Socrates on the Unity of the Person*

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In that well-known passage of the *Apology* after his conviction by the Athenian jury and before the penalty is imposed, Socrates gives his reasons for refusing to change his ways, even then: "The unexamined life", he says, "is not worth living for man".[1] Few of his utterances describe him as well as this: if Socrates could ever be encapsulated in a few words, here he is.

The unexamined life is not worth living, such was Socrates' firm belief, because only constant inquiry can bring about the improvement of the soul. Before him, the Pythagoreans had already stressed the moral value of θεωρία, over and above its intellectual aspect: "When asked what is (the purpose of human life), Pythagoras used to say: 'To contemplate the heavens', and of himself he used to say that he contemplated the heavens.[2] However, Socrates' interest was not in natural inquiry (although it might once have been, if Aristophanes and Plato are to be believed[3]). Unlike Pythagorean θεωρία, the immediate object of Socrates' intellectual activity was human action. His is not the contemplation of the ordered universe leading eventually to a corresponding order in the soul, but a consideration of human actions and their justifications. It is perhaps not devoid of significance that θεωρία in a technical sense makes its first appearance in the *Phaedo*. The

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1 *Apology* 38A5.

2 Aristotle, *Protrepticus*, fr. 11 Walzer.

3 Cf. Aristophanes, *Clouds* 225 ff.; Plato, *Phaedo* 96a6.

Socrates of the early dialogues seems to prefer the philosophically more neutral ζητεῖν or σκέψασθαι to the Pythagorically flavoured θεωρεῖν.[4]

Like the Sophists, his contemporaries, Socrates' bent was ethical, perhaps even narrowly ethical. His aims as well as theirs were *practical*: knowledge was ultimately for the sake of action and the good life. But while for the Sophists inquiry had an instrumental, almost pragmatic importance, for Socrates it had in itself moral value. Socrates not only inquired *into* human excellence, he saw this same inquiry itself as at least part of the excellence sought. However, Socrates' was not a Romantic quest to be cherished regardless of its results. The dialectical search should eventually lead to the truth, and this truth is independent of the search for it. But this is not to say that the moral value of inquiry is derivative from the truth it leads to. Socrates was convinced that ἀρετή is ἐπιστήμη, and, as Socrates understood it, it cannot be dissociated from the reasons that support it.[5] In his eyes, knowledge was *morally*, and not only epistemically, superior to true but unsupported opinions precisely in that he who has knowledge can give an account of it.

But how can inquiry have so deep a psychological power that it is able to bring about such a transformation of the soul, even to the point that ἀκρασία becomes impossible? What is the concept of the soul that underlies such an intellectualistic view of its improvement?[6]

I have already discussed elsewhere Plato's solution to this Socratic problem.[7] In the present paper I wish to consider in greater detail Socrates' own solution, or at least the solution offered by Plato's Socrates, that Socrates in the dialogues who is still innocent of the doctrine of ideas, of Pythagoreanism

4 Cf. *Phaedo* 58b, where much is made of the word in that context. Cf. L. Brandwood, *A Word Index to Plato* (Leeds 1976), s.v.

5 The "binding of opinions by the fetters of reasoning" in *Meno* 98a8 is probably Platonic, but it is hardly more than a metaphorical description of Socrates' practice in the earlier dialogues.

6 Of course, Socrates had moral convictions, as that doing evil is worse than suffering evil, which, as they stood, could hardly be called intellectualistic. But he thought that the ultimate test of all moral convictions is their capacity to withstand examination. Even the δαιμόνιον σημεῖον, that most irrational of Socratic traits, was put to elenctic scrutiny in *Apology* 21b8ff.

7 See S. Scolnicov, "Reason and Passion in the Platonic Soul", *Dionysius* 2 (1978), 35–49.

and of eschatology,[8] and for whom the soul was nothing more than that by which we are good or bad and which becomes better by knowledge and worse by ignorance.[9]

Socrates seems not to have held any explicit metaphysical doctrine about the soul, though its improvement was his foremost preoccupation. And as in this case what he said is of little help, if we wish to grasp some of his meaning we have to look into what he did. An inspection of Socrates' practices in the so-called "earlier" Platonic dialogues will show that there are three main demands which he makes of his interlocutors: the demand that answers be given out of personal conviction, the demand for consistency and the demand for definitions.

