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Socrates (Historical)

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SOCRATES (HISTORICAL)

William Prior

(I) LIFE

Socrates, one of the greatest philosophers of the ancient Greek world and for several ancient schools an exemplar of what the philosophical life should be, was an Athenian citizen born in 469 BCE. He was the son of Sophroniscus, a stonecutter, and Phaenarete, a midwife; and he was married to Xanthippe, with whom he had three children (*Phaedo* 60a, 116a–b). His adult years coincided with the ‘Golden Age’ of Athens, and he was present during Athens’ decline and fall during the Peloponnesian War (431–404). Socrates was a public figure during at least part of this

period: the comic playwright Aristophanes made him the target of his play the *Clouds* (423; later revised). His odd physical appearance and his way of life made him a ready target for the comic poets. Socrates served as a hoplite (a heavy-armed infantryman) in at least three of Athens' military campaigns in the Peloponnesian War (at Potidea in 429 BCE, Delium in 424 BCE and Amphipolis in 422 BCE). Plato notes his courage during the retreat from Delium (*Laches* 181b; *Symposium* 221a).

(II) PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVITY

Socrates seems to have spent most of his time in the agora, the public market place, discussing philosophy. He denied that he was a teacher, and he did not accept pay as did numerous other thinkers of the day, but he did attract a coterie of young followers, most importantly including Xenophon and Plato. Several of these followers made contributions to the Socratic literature, dialogues written with Socrates as the central figure (Kahn 1996:1–35). Except for the writings of Xenophon and Plato, however, only fragments of their works remain.

(III) TRIAL

In 399 Socrates was brought to trial on charges of impiety (lit. 'not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things' *Apology* 24b) and corrupting the youth. He was found guilty, sentenced to death and executed by hemlock poisoning. Several reasons for his conviction and execution have been offered. At least one scholar (Burnyeat 1998) has argued that he was guilty of impiety. Others note his arrogance before the jury, or his relationship with antidemocratic elements within Athens (in

particular, Plato's uncle Critias and his cousin Charmides). Even more important may have been his association with Alcibiades, a highly controversial Athenian political leader, though a democratic one. Alcibiades and Socrates had an erotic relationship, comically described by Alcibiades in Plato's *Smp.* (217a–19d; see also, *Alcibiades I* and *Protagoras*). Socrates' status as the leading intellectual in Athens and as a central figure in the intellectual revolution that took place in the latter half of the fifth century doubtlessly aroused antipathy among many jurors.

(IV) THE SOCRATIC PROBLEM

The above information is generally accepted concerning Socrates. He examined others in public as well as in private and he discussed ethics. The Socratic dialogue form presumably reflects the dialectical activity of the historical Socrates. Beyond this, it is difficult to be certain what, if anything, Socrates believed or taught or what kind of person he was. The problem is that we have four early sources: Aristophanes, Aristotle, Plato and Xenophon, and they do not always agree. Three of these sources were contemporaries of Socrates who knew him personally (Aristophanes, Plato and Xenophon); the other was a member of Plato's Academy who had access to eye witness accounts of Socrates (Aristotle). The discrepancies among our sources have produced the 'Socratic Problem', and its persistence in the literature may be a sign that it is insoluble.

The problem arises from the fact that Socrates wrote nothing, so that all of our earliest accounts of his views come from the sources mentioned above. Though there are areas of overlap in these sources' portraits of Socrates, there are important differences. Controversially (cf. Dover 1968),

Aristophanes portrays Socrates in the *Clouds* as a philosophical mountebank, a purveyor of doctrines in all areas, who dispenses these doctrines from a school called the *phrontisterion* (think tank). Aristophanes' Socrates combines features of a philosopher of nature with that of a sophist. It is difficult for us to know, at this distance from the *Clouds*, how serious this portrait is to be taken (though Socrates takes it seriously enough to respond to it in the *Ap.* 18a–d, 19c–d).

For Plato and Xenophon, however, Socrates is a revered figure with the highest ethical standards. They differ to some degree on what these standards entail. For Plato, Socrates rejects the *lex talionis*, the repayment of 'an eye for an eye', whereas Xenophon's Socrates does not (Vlastos 1991a:179–99). Plato's Socrates has a developed theory of virtue, equating virtue with knowledge and denying the possibility of moral weakness; Xenophon's Socrates is more of a homespun moral philosopher offering practical, moral advice. Aristotle does not offer a complete portrait of Socrates, but he offers interesting bits of information, many of which seem to confirm the portraits in the Platonic dialogues.

Plato's portrait of Socrates has proved to be the most compelling for most contemporary scholars. Even if we confine ourselves to the Platonic portrait of Socrates, however, it is difficult, if not impossible to form a single coherent picture of his views. Socrates in the *Ap.* (23a–b) professes scepticism about the existence of knowledge in humans. In the *Theaetetus* (149a–51d) Plato portrays Socrates as a midwife who, though barren himself, elicits philosophical truths from his interlocutors. For Alcibiades in the *Smp.* (221d–2a), Socrates' barrenness is only an ironic mask for philosophical riches hidden within. Numerous scholars have seen in those

riches philosophical doctrines in the area of ethics. Other scholars (including Penner 1992) have attributed to Plato's Socrates a theory of the nature of the soul. Still others have attributed to him an early version of the theory of forms (Allen 1971; Prior 2004).

Socrates remains a mystery. His influence on other philosophers, however, is not. He was more influential on Plato than any other philosopher, as is shown by the fact that he is present in all the dialogues save the very late *Laws* and is the leading speaker in most of them. We may not know precisely where the historical Socrates ends and the Platonic Socrates begins, but we can detect his influence on Plato throughout most of the corpus.