



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

PLATO

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THE LAST DAYS OF SOCRATES



## THE LAST DAYS OF SOCRATES

PLATO (c. 427–347 BC) stands with Socrates and Aristotle as one of the shapers of the whole intellectual tradition of the West. He came from a family that had long played a prominent part in Athenian politics, and it would have been natural for him to follow the same course. He declined to do so, however, disgusted by the violence and corruption of Athenian political life, and sickened especially by the execution in 399 of his friend and teacher, Socrates. Inspired by Socrates' inquiries into the nature of ethical standards, Plato sought a cure for the ills of society not in politics but in philosophy, and arrived at his fundamental and lasting conviction that those ills would never cease until philosophers became rulers or rulers philosophers. At an uncertain date in the early fourth century BC he founded in Athens the Academy, the first permanent institution devoted to philosophical research and teaching, and the prototype of all western universities. He travelled extensively, notably to Sicily as political adviser to Dionysius II, ruler of Syracuse. Plato wrote over twenty philosophical dialogues, and there are also extant under his name thirteen letters, whose genuineness is keenly disputed. His literary activity extended over perhaps half a century: few other writers have exploited so effectively the grace and precision, the flexibility and power, of Greek prose.

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PLATO

The Last Days  
of Socrates

*Euthyphro · Apology*  
*Crito · Phaedo*

*Translated by* HUGH TREDENNICK  
*and* HAROLD TARRANT

*Introduction and Notes by*  
HAROLD TARRANT

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## Chronology

- 469 BC Birth of Socrates.
- c. 435 BC Socrates already active in intellectual debate, as seen in Plato's *Protagoras*.
- 432 BC Socrates involved in the Potidaean campaign between Athens and Sparta.
- 431 BC Start of the Peloponnesian War.
- c. 428 BC Birth of Plato.
- 424 BC Socrates displays courage in the defeat at Delium.
- 423 BC Performance of Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, mocking Socrates.
- 406 BC Battle of Arginusae – Socrates objects to the illegal decision to prosecute the generals involved.
- 404 BC Peloponnesian War ends; Regime of the Thirty established at Athens.
- 404 BC Socrates defies the orders of the Thirty to arrest Leon of Salamis.
- 403 BC Restoration of democracy in Athens.
- 399 BC Trial and death of Socrates.
- c. 395 BC Plato writing his earliest dialogues, perhaps including the first three in this volume.
- c. 385 BC Plato established as a teacher in Athens.
- 384 BC Birth of Aristotle.
- c. 380 BC Date sometimes offered for the composition of the *Phaedo*.
- 347 BC Death of Plato.

## Preface

Hugh Tredennick's *The Last Days of Socrates* has helped introduce these works of Plato to countless readers. It has been part of an important project which has made great literature accessible to all sorts of readers. Since 1954, however, much has changed in Platonic studies; as a result the original volume was being outshone by many of the newer Plato translations in the Penguin series. I have tried to write a more extended general introduction, taking account of modern directions in the study of Plato, but without straying into the kind of technicalities which the general reader would find problematic.

I believe that Tredennick was well justified in incorporating these four Platonic works into the same volume, for they make a satisfying and in many ways enlightening combination. It is extremely useful to have the *Phaedo* in the same volume as the other three works, though because of its literary qualities and philosophic rigour it may seem to have deserved a volume, of its own. There have been several annotated translations dedicated to that work alone, and yet there is merit in refusing to be drawn too far along the path towards producing a full commentary. Many readers will not need in-depth discussion of Platonic metaphysics in order to appreciate a work of this power; some will find too much commentary tedious. I have tried to steer a middle course here between unhelpful shallows and mystifying depths. The reader who is still ready for a further challenge will find a number of suggestions in the bibliography.

Sydney  
March 1992 and July 2002

HAROLD TARRANT



are not required to take anything on trust. We are asked to be spectators at an occasion, whether historical or fictitious, when lifelike characters talked on real issues, issues which are sometimes remote from us but which we can feel were pressing ones for them. We are asked to react to human experience and human ideas, for which we, as human beings, have some understanding. We are asked to listen to the arguments critically; we are also asked to respond to the personalities of those participating. We may be encouraged to learn certain lessons and to form certain conclusions as a result; but many of the problems superficially seem left unresolved, and we are not bullied into taking the author's line. Consequently Plato's dialogues have continued to have appeal over the ages, and have survived numerous changes of intellectual and religious fashion, for somebody has always found something of value within them.

The term 'dialogue' in fact embraces a wide variety of works. We shall meet in this volume the *Apology*, which in most respects resembles other law-court speeches which have come down to us; it is essentially a monologue, interrupted only by a short cross-examination of the principal accuser, Meletus. But cross-examination also occurs in other forensic speeches,<sup>1</sup> and the skilful characterization of Socrates has parallels in the contemporary speeches of Lysias, which are likewise tailored to bring out (in the most attractive and sympathetic light possible) the character of the speaker. Plato's *Menexenus* has a brief dramatic introduction, but is otherwise little more than a mock funeral-speech for a public burial, apparently parodying the Periclean funeral speech from Book 2 of Thucydides. In the *Critias* another short dramatic introduction leads into something more like a novel – except that it is a novel without any individual personalities. In the *Symposium* dialogue provides a frame for seven related speeches; in the *Phaedrus* it is a frame for a rich mixture of speeches, myth and argument.

Perhaps the earliest fundamental division of Plato's works to be widely accepted was that into dramatic and narrative works.<sup>2</sup> A 'dramatic' work, in this technical sense, was one in which the main conversation was written in a form rather like a drama. Only the words supposedly spoken were written down by the

author, though ancient scholars soon added the speakers' names for ease of reading. The speakers were originally identified by the way in which they frequently named each other as they conversed. There were limitations inherent in this kind of presentation, in so far as every time the writer wanted to draw attention to actions or to the appearance of the participants, he had to have one of the speakers comment upon what was happening. It is also difficult to handle many characters simultaneously within the 'dramatic' dialogue, for one might easily lose track of who was supposed to be speaking. Consequently, where Plato has to handle a large number of characters, as for example in the *Protagoras* or the *Symposium*, or where the argument is to be accompanied by a great deal of action, he inclines towards presenting the conversation in the form of a narrative. This narrative often, but not always, emerges out of a short 'dramatic' introduction where the narrator converses with somebody eager to hear the tale, as in the *Phaedo*.

