

THE USES AND DISADVANTAGES OF SOCRATES*

Abstract. Socrates was and is one of the most influential figures in the history of Western philosophy. Yet it remains an open question just what the real, historical Socrates stood for: he wrote nothing, and none even of our most ancient sources can probably be relied upon to give us anything like an accurate picture of his ideas and methods. As if to fill the gap, successive individual philosophers and philosophical traditions—from Plato to Nietzsche and beyond—construct a range of different Socrateses, to serve either as a model for emulation or as a target of attack. Nevertheless, the single most vivid picture of Socrates is that provided by Plato, who was his immediate philosophical successor, and who gave the character ‘Socrates’ the leading role in the majority of his fictional dialogues. What is *this* Socrates like, and does he have any use for us?

When I was planning this lecture, I was asked if I needed any audio-visual aids, and I said no. But I decided I would bring along one visual aid: a statuette of Socrates, which stands in my study as it used to stand on the desk of J. B. Skemp, a distinguished holder of the Chair of Greek in which I now sit. (Enoch Powell was, I understand, almost another of my predecessors: appointed to the Chair around the outbreak of the war, he joined the army instead.) The statue is a modern reproduction of a Roman copy of a Hellenistic original, itself partly deriving from a massive literary and philosophical tradition which grew up around Socrates after his execution in Athens in 399 BCE. This tradition, the best known examples of which are in the Platonic corpus, consistently describes him as extraordinarily ugly: squat, snub-nosed, with thick lips and protruding eyes—resembling the satyrs of the dramatic stage. His image actually becomes merged with a typical comic or satyric mask: he was evidently a *natural* comic figure, and a character called Socrates appeared regularly in Attic comedy.

But the fact that he did so is also a reflection of his fame, or notoriety. In the latter parts of the fifth century and the early fourth century, everyone would evidently have known who he was, and this is quite a striking fact, given the size of Athens (a city with a total population of perhaps more than a quarter of a million), and given also that for the most part he appears resolutely to have taken no part in political life, except insofar as would have been necessary for any Athenian citizen. The explanation of his notoriety

* This is the oral text of Christopher Rowe’s inaugural as Professor of Greek at the University of Durham, as delivered on 3rd February 1999, with minimal modification/supplementation. The issues considered seemed sufficiently close to those of historiography to justify publication on *Histos*, especially given our publication of T. K. Johansen’s ‘Truth, Lies and History in Plato’s *Timaeus-Critias*’, *Histos* 2 (1998) 192–215.

probably lies in the combination of his extraordinary appearance and high public visibility: to judge from the stories about him, he was always out and about, in the public spaces of the agora, the streets and the gymnasia, talking to anyone he came across. *Talking* was his favourite activity. He seems to have become emblematic of that troublesome class of people so rare in this country but quite well-known in other parts of Europe and the world: intellectuals; and that no doubt has something to do with the fact that he ended his life tried, condemned, and executed, in a democratic court, on a charge of impiety.

I say ‘that probably had something to do with it’: the truth is that we do not really know exactly what lay behind his trial and execution. It might have started with a personal dispute, but that would not explain why 501 judges voted by a majority to convict him, and by a larger majority to inflict the sentence of death (though the latter point by itself is easier to understand, if the judges had to choose between sentencing him to death and the alternative Plato has him propose: that he should be fed and watered at public expense for the rest of his life). Evidently the current of opinion was against him. This might well have been for political reasons; he was widely associated with anti-democratic and other dubious elements in Athenian society (one or two of them members of Plato’s family), and was not averse to questioning democratic institutions, even if the evidence—for what it is worth—is that he would have thought any sort of political ideology equally suspect. Or else (or additionally) the charge of impiety really was a serious one. Only last week a visiting speaker in my Department was talking about a fairly recently discovered, and still unpublished, papyrus (the oldest Greek manuscript we have), which he interpreted as documenting a rationalist approach to religion with possible connections with our man here.¹