The first demand, that the respondent speak out of commitment for his opinions, means among other things that one is held personally responsible for them, and no opinion is to be maintained solely on trust or authority. Authority in itself is not enough, be it the authority of the rich, the noble, even the authority of the sage, or, a *fortiori*, the authority of the many, in the form of tradition, common sense, or democratic vote.[10] The Socratic elenchus is not an examination of disembodied opinions, but of beliefs which are the interlocutor's own, at least for the time being.

8 After all, this is the Socrates we are essentially left with. There is no reason to assume that just because Xenophon's Socrates is the less interesting he must be the more historical. Xenophon, like Aristophanes and Aristotle, each in his own way, may help direct our attention to aspects of Socrates' biography, personality or doctrines. In the end, the line between Plato and his teacher must be drawn within the Platonic dialogues themselves. But it passes *within* the dialogues, not between them. The venerable division between "early" and "middle" or "late" dialogues has to be handled with care. In some dialogues, such as the *Gorgias* or the *Theaetetus*, Socrates is a highly composite figure. Traits like the distinction of dialectic from rhetoric in the *Gorgias* or the μαιευτική in the *Theaetetus* seem to be genuinely Socratic; but the Pythagorean influence and the interest in eschatology and epistemology are best understood as Platonic. I cannot attempt in the present paper to tell apart Plato's "historical" Socrates from the *Platonic* Socrates. Until I can address this question properly, the criteria offered above must suffice as a rough guide.

9 Cf. *Crito* 47d4, *Protagoras* 312, and J. Burnet, "The Socratic Doctrine of the Soul", *Essays and Addresses* (London 1929), 126–162.

10 Aristotle thought more highly of tradition and common sense. But even for him, they were only starting points.

The second demand, the demand for consistency, means that a man is responsible for the coherence, or at least the consistency, of his various opinions, and he is enjoined to check each and every one of them (but not all of them at once) for its compatibility or otherwise with his other relevant opinions.

The third demand, the demand for definitions, provides Socrates with a powerful logical tool with which to lay bare the inconsistencies in one's body of opinions and, more importantly, in one's body of actions. As we shall see, the demand for definitions is the guarantee of the objective value of the consistency and the conviction sought by Socrates.

It seems that Socrates sought in the words and actions of each and every one of his interlocutors a certain unity, a "harmony", as he put it. This harmony is expressed in the avoidance of contradiction in word and deed, and this is the good for man.[11] But a merely "external" harmony is not sufficient. It is necessary not only that the opinions examined be compatible with each other, but also, perhaps chiefly, that they be *one's own*.

It is clear, however, that the mere fact that I can formulate a certain opinion in words does not make that opinion mine. For what does it mean to say that an opinion is *mine*? Of course, this question cannot be answered by appeal to the established criteria, by which I say this house is mine, or this hand is mine, or this coat is mine, seeing that I have no title of ownership over my opinions, nor are they attached to me as a part of my body, nor do I have over them any claim of possession in the usual sense. Nevertheless, we seem to understand Socrates' satisfaction when someone answers him "according to his own opinion" or "as it seems to him", and so does Meno when he agrees that the boy's answers were indeed "his".[12]

From what has been said up to now about Socrates' demands, it appears that Socrates thought that an opinion becomes "mine" — for opinions can "become" one's own — as opposed to an opinion "of somebody else" which I merely quote, if it fulfils at least two conditions, each of them necessary and both jointly sufficient: (a) I am convinced of its truth; and (b) I can integrate it without contradiction with my other opinions.[13] And conversely, to be "myself" is, to a great extent, to display a certain coherence, or at least a certain consistency, of beliefs earnestly held. (For Socrates, as for Plato, the

11 Cf. *Charmides* 188d, 193d, *Gorgias* 482b.

12 Cf., e.g., *Charmides* 159a10, *Meno* 83d2, 85b8 ff.

13 Cf. *Gorgias* 466e4–7.

basic logical relation is the relation of contradiction — or of lack of contradiction — and not the stronger relation of coherence.[14])