Plato is best known for his dialogues which involved Socrates in conversation; only a few later works employ other characters as the chief speaker, while the *Laws* alone omits him entirely. Socratic dialogues were not exclusive to Plato. They were written by a number of followers of Socrates, and it was a natural form for these writers to adopt. They wanted to depict Socrates in action, i.e. in conversation: for Socratic philosophy can only be truly realized through question and answer. We have plenty of examples of Socratic conversations in the works of Xenophon, most notably his *Memorabilia*.<sup>3</sup> These are all in the narrated form, even though Xenophon does not exploit the advantages of that form in the way that Plato can. It is very likely that the narrated form was favoured by other well-known writers of Socratic dialogues, such as Antisthenes and Aeschines.<sup>4</sup>

A famous passage of Diogenes Laertius (3.48) gives Plato the credit for the introduction of the philosophic dialogue, allegedly after he had developed great enthusiasm for the 'mimes' (brief non-philosophical dramatic sketches) of Sophron. A fuller parallel passage in an Oxyrhynchus papyrus published by M. Haslam in 1976 (*P. Oxy.* 3219, fr. I) makes it clear that it is

the *dramatic* dialogue which is supposed to have owed so much to Plato.<sup>5</sup> We may suppose that with his great dramatic talents, which may at one time have been encouraging him to write tragedies, Plato was able to inject extra life into bare dramatic sketches, which, like other prose works, were probably read aloud by the author in the first instance. To read a narrated work one only had to play one character, the narrator; to read a dramatic work one had to become a minimum of two.<sup>6</sup> Playing such a double role seems to have been considered educationally dangerous at *Republic* 394b ff., but all the same *Theaetetus* 143c speaks as if Plato had begun to see the perpetual inclusion of such phrases as 'I said' and 'He agreed' as unnecessarily cumbersome. Dramatic works often have a freshness and immediacy about them. We enter directly, often quite suddenly and with little or no introductory conversation,<sup>7</sup> into the world of Socratic debate. The *Euthyphro* and *Crito* are examples of such works. By contrast, narrated dialogues, particularly the *Phaedo*, *Symposium* and *Parmenides* where setting of the introductory dialogue is remote from the action, ease us gradually into the world of Socratic legend.

It should be clear to virtually any reader that Plato greatly enjoyed writing, and enlisting his literary powers in the service of philosophy. We are confronted, however, with a well-known passage of his *Phaedrus* (275c ff.) which questions whether written compositions have any serious purpose. Certainly Plato valued face-to-face teaching more than any written message which he left behind, but an important part of his criticism of the written word concerns its habit of addressing all alike; moreover the literature criticized always says the same thing when the reader tries to ask it questions. The dialogues, however, are asking *us* the questions, and as we change ourselves so do the answers. For an author who had a fear of the finality of the published word, Plato did at least choose the most flexible form of composition possible, and the effort which has gone into many of his compositions clearly demonstrates that he usually took his activities as an author with considerable seriousness.

Seriousness, of course, does not mean that the dialogues are

all serious in tone. A work like the *Euthydemus* is distinctly comic for the most part, and the *Euthyphro* is another work with important comic elements, ridiculing not only Meletus and Euthyphro, but 'Daedalan' Socrates as well (see 111c-e). Even in the sombre setting of the *Phaedo* there is room for the occasional joke. Irony and caricature play their part from time to time. Humour spices the dialogues, as do some of Socrates' grotesque analogies and charming tales. Humour invites the reader in, and sometimes an erotic element plays this role. But once we have been captured Plato does not waste the opportunity to make us think. He may even try to persuade us to adopt his own beliefs.

Plato's principal tool of persuasion is of course argument. There are two particular terms which are often used in this context, *elenchus* and *dialectic*. The former is Socrates' means of examining the soundness of the views of others. Typically an interlocutor will make a moral claim that Socrates cannot accept. He then secures the interlocutor's assent to some further proposition or group of propositions, and, accepting these, proceeds to demonstrate that they are inconsistent with the original claim. It is a tool for the exposure of problems with beliefs and inconsistencies in sets of beliefs rather than for demonstrating what is true and what is false.<sup>8</sup> It makes considerable use of inductive arguments. It is the weapon employed in the *Euthyphro*, for example, or in the cross-examination of Meletus in the *Apology*. It is not, however, characteristic of the *Crito* or the *Phaedo*. In the latter work Socrates is not trying to expose the false beliefs of others so much as attempting to give a thoroughly argued justification of his own deep-rooted beliefs. To such reasoned justification the term 'dialectic' would apply. The term is derived from the verb 'to converse', and need mean no more than 'conversational art' – not the art of polite conversation, but the art of employing person-to-person discussion in such a way as to come nearer to the truth of a given issue. The teaching of dialectic is to constitute the culmination of the education of the Guardians in Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*.

