

## THE PERSONALITY AND INFLUENCE OF SOCRATES.

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A MAN is bigger than his career and deeper than his ideas, for they are but the imperfect struggle of personality to objectify itself—the primary struggle of every man, and ever at best a noble failure. Socrates is more than the facts of his life and more than the Socratic teaching; for both are but derivative verbs of action from a concrete substantive of being.

The physical foundation of his life was like those immemorial outputs of earth, the rocks and trees, rather than the supple and beautiful strength we associate with the white bodies of Greeks. And this pristine and autochthonous hardihood that might have served paleolithic man in the windy Neanderthal, found itself undisturbed amid the gracious products of Ionic luxury, and supported without discomfort one of the keenest intellects and one of the goodliest temperaments of civilization. Thus will Nature sometimes remind us of the continuity of her antique brood.

That was an incessant intellect. Most of us glance at a problem now and then or deliver a judgment, but for Socrates there was no respite. Untiringly curious, subtly discriminating, penetrating to the center, grasping essential values, unembarrassed, coherent and certain of aim through all involutions of discourse, ready with sentence or phrase, his mind stood, whether brooding at Potidea, or debating at Athens, a challenge to all comers for a long generation, vigorous to the last.

A pathfinder without map, a pioneer with no base of supplies, getting his direction from observing the ambiguous light of the common ken and conduct of man, he blazed the road and dug the trenches for the armies of thought.

His self-reliance of intellect was also the self-reliance in the

art of living. They might cartoon, threaten, indict, murder him, but they could not change him. Steadfastly rooted in himself, devoted with singleness of purpose and unflinching courage to his own business, he would quietly gainsay any interruption or deflection.

Yet without self-consciousness, arrogance, or vanity; without pride, too, except in the supreme moment, where, in the face of defiant injustice, his pride was the proud sense of the security of the truth he witnessed; humble and homely, democratic in conduct, even if not a complete democrat in political theory, learning from high and low, interested only in truth, never in displaying his store or facility, and detached from all self-seeking.

Gregarious, convivial, loquacious, strolling from agora to symposium and back again, meddlesome as an itinerant evangelist, hearty and whole as an after-dinner speaker, incorrigibly fond of humanity, alike thoughtless of soiling his skirts and losing social prestige as of arousing the jealousy of "the uninvited," scarcely ever away from the city, he was like the old Irish nurse, who returned unexpectedly from a rural visit with the explanation, "Shure, there's moor coompany in pa-aple than in shtoomps."

He was dowered, more than any philosopher since, with good nature, kept from souring by that subtle preservative, humor. This humor played cheerfully about the ears of the pestilential and bumptious youth, with bonhomie and irony before the judges, with whimsical imagination mockingly around the details of an inquiry or around his own domestic troubles and his own intellectual activities, and if a pupil left him angry and disgruntled, he waited genially for the medicine to work. This, perhaps quite as much as his more exalted qualities, endears his memory. For we feel so certainly that it was not only a wise, but a friendly humor, like his sociability, closely related to a native kindness unreserved but never sentimental, and to his dominant desire to help his fellows.

He was the best exemplar of the balance of soul reiterated in his precepts: balanced in judgment, emotion, conduct; holding the reins of his own nature; knowing his own center of gravity and maintaining stability of equilibrium, whatever else might go spinning around him, and whatever the varied circumstances in which he found himself—whether battlefield, market-place, assembly, criminal court, or death-cell.

His moral grandeur still towers over Athens and her shattered temple to rebuke the world. We may reject his moral theory, we may deny even its efficiency as a prime factor in his own morality, deducing (with some truth) his theory ultimately from his char-

acter; but the things he deemed good with all his soul, we deem good, and the righteousness he fulfilled is the righteousness we seek to fulfil. He is the first great incarnation in Europe of the moral law, faithful unto death.