The same is true of one's actions, and of the relation of one's actions to one's opinions. The lack of such consistency in one's actions and beliefs is thought, in extreme cases, to be pathological. And indeed Plato in the *Republic* and Socrates in the *Gorgias* (insofar as the *Gorgias* depicts the "historical" Socrates), both speak of the inability to unify the personality, i.e. the inability to integrate one's actions and opinions, as mental illness.[15]

The idea of a unified personality, which is responsible for one's actions, was, in the fifth century, a novelty. In archaic thought such a unity is not self-evident. Each action, insofar as it is felt as needing explanation, is explained on its own. More often than not, one of the gods or a δαίμων is involved in important actions, although the concomitant responsibility of the agent is not thereby excluded.[16] It is only with Heraclitus, towards the end of the sixth century, that a notion of personal responsibility based upon the unity of the moral agent is evolved. "Character is a man's δαίμων", he says.[17] A man's actions are not to be traced back to a δαίμων or to fate, but to his ἦθος, to the totality of his habits and ways of acting.[18]

14 Cf. S. Scolnicov, *Plato's Method of Hypothesis* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Cambridge 1973) and "Plato's *Phaedo* as an Example of the Method of Hypothesis", *Eshkolot* 7 (1975), 45–65 (in Hebrew).

15 Cf. *Gorgias* 504, *Republic* 609. At least so far, the common ground of the Socratic and the Platonic views of the soul is not much different from, e.g., the view presented in C. Frankenstein, *Roots of the Ego* (Baltimore 1966), ch. 6, esp. p. 66. But the similarities between Socrates (or Plato) and analytic psychology should not be exaggerated.

16 The archaic view of moral responsibility is notoriously complex. Cf., e.g., *Odyssey* I 33 ff. Evil comes to men σφῇσιν ἀτασθαλίῃσιν, but Orestes' killing of Aegisthus is preordained. Cf. W.H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, pp. 50 ff., with G. Vlastos' strictures in *Plato's Universe* (Seattle 1975), 13 ff. At any rate, the innovation is not so much in the concept of moral responsibility as such as in the attribution of moral responsibility to a *unified personality*. But, of course, this is not to say that there is in archaic thought no characterization: Achilles *is* irascible and Odysseus *is* cunning. What is lacking is the recognition of character as the *locus* of moral responsibility.

17 B119 DK.

18 But the Greek concept of ἦθος does not include the element of will, which is implied in the English "character". Indeed, whether or not the Greeks had any

For Socrates, the whole of one's actions *and* one's cognition becomes the focus of moral interest. By stressing the intellectual element in the unified personality, Socrates picks up the *conscious* deliberation as the morally relevant aspect of the action. The moral agent is no longer considered merely as a unity of habits and ways of acting, but chiefly as a unity of thought and of action following upon thought.

Socrates' chief philosophical and educational interest seems to have been not in the finished act, but in the reasoned consideration, in the impact of thought upon action. Greek tragedy had already emphasized, shortly before Socrates, the intellectual element in human action, pitching conflicting points of view against each other on stage. But apparently it was Socrates who strictly made the rightness of one's action dependent upon deliberation based on knowledge.[19] For him, intellectual activity was for the sake of right action, but the rightness of the action was not independent of the intellectual activity involved in it. The distinction is a fine one, and Xenophon, for one, does not always seem to grasp it. In this respect, the comparison of *Memorabilia* 1.4.18–19 with the conclusion of the *Euthyphro* is rewarding.

By the improvement of one's soul, then, Socrates meant making one's self better by means of constant examination of one's opinions and of the opinions of others. But the value of self-examination is not in the rightness of the moral opinions which, so one hopes, are achieved by such a process. Right but disjointed beliefs about courage or justice do the soul little good. It is their integration into a consistent pattern of reasoning and justification that constitutes the soul's well-being.[20] Such an integration can only be arrived at by

concept comparable to our *will* with its voluntaristic implications, such a concept did not play any significant philosophical role in classical times.