Even dialectic is conceived more as a means of legitimate persuasion than as a means of proof. In the *Gorgias* there is talk

of 'arguments of iron and adamant', but it is denied that they have led to knowledge (508e-509a). In the *Phaedo* Socrates wants the argument to suggest to him that its conclusion is true (91a); he seeks for sound and trustworthy arguments, and for the skill in argument to be able to recognize them. The medium of language (*logos*), and presumably of argument in particular, is thought to provide in a sense a *reflection* of the truth rather than a guarantee of it (99e-100a).<sup>9</sup> The concept of formal validity is not yet in evidence, though already the connection between dialectical and mathematical procedure is present.<sup>10</sup>

Whatever Plato himself thought of the proof-giving powers of argument, his readers were bound to be cautious; hence the appeal to those who have trusted in unsound arguments (and regretted it) not to become detesters of argument (*Phaedo* 89d ff.). After an age in which sophists and orators had discovered the art of arguing convincingly for all sorts of conclusions, and often for contradictory ones, it is possible that many of Plato's readers viewed argument more as a tool of deception than as a source of truth. Others still would have mistrusted their ability to recognize a good argument. So argument could not be Plato's only tool of persuasion. Sometimes he will use character as a catalyst to belief, exposing flaws of character in those who expound the views which he rejects, and showing Socrates to have the kind of qualities which are both trusted by the reader and somehow consonant with the line that he takes. The credibility of the argument and the credibility of its promoter were inextricably related.

Another important device is myth. Myth appeals to the reader's cultural identity and to deep-seated beliefs and feelings. We might view these feelings as culturally conditioned; Plato would have seen many of them as dim traces of innate knowledge. Myths may be placed at the end of such works as the *Gorgias* and *Phaedo* in order to induce some spark within us to give its sub-rational assent to the argument's conclusions. Lesser myths, like simpler imagery and metaphor, subtly condition our reading and assist in eliciting a positive response from us.

Often, of course, Plato is more concerned to discourage certain beliefs than to promote any particular ones himself. The

elenchus will then be an important tool, as will satire. The exposure of the beliefs of the interlocutor will be accompanied by his exposure as an incomplete moral being.

## THE GROUP

### *EUTHYPHRO-APOLOGY-CRITO-PHAEDO*

Early in the first century AD Thrasyllus, who was not only the astrologer of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, but also a polymath and devoted follower of Plato and Pythagoras, accepting that Plato had arranged his works in groups like the tragic playwrights, argued that these were groups of four. As the first of these groups he postulated the 'tetralogy' *Euthyphro-Apology-Crito-Phaedo*. The rationale was simple enough: the works all had a dramatic setting at around the time of Socrates' trial and death, and they all contributed to a paradigm of how the philosopher should live and die.<sup>11</sup> All manuscripts of Plato stem from exemplars which employed Thrasyllus's order, and thus there has been a strong tendency to keep these works together even today. Certainly they provide a satisfying sequence, and combine to shed considerable light on the circumstances surrounding Socrates' death – or Plato's view of those circumstances.

The *Euthyphro* depicts a professedly worried Socrates about to face a preliminary hearing of the impiety charges against him – and consequently most anxious to discover at last what piety really is. The *Apology* shows Socrates speaking in court, not merely when defending himself, but also when proposing a possible punishment after conviction and when responding to the news that the jury have voted for his death. The *Crito* shows Socrates in prison, responding to an eleventh-hour plea by Crito that he should let his friends arrange his escape. The *Phaedo* shows him conversing with his friends on his last day, arguing for the immortality of the soul, and attempting to reassure them about his fate.

In spite of the fact that they make an attractive sequence,

modern theory would resist the suggestion that Plato composed these works as such, or even that he published them as such. It is usual, in the English-speaking world at least, to regard the *Euthyphro*, *Apology* and *Crito* as early works of Plato, written within a decade or so of Socrates' death, and the *Phaedo* as belonging to his 'middle period' (a decade or so later), when Plato had reached his peak as a literary artist and was already putting his own distinctive doctrines into the mouth of Socrates. This chronology is less secure than is often pretended, but one ought not to believe that the works necessarily constitute a compositional unit.

## PLATO'S SOCRATES

Socrates was a character who took on many guises in literature, being transformed by the individual author's perception of his character and his activity. Among scholars of ancient philosophy Socrates is often taken to be Plato's 'Socrates' as he figures in those dialogues of Plato which they would label 'Socratic'. There has not, however, been much unanimity about which dialogues ought to be so labelled. All that tends now to be agreed is that in certain middle- and late-period works, the character called Socrates becomes more of a mouthpiece for Plato's own doctrines and less 'Socratically' characterized. The *Phaedo* is normally classed among them, even though it certainly offers a number of insights into Plato's view of the real Socrates. Chronology is important, not because Plato forgot what his mentor and source of inspiration had been like, but (i) because his concerns developed and changed in such a way that it would have been unnatural to limit himself to examining problems from a Socratic perspective, and (ii) because the conventions of Socratic writing were shifting in such a way that it was no longer expected that one's character 'Socrates' would only say what Socrates himself could have said.

The shifting conventions are illustrated by observations at the beginning of Xenophon's *Apology of Socrates*, in which it is noted that all who had (so far) written about the trial and death

of Socrates had managed to capture his defiant aloofness, but that they had thereby made him look rather imprudent because they had not additionally gone into his reasons for preferring to die at this stage than to live. The unanimity of these writers was indeed an indication of historical fact in Xenophon's eyes, but was he criticizing them for not having gone beyond Socrates' actual words to explain that aloofness? The Socratic writer, it seems, did not merely have to say what Socrates said and did, but also had to put it in an attractive perspective. This of course is what Plato would do in the *Phaedo*, a work which actually contains a new defence speech, this time delivered to his own friends and explaining (in a much more philosophical manner than Xenophon) why the philosopher must welcome death (63e-69e).<sup>12</sup>

One might detect in the *Phaedo* a Platonic response to the challenge of another Socratic writer, Xenophon. Likewise one might see in the *Euthydemus* an attack on those who present their Socratic philosophy in too 'eristic' a manner, striving for victory in argument at the expense of truth;<sup>13</sup> and scholars often suspect a Platonic response to his fellow-Socratic Antisthenes in various passages. Certainly Antisthenes attacked Plato in his work *Sathon*, whose title is a crude, lisp-like perversion of Plato's name. As dialogues became a polemical tool for carrying on debate between rival Socratics, the character of 'Socrates' must progressively have been used to present the author's own side of Socratic philosophy;<sup>14</sup> and the less one saw of the real Socrates in the works of rivals, the more justified one would feel in remodelling him to suit one's own ends. There was not one Socrates in the literature, but several.<sup>15</sup>

