains part of the state religion and part he rejects. (*Euth.*, *Apol.*, *Phaedo*).

Xenophon's *Memorabilia* is not an attempt to give an account of Socrates's philosophy; it is hardly more than a defence of him against the charges of irreligion and immoral influence made by his accusers. Hence the more philosophic questions are thrown into the background and the emphasis is given to Socrates's religious and moral teaching and influence.

Xenophon begins his defence by showing that Socrates was, in some respects at least, a devout believer in the state religion. As a special proof of this he cites again and again Socrates's use of divination and of the advice given by his daemon. "He was seen frequently sacrificing at home and frequently on the public altars of the city; nor was it unknown that he used divination; and it was a common subject of talk that Socrates used to say that the divinity instructed him" (I, 1). "As for himself he undervalued everything human in comparison with counsel from the gods" (I, 3). "If any one desired to attain to what was beyond human wisdom,

he advised him to study divination; for he said that he who knew by what signs the gods give indication to men respecting human affairs would never fail of obtaining counsel from the gods" (IV, 7). This daemon according to Xenophon gave him not only prohibitions, as Plato said, but commands as well (IV, 8). In many respects, then, Socrates retained the religion of the state. Yet we can see from Xenophon's account that Socrates went decidedly beyond the limits of the state religion. In the two long passages on the design argument in I, 4 and IV, 3 Socrates speaks as a mono-



PRISON OF SOCRATES.
Photograph by the author.

theist. The many contrivances of nature for the good of man seemed to be the work of an Allwise Creator. This wise and beneficent power, whose work the universe is, he speaks of as "the intelligence pervading all things." Such a view of the divine order was certainly very different from the orthodox polytheism of the Athenian state.

The practical teachings of Socrates take up the larger part of the *Memorabilia*. Chapter after chapter is filled with discussions on temperance, justice, duty to the state, to parents, to friends, the

advantages of industry, the qualities needed in public officers, etc., etc. To the questions of physical science and to the guesses of the philosophers on cosmic questions he paid no attention. One should learn only so much geometry, he maintained, as was useful in surveying, and only so much astronomy as was required in navigation (IV, 7). "He did not dispute about the nature of things as most other philosophers disputed. . . .but he endeavored to show that those who chose such objects of contemplation were foolish. . . .He wondered too that it was not apparent to them that it is impossible for



THE PARTHENON.

Photograph taken by the author from Socrates's Prison

man to satisfy himself on such points" (I, 1). Anaxagoras's opinion that the sun was a heated stone seemed to him absurd; and in fact he considered all attempts at knowledge concerning celestial matters not only vain but impious (IV, 7).

As to Socrates's theory of ethics, the *Memorabilia* informs us that he held virtue identical with knowledge or wisdom. "Wisdom [*σοφία*] and temperance [*σωφροσύνη*] he did not distinguish" (III, 9). Both piety and courage also he identified with knowledge (IV 6). No one does wrong knowingly; all wrong action is from ig-

norance. "All persons choose from what is possible that which they judge for their interest, and do it; and I therefore deem those who do not act judiciously (i. e., who judge wrongly) to be neither wise nor temperate" (III, 9). "Do you know any persons who do other things than those which they think they ought to do?" "I do not" (IV, 6). Throughout most of the *Memorabilia* Socrates is represented (as in the *Protagoras*) as a thorough hedonist. Temperance, whose praises are more often sung by Socrates than those of any other virtue, seems desirable and fine because it leads ultimately to the greatest happiness, while intemperance is evil because it defeats its own purpose and brings more pain than pleasure (II, 1; IV, 5; IV, 6). "What is beneficial is good to whomsoever it is beneficial" (IV, 6).