19 See further B. Snell, *The Discovery of Mind*, tr. T.G. Rosenmeyer (New York 1960), ch. 8.

20 T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford 1977), 91, takes the value of self-examination to lie in the importance of the correct beliefs about morals which are arrived at in that process. But, intrinsic considerations apart, the passages he adduces do not support his contention. I should take *Apology* 38a to be squarely against his view. *Gorgias* 457a refers indeed to reaching right opinion "about whatever the discussion happens to be"; however, this has to do with the general case of knowledge (or right opinion) being good in itself, not with correct moral beliefs. *Charmides* 157a and *Gorgias* 500c either are inconclusive or prove the contrary of what Irwin needs.

means of conscious reflection on one's beliefs. This reflection, by creating the integration of one's system of opinions (and actions), also creates, in itself, the integration of the soul.

It is true that the opinions that Socrates set out to examine were, on the whole, opinions about morals, or more exactly, about matters of conduct. But Socrates' momentous innovation seems to have been the emphasis he put on the moral importance of duly justified deliberation, as opposed to the value of right moral opinions not necessarily supported by reasoning. Of course, sound moral arguments imply true moral opinions; but not conversely. And Socrates obviously recognized that a valid argument is at least a step towards a true and reasoned conclusion, whereas an unsupported opinion, no matter if true or false, is an obstacle in the way of intellectual and moral improvement. This is one of the reasons why so many beliefs are overthrown by Socrates in one dialogue, which turn out in another to be not so far from the truth. Disconnected from their reasons, they have no great value.

Socrates saw himself as an educator. But, unlike the Sophists, he did not consider himself a teacher: he professed to know nothing, hence to teach nothing.[21] The mission on which he believed Apollo had sent him was to examine each and every moral opinion, his fellow-citizens' as well as his own.[22] But Socrates did not examine his fellows' opinions for truth or falsity. This, in fact, he could not do, since in order to do it he would have needed a criterion for distinguishing true opinions from false ones. And it was just such a criterion which he claimed not to possess, save perhaps in some matters of small consequence, as when he found that artisans were knowledgeable about their crafts.[23]

Instead, Socrates looked for inconsistencies. His quest took two forms: on the one hand, he searched for possible contradictions in one's opinions, including the conclusions one is prepared to admit that follow from them, and between these and one's body of beliefs; on the other hand, he demanded a general and abstract character (*eidos*) which would justify one's use of the same word ("piety", "courage", "friendship") to describe apparently dissimilar

21 See, e.g., *Apology* 19d f., where Socrates contrasts himself to Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias and a lesser Sophist, and disclaims having any knowledge or teaching anything. See also *Charmides* 165b, *Protagoras* 348c, 361d, *Gorgias* 506a.

22 The god does to Socates what Socrates does to others: he presents him with a paradox which arouses Socrates to inquiry.

23 *Apology* 22d.

situations as well as one's refusal to use the same word in cases which *prima facie* look pretty much alike.

However, the Socratic procedure should not be construed as pure conceptual analysis.[24] Even when Socrates does appeal to linguistic intuitions (and he does it quite often), he implies in them moral judgments too. Therefore — and no doubt also, but not exclusively, because of the range of concepts involved — Socrates' inquiries would have direct moral implications. How far this is true also of conceptual analysis is no longer a burning question. In any case, Socrates' inquiries had a much more obvious stake in morals than is sometimes conceded.

"Socrates asked, but never answered", said Aristotle: "for he professed not to know".[25] In the typical case, Socrates engaged his interlocutor in elenchus. By counter-examples, or by more elaborate indirect refutations, Socrates would force upon the respondent the realization of his ignorance. Admission of ignorance is a prerequisite to learning. But it is painful, and neither easily nor, in most cases, willingly arrived at. Thus, the elenchus is not only a logical and intellectual process, but also, if successful, a deep emotional transformation.[26]

Rather than a declaration of dogmatic scepticism, a blanket denial of the possibility of knowledge, Socrates' profession of ignorance was a radical openness to constant re-examination. No question was ever definitively closed, no opinion beyond doubt. If agreement was reached a while ago on a formulation which seemed then satisfactory, even such an agreement was not enough: for the conclusion to hold its value "it must seem to us right not only

24 Cf. Irwin, pp. 63–4. But I cannot see that "a Socratic definition will not analyse the concept inarticulatedly grasped by the ordinary speaker". It is true that the concept is modified in the course of the analysis and parts of it are rejected altogether. Nonetheless, the starting point is still the more or less confused grasp of the educated man in the street.