What I have to say here, then, concerns Plato's Socrates, as he appears in supposedly early dialogues or in later passages which seem intended to shed light on the historical figure. Socrates' investigations are referred to in the *Apology*, and Plato shows us his investigative technique in works like the *Euthyphro* which appear to be examining what an interlocutor either should know or would claim to know. Discussion usually arises, at first sight, from Socrates' desire to remedy his own deep-seated ignorance of the subject which the other understands; we



suspect, though, that his real desire is to expose the ignorance of the other and in so doing to draw attention to difficulties inherent in the subject which every would-be expert must be aware of. Sometimes, however, as in the *Charmides*, *Lysis* and *Meno* where his interlocutors are young men in need of guidance, his purpose in exposing ignorance is more constructive and tailored towards encouraging them to pursue philosophy. Always there is a sense in which the examination of the person's theories constitutes an examination of their life and character, as *Laches* 187e-188a shows. For as we have seen, Socrates' method of argument, the elenchus, exposes inconsistencies in the moral beliefs of the interlocutor, inconsistencies which are likely to be reflected in their lives.

It is well known that Socrates claims not to teach, not to give instruction to the interlocutor. It is essential that the interlocutor himself should either volunteer or assent to each premise and each step in the argument. Socrates does, however, lead. There are occasions when he makes helpful suggestions which keep the argument going. There are many more when his questions introduce aspects of the problem which will have to be considered thereafter. He can be constructive, but he recognizes that the only secure construction in education is a construction freely built upon the learner's own experience. In time the elenchus itself fades from the scene. It is not much in evidence in the *Crito*, and is no longer the means of investigation in the *Phaedo*; for in both it is Socrates' beliefs rather than those of the interlocutors which must be justified. Still, the assent of the interlocutor to every step remains important; he must not be bullied into assent, but gradually led on to see that he too must accept the logic of Socrates' position. Socrates emerges as extremely astute in debate, but too dedicated to his educational purposes and to his quest for the truth to become either a showman or a shiftily deceiver. Though there are times when we may suspect that he is being unnecessarily contentious and altogether too reluctant to try and understand his opponent's position, it is not Plato's intention to depict him as petty or malicious in his questioning.

As far as the action of the dialogues is concerned, Socrates

seems to play very little part in it, other than arriving at and departing from the scene of the debate. In the action of the *Euthydemus*, for instance, Socrates is initially seated alone; the others take up their positions, act and react. Socrates usually argues quietly, leaving others to be provoked into actions, though he does get up to leave when debate temporarily breaks down in the *Protagoras* (335d). In a way, Socrates is most famed for his inaction: in the *Symposium* for his spell standing in a neighbouring porch (175a–b) or his failure to respond to Alcibiades' advances (219b–d) or his immunity to wine (220a, etc.). It is the same Socrates who holds only routine offices in Athens, resists illegal measures and refuses to escape from prison. The action tends to move around him, as round the centre of an eddy.

The figure who remains sure and unmoved amidst the turmoil of life might seem to some to be a man who has founded his life upon beliefs which are unusually secure and unassailable. The reader of the *Apology* will feel that Socrates is such a person at the same time as being confronted with Socrates' own claim that the only way in which his wisdom exceeds that of others is that he recognizes the state of his ignorance. The Socrates of the putative 'early dialogues' (as also of the putatively late *Theaetetus*) is indeed a person who makes much of the yawning gaps in his own knowledge. His investigations generally arise out of his claims that he does not know the answers to seemingly everyday questions, such as 'What is courage?', 'What is rhetoric?', or 'Can virtue be taught?'. These works tend to end either inconclusively or with some conclusion so counter-intuitive that it could convince nobody. *Euthyphro* would be an example of the former kind, *Hippias Minor* of the latter. The occasional passage where Socrates does seem to be openly propounding his doctrine, such as *Protagoras* 345b–c, tends to be so contentiously presented that it seems to be not so much an expression of belief as a challenge to those who would prefer not to believe. Socrates never sets himself up as an authority upon any matter relating to morality,<sup>16</sup> nor upon any matter traditionally taught by Presocratic philosophers or by the sophists. For that matter he does not set himself up as a master of investigative technique

or in the expulsion of false beliefs, for these skills are attributed to the guiding hand of Apollo or some other divine inspiration rather than to any systematic knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

That Socrates is not an expert may be difficult for the reader of the present works to accept. Socrates seems like an expert handler of the elenchus in the *Euthyphro*. He seems to be telling the jury what justice and the juryman's oath demands in the *Apology*, a work which also has him tell of his defiant refusal to become implicated in unconstitutional measures likely to lead to unjust deaths. He seems to be equally certain about the requirements of justice and lawfulness in the *Crito*. And he is about as convinced as one could be of the immortality of souls and some of the related theories in the *Phaedo*. This last work is less of a problem, in so far as it is acknowledged to be a middle-period work, and hence less rigorously true to the historical Socrates, but one feels that Plato is writing partly to explain the complete equanimity with which Socrates faced death (see 58e), an equanimity which was for him based upon Socrates' deep-rooted beliefs.