Yet that is all fairly speculative. In the end, the amount that we actually know, with any degree of certainty, about the real Socrates could be written on a postcard. He actually wrote nothing himself (probably he talked too much to have time for it), but of course that’s not an explanation in itself; we probably know just as little about Plato, and he spent most of his life writing away—he just didn’t write anything, or anything much, about himself. The real explanation of our ignorance about Socrates is that there was nothing like a tradition of what one might loosely call ‘scientific’ biography in the Greek world: no tradition of preserving the ‘real truth’ about a person, what he or she actually said and did. Or rather: if all biography is a matter of selection and interpretation, modern biography at least gestures in the direction of trying to decide what interpretation the evidence will bear; whereas

¹ Richard Janko, ‘New light on the religion of Socrates’, *Classical Association* meeting, Durham, 29th January 1999.

ancient ‘biography’ (and the genre hardly existed at all at the beginning of the fourth century) tended to miss out the evidence and go straight for interpretation. The question is what this person’s life means, or stands for, for the author and his audience, and writing about past figures was usually the business of the moralist or the ideologue.

This tendency was always likely to be especially marked in the case of a figure like Socrates. He was from the beginning a *controversial* figure—after all, he was executed, by popular vote (no doubt the judges at his trial would have been more or less representative of popular opinion as a whole). As it happens, the anti-Socratic tendency in Socratic literature has mostly perished (a modern example is I. F. Stone’s well-known book on *The Trial of Socrates*, whose main thesis is essentially that the Athenians had a point). One exception is Aristophanes, whose lampooning of Socrates is actually cited by Plato as part of *his* explanation of why Socrates found himself in court (this in the *Apology*, or *Defence of Socrates*: a largely fictional account of what Socrates said at the trial: some people still persist in thinking it factual, but Michael Stokes, my immediate predecessor in the Chair of Greek, has in my view provided conclusive arguments against them). For the rest, we have what is essentially the *intellectuals’ own* response to Socrates’ life and death, which is almost exclusively positive. By ‘intellectuals’, I mean philosophers, thinkers, and the generally educated and cultured: Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, and a host of other people who took part, along with Plato and Xenophon, in what became a virtual industry in Socratic literature. Only one intellectual grouping tended to stick with the opposition: the orators and rhetoricians, like Isocrates, who tended by the nature of their trade to have feet in both camps, and tried (with considerable success) to offer a form of culture not dominated by the Platonic philosophical paradigm, even going so far as to label it ‘philosophy’.

By and large, it is the positive paradigm of Socrates that predominates now, in the twentieth century. We tend to identify him with painstaking inquiry, the habit of questioning, and a tendency to be somewhat sparing with his own opinions. Modern writers talk in this sense, rather loosely, of ‘Socratic inquiry’, identifying ‘Socrates’ with the sober search for an elusive truth. A not very distinguished example of this is a recent book called *The Tenure of Phil Wisdom* by Craig Clifford (Lanham, Md., 1995), consisting of a series of dialogues in which the eponymous Phil, i.e. Socrates, persists in asking awkward questions, particularly ones that embarrass university administrators in what Phil thinks of as their daily business of obstructing genuine intellectual activity; Phil knows nothing except that he and others like him should be allowed to go on asking their questions. The basis for this image of Socrates is a selective reading of Plato’s dialogues, which treats some of them—that is, the ones that reach no conclusions—as genuinely ‘Socratic’,

and the others as exemplifying Plato's worrying tendency actually to put forward positive ideas. This way of reading Plato is in fact fairly standard nowadays, and it significantly chimes in with a particular view of philosophy summed up not so long ago by a remark of Robert Wardy's, to the effect that there were plenty of beautiful *arguments* in philosophy, but precious few beautiful *conclusions*. Philosophy, from this point of view, is essentially a matter of looking for things, not of finding them [(there is a possible parallel with archaeology here which I shall resist the temptation to explore)]. And this idea is nicely summed up by the famous *mot* Plato puts into Socrates' mouth in the *Apology*: 'the unexamined life is unliveable for a human being'. So the moral is: it's all in the journey, and we shouldn't expect any positive results.