25 *Sophistici Elenchi* 183b7. Cf. also Plato, *Theaetetus* 150c and *Republic* 337a.

26 On the logical aspects of the Socratic elenchus, see R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford 1953), ch. 2 and 3, repr. in G. Vlastos, *The Philosophy of Socrates* (New York 1971), 78–109. The emotional aspects of elenchus have not been stressed nearly enough. See, however, Adkins, pp. 34, 266 ff., who also calls attention to the Homeric meaning of ἔλεγχος as shame at one's failure in word or deed. See further my "Three Aspects of Plato's Philosophy of Learning and of Instruction", *Paideia* 5 (1976), 50–62.

a while ago, but also now and in the future".[27] And although, in most of the cases, it is Socrates who conducts the conversation, his own opinions are also examined. For if his opponent is in the right, Socrates must be in the wrong.

There is, indeed, in the Socratic elenchus a marked Protagorean element. It was Protagoras who insisted on personal conviction as an inalienable criterion of truth. If the wind blows cold to me, it *is* cold to me, and I alone am entitled to judge its being so or not so, insofar as my own sensations are concerned. For Protagoras, this meant that the very being of things is always referred to a percipient (but not totally *dependent* on him); to be (so-and-so) is to be (so-and-so) for someone. But this is no Berkeleyan idealism: things are not ideas in some mind: they *are*, but they are for each man what they seem to him. Protagoras is more radical than Bishop Berkeley: man is the measure of all things and there is no God whose mind can serve as the common measure of all ideas. The wind is cold (to me) and warm (to you), and this is all there is to it, with no possible compromise. Personal conviction, through sensation, intuition or persuasion, is the ultimate judge, and there is no appeal against its verdicts. The assent to, or the dissent from, any proposition rests ultimately on private grounds. The fact that the wind is cold to me (or warm to you) cannot be reduced to anything more basic. Thus Protagoras, at least as Plato understood him.

In this context, it is instructive to consider the central role played by contradiction in the thought of Socrates and of Protagoras, and their conflicting views on it. For Protagoras,[28] contradiction is an impossibility. Of course, "*p* is true" and "*p* is false" are contradictories. But Protagoras would consider these statements as elliptic statements which should be completed by a reference to the persons for whom *p* is true or false. And then, indeed, "*p* is true for Jack "and *p* is false for Jill" or, in a more extreme formulation, "*p* is true for Jack at time t_1" and "*p* is false for Jack at time t_2", are not contradictories. By contrast, for Socrates, contradiction is the heart of the elenchus. Not only is contradiction possible for the same person over time, but it should be avoided at all times. Moreover, even inter-personal agreement is to be sought, although such agreement is not always within reach, nor, when reached, is it a guarantee of truth.

Such inter-personal agreement, if it is genuine and not a matter of shallow courtesy or shame, is, *prima facie*, an index of the success of the inquiry into

27 *Meno* 89c.

28 Or for his followers. Cf. 80A19 DK.

truth. Socrates stressed time and again that he wants to secure only his interlocutor's admission to the proposition under investigation. He will not accept appeals to authority, he will not count heads, he will always prefer a response which has his interlocutor's conviction, even if it cannot withstand criticism, to one that is probably sound, but uncritically borrowed. Nevertheless, Socrates was prepared to consider opinions quoted from poets, dreams, prophecies and the like, as long as one was prepared to examine them in earnest instead of relying on the authority of the source.

On the other hand, Socrates did not think that real agreement between the partners in the dialogue could arise out of rhetorical persuasion alone. Socrates expected his interlocutor to agree or to disagree with him on the strength of his own grasp of the state of affairs. It is true that quite often he would mislead his interlocutor and play on him eristic tricks. But, at least as Plato saw it, Socrates' purpose seems to have been for the most part[29] therapeutic: to entangle his interlocutor in contradictions in order to force upon him the recognition that his opinions are confused and only partly justified, if at all.