There are various possible ways of attempting to reconcile Socrates' disavowal of knowledge with his attitude of great certainty. Firstly, there is the sceptic way. The ancient sceptics, who like many others saw Socrates as a predecessor, believed that the untroubled state of mind was best achieved by avoiding coming to conclusions. Socrates could be seen as a true sceptic, and his equanimity in the face of death a result of his success. This does not help to explain his little lectures to the jury and to Crito. Then there is a chronological approach. The *Apology* and *Crito* are set at the end of Socrates' life; also from this period are his refusals to act unconstitutionally. There is no need to suppose that he always had the convictions which he demonstrates in the last few years of his life. The very success of his examination of others may have persuaded him that he did have some of the answers himself. Yet the Socrates of the *Apology* does not suggest that he is abandoning his disavowal of knowledge. Even at his firmest, he still talks about what he *thinks* or what seems just to him (30c-d, 35b-c). Above all, the profession of ignorance is still strong in the *Euthyphro*. We

might discount this as being the product of Socrates' irony, but it is not the function of Socratic irony to tell direct lies. Irony would rather involve telling half-truths, toying mysteriously with the interlocutor and keeping your real meaning hidden.<sup>18</sup> Thus the chronological approach meets with only limited success.

Another possibility is to distinguish between senses in which Socrates does know, and senses in which he does not. For instance he may have that kind of limited knowledge which is open to mankind, but falls short of full knowledge, something traditionally reserved for the gods.<sup>19</sup> If this is Plato's view of Socratic knowledge, he certainly does not make it obvious. The Socratic message is that men do not have that kind of knowledge to which they *as men* aspire. Euthyphro would not be put out nearly so much by the thought that he might know his subject with slightly less precision than Zeus.

The most depressing aspect of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is the fact that his best-known doctrine (I should prefer to call it 'theme') is that virtue is knowledge. The result would be that neither Socrates nor anybody else with whom he is familiar can be virtuous – unless of course knowledge of one's own ignorance can suffice to yield virtue.<sup>20</sup> As for others, Plato's Socrates does not encourage the belief that any of them were virtuous in the preferred sense of the term, but Plato surely wants us to believe that Socrates was himself virtuous in some very meaningful sense.

The burning question, of course, is the nature of knowledge itself. What is it to know? How does one test knowledge? How does one recognize it? It is because this question was so central that Plato's main treatment of it did not appear in its final form until the *Theaetetus* – fairly late in his career. There Socrates is 'unproductive of wisdom' and 'has nothing wise' to offer (150c), but yet he possesses the crucial skill of investigating and evaluating the ideas of others, and above all of distinguishing the true from the false (151b–d). He knows, Plato would have us believe, not just his own ignorance, but also whether others know or do not know. And with this knowledge he ought to be able to declare true or false all propositions which an interlocutor had

submitted to him for testing. Can he know that a proposition  $p$  is true without knowing that  $p$ ? This is by no means unthinkable. Let us pursue the consequences.

If others can produce the rational true beliefs required as a basis for knowledge though they have no ability to test them, while Socrates has the ability to test their truth or falsity while not having the necessary true beliefs, it is clear that the process of discovery – of coming-to-know – can only take place when Socrates tests the beliefs of others. It must emerge through some dialectical exchange between Socrates and correct believers. This will explain why Plato's devotion to Socrates' conversational methods is greater than his devotion to what we see as Socratic doctrine. Others have some beliefs which are true, but unfortunately wallow in ignorance because they do not have the means to identify which ones; Socrates can help them, but relies upon their cooperation in providing ideas for scrutiny.

If this assessment of Socrates' contribution to knowledge has any merit, then it is clear why he professes his ignorance – he remains dependent on the suggestions of others; but it is likewise clear why he can be extremely confident on certain questions which he had regularly examined with the experts. The conclusions to which his investigations have consistently come, whether that a given proposition is true or that it is false, are propositions known from experience to have passed the test.<sup>21</sup> To doubt the results of these investigations would not be to doubt his own abilities; it would rather be to doubt the generosity and good will of the divinity from whom he had received his powers and the command to use them.<sup>22</sup> That would be a case of impiety. Socrates cannot doubt many of the findings of his quest, because he cannot doubt the prophetic gifts that propel him on that quest and assist him to undertake it. His confidence is partly a product of his alleged divine inspiration;<sup>23</sup> he does not have the same confidence in *any individual's* power to discover the truth on his own through his ordinary cognitive powers.

This being the case, it is clear also that time contributes to Socrates' later confidence, for that confidence is dependent upon his experience of the results of his questioning. Even so, we

should see comparatively little of it if it were not for the openness with which Socrates speaks in parts of the *Apology*, as well as *Crito* and *Phaedo*. This is because Plato's Socrates was a master of irony, a master of mystification said by Alcibiades to 'spend his whole life playing the ironist and toying with mankind'.<sup>24</sup> Alcibiades is contrasting Socrates' external self, which one does not and should not take seriously, with an internal self whose splendour (by 416 BC) had only been revealed to those who knew him closely. It is possible to see Socrates' non-serious mask as a defence mechanism – one which had long prevented the Athenians regarding him as a threat. But his own involvement in the political turmoil in 406–403 BC had forced him to reveal his hand. Without that mask public suspicion of his activities increased, forcing him all the more to talk plainly. The *Euthyphro*, describing events just before the trial, shows the mask breaking down and shows also how those who saw him as a friend and ally could come then to detest him. The *Apology* shows the mask being deliberately lifted. The *Crito* and *Phaedo* show the mask virtually gone.

There is one other aspect of the *Crito* and *Phaedo* which is of relevance in this context: Plato appears to be quite deliberately portraying Socrates as a man whose powers of vision had reached their peak just as he was about to die. In the *Crito* revelatory forces associated with Apollo are operating with considerable impact upon Socrates. At 44a–b we are told of a prophetic dream, in which a lady in white appeared to him, and suggested through a Homeric quotation that it would be two more days before he died; and at the end of the work the voices of the Athenian Laws, which have charmed his ears like the Sirens, seem to be regarded as part of the machinery employed by Apollo to lead Socrates to his death. We are not meant to see this as entirely typical of Socrates; rather we must see it as characteristic of Socrates in his final hours.