This is a true superman. The ruthless egoist, if not the ideal of Nietzsche, at least the avowed ideal of many Nietzscheans, who, trampling out the weak, mounts more and more into a power more and more his own, where does he stand at last when by virtue of that strength the world is his in right of eminent domain?—alone in a universe of the irrevocable dead, without even a groan from the pile or an imprecating fist to serve his turn—shorn of all power, because forever without a remnant whereon to exercise the power he coveted, irretrievably defeated by that logic of life which should prove to us that the superman presupposes men, that power presupposes opportunity, and that the only power which adds power to the individual is that which he exercises to save his fellow and conserve the race unto righteousness.

The qualities sketched above he had each in generous measure. Socrates must be writ large; he is human but prodigally human, with an abundance of each portion of himself. But the man in his uniqueness emerges only when we contemplate the difficult but triumphant blend of those qualities, so often disparate in men. Superficially, he may recall in one aspect or another, Tolstoy, Emerson, Lincoln, Dr. Johnson, Franklin, Confucius, or the great Jesus; fundamentally he is unlike all men, yet close to all. "There is only one Socrates," said Tatian; yet he belongs to everybody.

But, like the rest of the world's eminent, he falls short of epitomizing humanity. Some qualities he had not, if we read our records aright. Verily he lacked humanity's worst passions and vices and shared apparently in few of its blunders. And on the other hand, though a Greek, he had little joy in the glory and the charm of nature or of art: the blue sky over Athens and the flowery fields beyond the walls, the Parthenon and the shining goddess on the hill came not into his discourse, and thus apparently only casually into his ken. He had not the creative imagination. He was no poet, like Jesus and Mohammed, each in his way. His kindness had yet none of the plangent pity for the sorrow of life, naught of the throbbing love and enfolding arms. His righteousness, as we have seen, burned with no fiery imprecation, entreaty, or command, and rose, cool, observing, undepressed, assistant, before his own shortcomings or the sins of the world. His religious consciousness phrased itself in loyalty to the divine, as a mode of

thinking and acting among men, not in prostration or in ecstasy: he was neither a god-smitten nor a god-intoxicated man.

The chief influence of this personality was upon his immediate acquaintances—men long since dead, but quite as important to the planet which has bosomed their bones as you or I, whom it yet a little while gives to walk on its emerald hills. The lifetime, which, as Xenophon attested, "he gave to the outpouring of his substance," can repeat itself for thought only partially, thwarted by imperfect record, or intricated with the lifetimes of a line of descendants a part of whose blood came from other stock. "To be with Socrates and to spend long periods in his society was indeed a priceless gain" (*Memorabilia*, IV, 1); but it was a gain evermore impossible after the year three hundred and ninety-nine; (unless one be speaking in the language of a legitimate hyperbole, with the stress on the vitality of that portion of him we still may make our own). That influence may well have been less through a dialectic, easily misunderstood in its deeper moments, and more through the certainty of goodness he was in himself. "Socrates is the only man who ever made me feel ashamed," said Plato's Alcibiades.

His chief influence after death is found in Plato. From Socrates's skill in a peculiar conversational method (soon to become a popular literary type), Plato derived the form of his essays, subsequently the model for Cicero and writers in the modern tongues. From Socrates was the stimulus to his prime interest in ethics, and to his far-reaching inquiries into the nature of knowledge. In the Socratic definitions, ideals, moral principles, or whatever we prefer to call his established universals of ethical thought and life, is the germ of Platonic ideas. In Socrates's recognition of the transcendental implication were the materials for the ladder which Plato constructed from human experience to the supreme good. And the man who gave Plato starting points with such range of outlook for his thought, likewise strengthened Plato's spiritual character by contact of life with life, and enriched Plato's art by furnishing his creative pencil with a model beyond price. Different, far different though he was from his master, Plato's debt to Socrates was enormous. It has, however, been paid, and in the manner best pleasing to the master—paid to humanity with pieces of silver and gold of his own, still current.

Aristotle, by the critical attention he gives to the thought of Socrates as well as by the Socratic, rather than the Platonic, attitude as investigator and formulator of life, attests his intellectual line; even as the moral influence of Socrates seems behind him

when he says, speaking in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of certain differences between his thought and Plato's, "Friends and truth are both dear to us, but it is a sacred duty to prefer truth."