Socrates believed, unlike Protagoras, that there is a real difference between true and false, and between sound and unsound. He further believed that this difference becomes clear to one's mind on careful inspection of the propositions and arguments involved, if only one could be relieved of one's confused or irrelevant notions. The aim of the elenchus is to free a person from the opinions which are not "his" in the strict, Socratic sense, i.e., those opinions uncritically accepted and therefore, in the typical case, not integrated, or straighforwardly incompatible, with one another. And once such a liberation has been achieved, so Socrates seems to have believed, the person will reach, of himself and almost against his will, that harmony which Socrates described to Polus and to Callicles.

However, mere coherence, let alone consistency, is not sufficient guarantee of objective validity. That guarantee of the objective validity of personal and inter-personal consistency, Socrates found in the εἶδος and in definition. It is the εἶδος that brings together the different objects of actions and presents them as variations of the same essential configuration. The definition circumscribes the εἶδος, being applicable to all relevant cases and only to the relevant cases. It guarantees the consistency of the use of the common name in

29 But he seems not to be totally innocent of φιλονεικία, even in Plato's eyes. Cf., e.g., *Gorgias* 515b.

all these cases and only in these cases, because it is a real definition, answering to the τί ἐστι question, and not a nominal definition which is merely a matter of convenience. Such a position does not imply, of course, a doctrine of ideas like that in the *Phaedo* and in the *Republic*, but only a demand for a real object of definition, irrespective of its ontological status *vis-à-vis* the individual. Hence, Socrates' demand for definitions complements his demands for personal conviction and for consistency.

Thus, the Socratic elenchus, certainly in intention but perhaps also in practice, was not wholly negative. There was in it also that aspect which Socrates called μαιευτική, midwifery.[30] Ideally, the Socratic elenchus should clear the way for the development of true personal knowledge, stimulate that knowledge and build through it the intellectual and moral personality. But it is arguably no coincidence that the best examples of maieutical success are the geometry lesson in the *Meno*, the propaedeutical interludes with Clinias in the *Euthydemus* and the conversation with Theaetetus in the dialogue called after him — none of them in the early dialogues, which presumably portray a Socrates with a minimum of Platonic re-interpretation. As a rule, Socrates' attempts are not crowned with such success. In fact, the great majority of them end in failure — at least in Plato's view; Xenophon gives us a sunnier picture of Socrates' endeavours.

Nevertheless, Socrates can do no more than bring his partners to the brink of the recognition of reasoned truth. Personal conviction remains an indispensable — but by no means sufficient — requisite of knowledge. It is the great irony of the Socratic dialogue that, even when Socrates holds an opinion which he believes to be true and well-supported (and sometimes it can be very difficult to decide whether this is the case) — even then he can only point at it indirectly, by way of negation.

But Socrates' irony was not a dissembling mask which he could remove at will. Behind it there was no secret to be revealed only to the initiated who successfully underwent the trial of the elenchus. Because knowledge can only be attained by personal effort, Socrates could not "hand it down", but only hint at it by way of understatement.[31] And when his maieutic efforts failed, of

30 The joke in Aristophanes, *Clouds* 137, falls flat if *Theaetetus* 149 ff. is wholly Plato's invention. For the controversy on the historicity of Socrates' μαιευτική, see W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. III (Cambridge 1969), 397 n. 1 and 444–5 n. 3.

31 For irony as understatement, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1108a23.

necessity he had to let his interlocutor go — even if this meant, by Socrates' own standards, his moral perdition.

If Socrates' failure was, as Vlastos holds against him,[32] a failure of love, still Socrates was inexorably led to it by his own philosophy. There is in this philosophy only one way to the salvation of the soul: the constant striving for consistency in one's actions and beliefs, to be achieved by personal effort. This is a long and hard way, and Socrates could point to it, but he could offer no shortcuts, for there are none. Right opinions in themselves do not add up to a unified and harmonic personality. Such a personality can arise only in the process of self-examination and cannot be separated from it.

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32 Cf. G. Vlastos, "The Paradox of Socrates", in *The Philosophy of Socrates*, pp. 16–17.