The *Phaedo* actually supplies the theory which underpins the picture of a man on the brink of divine knowledge. At 84e–85b Socrates compares himself with the swans, fellow-servants of Apollo, god of prophecy, who according to his account sing their swan-songs just before death not out of any sorrow, but

out of joy at what they know is to come.<sup>25</sup> Socrates has extra powers of insight as a result of his impending death, and so the familiar ironic Socratic elenchus has given way to a new and unfamiliar song which reaches its climax in the visionary account of the higher and lower regions of the world in the myth. The increase in Socrates' visionary powers is likewise explained by the theory that the philosopher avoids the pleasures and pains of the body, striving to separate his soul *gently* from the body, practising being apart from the body so that the intellectual powers may reach their peak (cf. 65–8). The gentleness with which Socrates' soul leaves his body after drinking the hemlock (117e–118a) testifies to the close proximity to the other world – and to its truth – that he has already achieved.

The *Crito* and *Phaedo*, then, portray a Socrates who has achieved, when close to death, the maximum possible proximity to a divine knowledge of the truths of the other world. It is not surprising here if he speaks with unfamiliar voices and with an unfamiliar confidence. It is not surprising that Socrates' earlier belief that death is either the end of all sensation or the beginning of a new journey (*Apology* 40c) has changed to confidence in that new journey. For it is no longer Apollo's social critic who speaks, but the voice of Apollo speaking through him. Or so Plato would have us believe.

## SOCRATES' CAREER AND HIS LAST DAYS

Socrates was born in 470 or 469 BC, a decade after the Persian Wars had concluded and at a time when Athens was well on its way to a period of military, economic and intellectual hegemony of Greece. The son of Sophroniscus, a stonemason according to tradition,<sup>26</sup> he would not have had any very special education. During his youth Presocratic philosophy flourished, concentrating on the origin, nature and workings of the universe and mankind's place within it. Still in its infancy was the sophistic movement, piloted by Protagoras and other itinerant intellec-

tuals who usually taught more practical skills, geared to the needs of ambitious young men and founded upon anthropocentric principles.

Socrates must have become reasonably well known before the age of forty, not necessarily because of any overt philosophic activity, but rather because he was very much a man of the city and its public places. The earliest dramatic dates of works which show Socrates handling the conversation,<sup>27</sup> those of the *Protagoras* and *Charmides*, belong to the later 430s B.C. Socrates in both works is keen to ensure that the youth of Athens are correctly educated – with due concern for the quality of their ‘souls’. He is a man with obvious erotic feelings towards the most sought-after young men of this period, Alcibiades and Charmides, even though (if we are to believe Plato) his erotic relationships followed a rather unusual course. His feelings were perhaps tempered by his even greater thirst for knowledge which caused him to seek out professional intellectuals, though he had little money to take their formal courses<sup>28</sup> and a preference for drawing them into conversation. He moves already in the company of men of pretensions, already knowing the future oligarchic leader Critias very well, but also being familiar with men prominent in the democratic camp. There seems to be some surprise at the beginning of the *Charmides* that Socrates had managed to survive a hard-fought campaign in Thrace, perhaps because his lapses into other-worldliness (immortalized in the *Symposium*) were already well known.<sup>29</sup> In fact his qualities as a soldier earned him the admiration of others famed for their bravery.<sup>30</sup> The *Charmides* and the *Protagoras* both paint a plausible youthful picture of Socrates; the former (155e–157c) has him delighting in a piece of blatant deception required to lure the attractive Charmides into conversation, while the latter shows him somewhat more contentious and headstrong in both argument and tactics than he will seem in works set at a later stage. Though he has already become something of a cult figure among young men (*Charmides* 156a), it seems that he has not yet acquired a reputation for wisdom: the young Hippocrates does not think of Socrates as a wise man in the same sense as Protagoras (309c–d), and the sophist himself suggests that he



will not be surprised if Socrates *becomes* famed for wisdom (361d-e).

The reputation for wisdom is acquired sometime during the next decade or so. It is interesting that in the *Laches*, set in or around 420 BC, the old man Lysimachus, because he had been spending most of his time indoors recently, had not connected the Socrates whom the young men are always praising with the son of Sophroniscus. The year in which Socrates came to great prominence was probably 424 BC, as two comedies in which he played an important role, Ameipsias's *Connus* and Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, were presented early in 423. Could the Delphic oracle recently have declared him to be wisest (*Apology* 21a)? Possibly, though we get no hint in *The Clouds* as we have it that Socrates was engaging as yet in any programme of moral questioning of the kind that the Delphic oracle is said to have provoked, nor do we receive the impression that the Delphic response story was well known at Athens. What we do find Socrates engaged in at this time is the seeking-out of teachers. While Aristophanes depicted Socrates as already running a school of miscellaneous learning himself, Ameipsias was showing him rather as the over-age pupil of a music-teacher-cum-sophist, Connus.<sup>31</sup> Another musical expert with whom Socrates is associated was Damon, who features as somebody who had learnt much from the sophist Prodicus in the *Laches* (197d), and as an expert on verse metres at *Republic* 400b4-5 – a passage surprisingly reminiscent of Socrates' line 651 in Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

What picture of Socrates' current interests and pursuits does *The Clouds* suggest? Socrates is in charge of a weird school of philosophy, but this hardly implies that he did ever run such a school. It might, perhaps, have been inferred that his purpose in taking up all sorts of quasi-sophistic studies himself had something to do with the desire to set up such an institution. Aristophanes might have been giving an exaggerated and highly comic account of where he guessed Socratic activities might lead. In the background (at least of the extant version) hides the figure of Chaerephon, Socrates' accomplice, who seems to attract at least as much venom as Socrates himself and is treated

elsewhere by Aristophanes as a thief and cheat. It would be a reasonable guess that Chaerephon was the man whom Aristophanes judged to be promoting Socrates, especially in view of the fact that it was Chaerephon who at some stage asked the Delphic oracle about Socrates' wisdom. Socrates himself remains an other-worldly type, and seems to show little interest in the payment which his school is being offered or in the uses to which his pupils intend to put their new-found knowledge. It is not he who had the entrepreneurial skills to turn philosophy into a profit-making business.