Just as in Plato's account of Socrates's ethics we found two almost contradictory tendencies, so in the *Memorabilia* though the hedonistic view predominates we may trace here and there suggestions of an opposing belief, namely that virtue is superior to happiness and independent of all questions of pleasure and pain. In IV, 4 and IV, 6 we are told that justice is obedience to laws—the laws of one's country and more particularly the unwritten laws of the gods. For there are unwritten laws which men of all nations and all languages recognize and obey. These laws are not the work of men but of the gods; and to obey these laws is justice, whatever the result may be. The facts of Socrates's own life as related by Xenophon show that he lived by this definition of justice rather than by his hedonistic theory. One ought to be courageous in the presence of death and danger and obey the laws of one's country and the laws of the gods regardless of consequences. It was on this principle he acted after the battle of Arginusae, before the Thirty Tyrants, and when accused by Meletus (IV, 4; IV, 8). How he reconciled his hedonistic with his more idealistic views, and whether he reconciled them at all, we are not told. So far as the *Memorabilia* goes it is possible that he would have agreed throughout with Bentham, but we cannot be certain.

Socrates's doctrine of beauty according to the *Memorabilia*, resembled his utilitarian doctrine of the good. In fact for him the beautiful is identical with the good, for both are merely other names for the *useful*. "For whatever is good is also beautiful in regard to the purposes for which it is well adapted" (III, 8). "What is useful is beautiful, therefore, for that purpose for which it is beautiful" (IV, 6).

The entire *Memorabilia* is one long illustration of Socrates's

method, of his use of definition and of logical concepts. To be sure Socrates does not here emphasize the importance and the nature of concepts as he does in Plato's Dialogues, but that could hardly be expected, considering Xenophon's interests and his practical purpose in writing the *Memorabilia*. Still if we had only the *Memorabilia* to go by, we could see plainly from it that Socrates laid great stress upon concepts—or what Aristotle calls "the universal." Socrates's method as illustrated in the *Memorabilia* is exactly that which we find in the Dialogues and is obviously what Aristotle had in mind when he spoke of Socrates's "inductive arguments."

To recapitulate the chief points in Xenophon's account of Socrates's philosophy, I find that he tells us the following things about his master:

1. He in part retained the state religion and in some things transcended it (I, 1; I, 3; I, 4; IV, 3; IV, 7).
2. He believed that he received divine warnings, through a monitory spirit or demon (I, 1; IV, 8).
3. He emphasized practical and moral questions (I, 1 *et passim*).
4. His attitude toward physical science and cosmic theories was agnostic (I, 1; IV, 7).
5. He identified virtue with knowledge (III, 9; IV, 6).
6. In theory virtue was for him based on hedonistic considerations (II, 1; IV, 2, IV, 5; IV, 6).
7. Yet as a fact he seems to have believed that virtue was superior to all considerations of personal happiness (II, 2; IV, 4; IV, 6; IV, 8).
8. For him the Beautiful was identical with the Useful (III, 8; IV, 6).
9. His method was inductive argument (*Passim*, cf. especially IV, 6; IV, 7).
10. To gain clear definition was one of his chief aims (*Passim*, cf. especially III, 9; IV, 6).
11. He valued the logical concept (*Passim*).

If now we compare the results obtained from our three authorities we will find that the account given by Plato includes all the points mentioned by Aristotle, elaborates and illustrates them, and adds four others; while Xenophon, though very different from Plato in his emphasis, as was to be expected, gives us, sometimes very briefly and indirectly, sometimes directly and at length, every point that Plato gives, and adds one for which he is the only authority.

It is not my purpose in this paper to give an elaborate account

of the philosophy of Socrates, but merely to state the leading points in his teaching, as given us by our three authorities. I will close, therefore, by a recapitulation of these points, noting the authorities for each. If I have been right in my analyses, the philosophy of Socrates must be constructed with some such list as this for an outline.

1. Inductive method (all three authorities).
2. Use of definition (all three).
3. Neglectful and agnostic attitude toward physical science and cosmic philosophy (all three).
4. Use of concepts (all three).
5. Emphasis laid on ethical questions (all three).
6. Virtue identical with knowledge (all three).
7. Hedonistic position (Plato and Xenophon).
8. Virtue higher than happiness (P. and X.).
9. The Beautiful identical with the Useful (X.).
10. The state religion in part retained, in part rejected (P. and X.).
11. The dæmon (P. and X.).