The other philosophic movements, as is well known, derive also from Socrates. Aristippus, stressing and revising the utilitarian criterion, develops a hedonism, which, combined with the atomism of Democritus, gives birth to Saint Epicurus, the long misjudged. Antisthenes, stressing the principle of self-limitation in the Socratic precept and conduct, founds the Cynic school and points the way to the Stoa. Euclides, stressing the dialectic, prepares the soil for a neo-scepticism, which, however, contained within itself its own refutation.

No historic generalization ever put to paper was absolutely true; but far truer than most is this: Socrates is fountain head not only of scientific ethics, but of all metaphysical systems in which the point of departure is a theory of knowledge rather than of being.

His subtler influence on the inner life of the generations cannot be disassociated from the sympathetic and uncritical reading of Xenophon and Plato, especially their accounts of his last days; nor need it. Where those narratives have taken deepest hold they are fortunately most true to the Socratic outlook on life and the Socratic walk in the midst of life.

Socrates, as we have seen, was often with Cicero; and he accompanied Seneca in his death. But by the second century banded zealots were preaching a new hero and a new martyrdom to the pagan cities of the Mediterranean; yet we find the church fathers, often more liberal-minded than later theologians, explaining the new martyrdom by the old, and defending Christ by Socrates. Justin (150), writing an apology for Christianity to the imperial court and the senate at Rome, eloquently and tactfully compares the Christians whom they persecute with that pagan whom they admire: "we are in prison with Socrates, and with Socrates we are slain: but with him we too are invincible." And again: "He, also, knew Christ in part, for Christ is the personal manifestation of the *logos* indwelling in every man." No less Clement, to whom religion was the education of man from partial to perfect truth, saw in Socrates the shadow of the Logos, and quoted his sayings beside those of Christ. Origen comes forth with the still remembered *contra Celsum*, for the persuasion of the heathen: "Jesus died a death of shame; so Socrates. Jesus taught courage against death, as in itself no evil; so Socrates. Jesus called to him the sinners—so Socrates. About Jesus are told strange stories, hard of belief;



so of Socrates. [This is a little forced.] . . . From the revelations of Jesus have sprung up various sects and schools; so with the teachings of Socrates." From Chrysostom, Hieronymus, Isidor of Pelusium, and the great Augustine, scholars have collected paragraphs of understanding praise. And in spite of some dissenting voices as the terrible Tertullian and the rabid Lactantius, I would name, more explicitly and emphatically than has been named by other writers, as an important historical service of Socrates, his mediation between paganism and Christianity, his influence in the spread of the new faith; albeit I have not forgotten that his ethic was grounded in knowledge and the Christian's in revelation, and that the Christian said "be saved through Christ," and Socrates, "save yourselves."

Among the moderns he has left his impress on men as different as Goethe, Emerson, and Mill. But incalculable must have been his influence on the impressionable generations of European schoolboys from the dawn of the Renaissance, whose best thumbed Greek prose texts have been these same Socratic records, reread with delight for the present study.

Nor alone on the European youth: though in our American academies to-day Greek have but one prophet to every ten or twenty for the kingdom of Mechanics, or the kingdom of Microscopy or the kingdom of Manual Arts, the face of Socrates may appear in unexpected places and with something of the old look and power. But the other day a reformer talking in the huge armory of a western State University on the fight for honest government, after citing the execrated excuses of the big bankers and brokers and civic officials "compelled to take and to give bribes or be ruined in business," commented with a sudden and passionate dignity: "How different was the answer—twenty-three centuries ago—of Socrates, who, condemned to death by an unjust senate, when friends would open for him the prison doors, refused to fly, because it was against the laws of his country." And three thousand generous young men and women applauded and cheered as to no other words of a long and memorable address; and who shall say that the courageous integrity of the dead Greek, here thus so unexpectedly revealed once more and so nobly approved, may not abide with one—or another—of that great audience, to stay his hand in the lobby or to steady his voice in the forum, or to guide his pencil in the booth where he marks his ballot,—helping him, as it helped so many in the old days, to sturdier manhood and more earnest citizenship.