When it comes to his picture of Socrates' interests, they are indeed fairly broad, but contain nothing of any moral or practical significance. His concerns are for the heavens above, the earth below, for the study of language, poetry, argument and problem-solving. There is much here that is Presocratic, and it seems to rely fairly consistently on the cosmology and biology of Diogenes of Apollonia;<sup>32</sup> there is much else that seems indebted to the teaching of the sophists, particularly that of Prodicus, with whom Socrates was much associated and who is mentioned in line 361 of the play. Only in the much-used theme, crucial to the plot, that there are two arguments on every topic is the influence of Protagoras obvious.<sup>33</sup> Likewise absent is any strong indication of particular influences from the Presocratics Anaxagoras and Archelaus, with whom Socrates is associated in the *Phaedo* (96b, 97b-c). Now clearly Aristophanes must have had easy access himself to the doctrines of Diogenes, and in that case one assumes that Socrates did as well: from whatever source. Was there some representative of Diogenes' philosophy at Athens whose expertise Socrates was also trying to tap at this time?

Whatever the answer, I think it is clear that Socrates did consult various experts with strong connections with philosophic or sophistic views during the late 420s. The section on Socrates' early career in the *Phaedo* says nothing to question such a belief. He once was an enthusiastic inquirer into various Presocratic theories, including those of Archelaus, Empedocles, Diogenes, Heraclitus and Alcmaeon of Croton (96b), but soon found that they raised more questions than they answered.

## SOCRATIC PIETY AND SOCRATIC JUSTICE

This is not the place to try and offer a reconstruction of Socrates' moral philosophy, but various important points may nevertheless be made. Both piety and justice were classed as virtues in Socratic thought, and the virtues themselves were in some sense one. They tended to coalesce in one individual, and though one thought of them as manifesting themselves in different spheres of conduct they were all founded upon some basic moral knowledge, a knowledge which was sufficient to ensure correct conduct. The virtues of justice and piety (or holiness) were considered to be especially close, as one observes in the *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 4.6.

The *Euthyphro* can be seen as a struggle between two competing conceptions of piety, one which places enormous emphasis on the acceptance of religious traditions – both religious beliefs and religious duties such as prayers, sacrifices and purification ceremonies, the other which seems to follow no prescription, relying instead on the individual's power to discriminate between right and wrong both in theological belief and in action.

The *Apology* might also be viewed as a struggle between two conceptions of piety, one which sees one's religious duty as integrated with one's duty to the traditional values of the city – not merely participating in its religious ceremonies but also respecting its political institutions and social principles, and that of Socrates who follows at all times whatever divine orders he believes he is receiving (28e–29a, 31c–d, 37e): which must surely be a recipe for social breakdown were it to be followed by everybody. As Socrates concludes his defence speech (35c–d) he asks the jury not to expect him to do what he does not think honourable, just or holy; this is because, in soliciting an act of impiety from the jury, he would be convicting himself of overlooking the gods. He as an individual pleads the right to follow his own interpretation of divine law, an interpretation sufficiently original to give credence to the notion that his gods

were not the gods of the city. In order to understand the importance of this dispute between Socrates and Athens we may refer to the *Euthyphro* once more. Euthyphro claims at 14b that piety as he conceives it preserves both private households and cities. The benefits of holiness and the disastrous effects of impiety were supposedly felt by families and by whole cities. The common good could be undermined by one dissident individual. Did Socrates have the right to follow his own private piety when the common good was at stake?

Socrates himself, however, believed that any transgressions can cause genuine harm only to the individual. Divine law does not permit the better person to be harmed by the worse (*Apology* 30b–c). No amount of impiety or injustice on Socrates' part would genuinely damage his family or state if they were not at least as guilty as he. *Gorgias* 474d–480d (like the *Republic*) depicts injustice as first and foremost a divisive quality within the soul, tearing the individual apart. Punishment is useful *for the criminal* in so far as it relieves him of injustice, the worst of all evils. So justice is a salutary quality in the soul, a quality which determines that the individual will act justly. Like other virtues it is associated closely with moral knowledge, and as such it must be allowed to determine what is just. To act contrary to one's intuitions of justice will itself promote injustice within the soul, the greatest of human evils. The individual, if he thinks he knows what is just, becomes the arbiter of what is just for him, an arbiter whom no legal or judicial body can – in his eyes – override.

Not surprisingly for one brought up in an age when Pre-socratic philosophers and sophists made their mark in Athens, Socrates conceived of justice as a natural corrective force, operating throughout the cosmos and in the minds of men, not as a man-made institutional one. It was easy to see such views as subversive, and the *Crito* helps counter this impression. The *Crito* places great emphasis on Socrates' acceptance of his obligations to Athenian law, not because that law is authoritative *per se*, but rather because higher law requires obedience to just agreements justly made, and an individual has agreed to abide by his city's laws in choosing to reside there. It is left to the

*Apology* (37e) to make it quite clear that the higher authority, associated with God and with the individual's perception of what is right, takes precedence over this derived authority of the city's laws.

## SOCRATES THE ATHENIAN

How then did Socrates rate as an Athenian? Like many of his fellow citizens he expressed admiration for the government of Sparta,<sup>36</sup> but other passages suggest that he thought well of his own city.<sup>37</sup> He had no illusions about the dangers of democracy because he had seen too many of its excesses, and his philosophy tended to suggest that a chosen few would rule better than the many; but this translated into typically Athenian free expression of his ideas, not into the choice for some alien regime. Religions not traditional at Athens had a fascination for him, but he did not have an un-Athenian devotion to them.

When it came to war the *Apology* (28e) shows how Socrates supported Athens in all that was expected of him. When it came to applying his principles in public duties he was just as firm (32a-d), and he expected others to be firm too (35c-d). He had no ambition for political leadership, but he offered intellectual leadership instead. And just as he saw death as the inevitable outcome of principled political endeavour, so it became the outcome of his social endeavours too. We cannot see him as a poor Athenian simply because he fell into disfavour with the Athenian people – so did Pericles, so too did Alcibiades. To be a great Athenian he had to be an inspiring figure, to fight at times against the tide, to risk being seen setting himself above the governing people. Socrates was an outstanding Athenian, and he paid the price for being one.

But was it not particularly un-Athenian to get oneself condemned for deserting the city's religion? As Michael Morgan has said, 'The Athens of Socrates' final years . . . was the scene of extreme religious heterogeneity and of intense unresolved conflict. The old and the new mingled. Festivals were celebrated with new sincerity by some, with offhand perfunctoriness by

others.<sup>38</sup> In Socrates that conflict is mirrored – resolved even – in a single individual, who captures uniquely the spirit of his city in those turbulent times.

## Notes

1. For instance, there is cross-examination of a witness in Andocides' speech *On the Mysteries*, written within a year of the trial of Socrates.
2. See Diogenes Laertius 3.49, probably drawing on Aristophanes of Byzantium whose arrangement of the corpus emphasized dramatic elements. See Chapter 4.iv of my *Thrasyllan Platonism* (Ithaca, 1993).
3. The Penguin translation of Xenophon's Socratic works has been updated and revised by Robin Waterfield (1990).
4. Some fragments of Aeschines have been included as an appendix to the Penguin volume *Plato: Early Socratic Dialogues*, ed. T. J. Saunders (1987). Saunders' introduction should be consulted for a fuller discussion of the nature of Socratic questions and conversations.
5. 'One should not believe Aristotle . . . when he says in the first book *On Poetics* (a mistake for *On Poets*) that dramatic dialogues had been written even before Plato by Alexamenos of Teos.'
6. The fact that a single slave is invited to read an entire dramatic dialogue at *Theaetetus* 143c confirms that such works were not normally acted out by a plurality of readers.
7. The important exception here is the *Laches*. Though 'dramatic', half the dialogue is over before the main philosophic conversation begins.
8. On this topic see Gregory Vlastos, 'The Socratic Elenchus', in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983), pp. 27–74 and the essays in Gary A. Scott (ed.), *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato's Dialogues and Beyond* (University Park, 2002).
9. Whereas Plato doubts if they are any more of a reflection than facts (*erga*), this is because facts as ordinarily conceived are viewed by Plato as a reflection of the true world in much the same way. *Logoi* and *erga* are both reflections of a single original (cf. *Republic* 509–11).
10. The term for mathematical computation (*logismós*) is employed as a general term for 'reasoning' after the *Meno*, a work which makes much use of mathematics.
11. For this rationale, see Diogenes Laertius 3.57, and the anonymous *Prolegomena to Plato's Philosophy* 25. The 'paradigm' notion explains why these works should be separated from a work set immediately before the *Euthyphro* (*Theaetetus*) together with works set between it and the *Apology* (*Sophist*, *Politicus*).

12. One might argue, likewise, that the *Crito* had done much to explain Socrates' readiness to die; certainly *Crito*'s major speech shows that Plato is already responding to criticism of Socrates' uncompromising tactics during and after the trial (45e), and the whole work justifies his readiness to face death rather than commit an act of injustice.

13. Isocrates in his speech *Against the Sophists* of c. 390 BC, shortly before the *Euthydemus*, clearly has Socratic practitioners of eristic in mind.

14. There has been much debate recently on the vexed question of whether Socrates or any other character can be regarded as a spokesman for Plato's own views. See on this Gerald A. Press (ed.), *Who Speaks for Plato* (Lanham, 2000).

15. At times this has resulted in a split in the figure of Socrates even within Platonic dialogues, most notably in the split between the surface-Socrates and the notorious *alter ego* of the *Hippias Major*. Also note the presence in the trio *Theaetetus*–*Sophist*–*Politicus* of young men, one of whom has the same name as Socrates and the other the same physical features.

16. He does seem to set himself up as something of an expert in 'erotics' at *Symposium* 177d, etc., and *Lysis* 204c.

17. In addition to the *Apology*, see *Theaetetus* 150c–151d.

18. For a spirited defence of the view that Socratic irony is not outright dishonesty, see G. Vlastos, 'Socratic Irony', *Classical Quarterly* 37 (1987), 79–95. My own view would be somewhat less extreme than that of Vlastos.

19. See here G. Vlastos, 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge', *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985), 1–31.

20. There is much discussion in the *Charmides* of the possibility that the virtue of *sophrosyne* (self-control, orderliness) might be a matter of self-knowledge and/or the ability to recognize knowledge/ignorance.

21. My own recent work has shown that Socratic interrogation in the supposedly early dialogues are designed to test the interlocutor for knowledge rather than a theory for its truth or falsehood. However, I do not doubt that such a test has implications for Socrates' thoughts on what is true and what is false. See my article in Scott, *Does Socrates Have a Method?*

22. *Theaetetus* 150c–151d; *Apology* 33c.

23. Note that Socrates also attributes his expertise in 'erotics' to God; *Lysis* 204c.

24. *Symposium* 216c.

25. cf. *Apology* 39c.

26. See *Euthyphro* 11b–c, which, in making the statue-maker Daedalus

# 'Nothing can harm a good man either in life or after death'

The trial and condemnation of Socrates on charges of heresy and corrupting young minds is a defining moment in the history of classical Athens. In tracing these events through four dialogues, Plato also developed his own philosophy of a life guided by self-responsibility. *Euthyphro* finds Socrates outside the court-house, debating the nature of piety, while the *Apology* is his robust rebuttal of the charges against him. In the *Crito*, awaiting execution in prison, Socrates counters the arguments of friends urging him to escape. Finally, in the *Phaedo*, he is shown calmly confident in the face of death.

P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

Translated by Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant  
with an Introduction and Notes by Harold Tarrant



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