I shall go on to suggest that this is an extraordinarily, and unnecessarily, limited, picture of what goes on even in the so-called 'Socratic' dialogues, though it has its ancient antecedents. But it illustrates the way we go on using 'Socrates' as a convenient model, or paradigm, for what we want to believe anyway. Here is another example, this time from a writer and thinker hostile to Socrates. A couple of years ago Edward de Bono, the champion of 'lateral thinking', contributed a discussion piece to the *The Guardian*, entitled 'Away with the Gang of Three'. The piece had the byline 'We spend far too much time looking backward in our thinking. Blame the Renaissance and the ancient Greeks, argues Edward de Bono, who has plans to lead us into a truly intelligent new century'. Part of what he said was this:

'First of the Gang [of three] was Socrates, who was mostly concerned with proving things wrong ... Socrates' questions were not exploratory questions, but confirmatory questions in which the listener was merely invited to agree. —Then we have Plato, who was an arrogant Athenian authoritarian. He was a fascist whose design for a modern state, *The Republic*, became the official doctrine of the Nazi party. —Finally there was Aristotle, with his word-based inclusion/exclusion logic. Aristotle believed that men had more teeth than women. Although he was married twice, he never actually counted the teeth of either wife ...' [my clipping from the issue with de Bono's piece unfortunately lacks a date, but the text is as quoted].

I think, in fact (a joke I have used before), that Aristotle may have married twice, if he did, just in order to count his *second* wife's teeth. But let's leave Aristotle out of it. Here we have a take on Socrates which is clearly a relative of the positive one I just described: Socrates wasn't as bad as Plato (he at least wasn't a Fascist), but actually he wasn't genuinely concerned with exploring things at all.

This too is based on the distinction between ‘Socratic’ and non-Socratic dialogues of Plato; only now the claim is that other characters in the ‘Socratic’ dialogues only ever say ‘yes, Socrates’, and ‘no, Socrates’. This is a widely held belief among those who haven’t read Plato recently, and the only thing that can be said in favour of it is that of course the writer, Plato, is likely to know everything in advance. Presumably what we are supposed to do, and as generous readers will do, is to imagine the conversations as if they were real exchanges between real individuals, who can at best only see through to the end of a particular argument, and have no way of knowing which way it will go next. Edward de Bono just thinks that Socrates (and Plato, and Aristotle) are not thinking in the right way; so Socrates’ questions could not have been genuinely exploratory; so they were not.

In general, people nowadays feel safer with Socrates, the master of the ignorant: ‘I know nothing (he says in the *Apology*), and if I really *am* the wisest person in the world, as the Delphic oracle suggests, then it is just because of the difference between me and others—they all think they know things, whereas I am aware that I know nothing’. So, apparently free of any commitments, and free of responsibility, he can spend his time in pure, unshackled, neutral, impersonal inquiry; and is this not what the modern academy, and not just academic philosophy, is supposed to be about altogether?

In a moment, I mean to put some flesh on the bones of my earlier suggestion that this picture of the Platonic Socrates (which is what, at bottom, it is) is seriously incomplete. But before I do that, I want to put Plato’s Socrates in perspective. Whatever Plato makes of Socrates, it is what *he* makes of Socrates. It comes with no built-in guarantee of its historical veracity. It has frequently been said that at least we could expect Plato to get Socrates right *as a philosopher*; after all, was he not an outstanding philosopher himself? There are, however, at least two problems with this. First, Plato continues using Socrates as his main character even after he has stopped writing supposedly ‘Socratic’ dialogues; if so, even on the standard interpretation he has no compunction about having Socrates say things that he never said, and—so these same interpreters must hope—would never have dreamed of saying (what about all those ideas in the *Republic*, for example, about the use of propaganda, selective breeding, mating festivals, and so on?). Why, then, should we suppose that what he has Socrates say in the ‘Socratic’ dialogues is itself genuinely Socratic? (I shall later on mention at least a possible, if also partial, answer to this question.) The second problem about supposing that Plato gives us an accurate record of Socratic thinking and methods is that other philosophers around at the time, or shortly after, give accounts of Socrates which, while in many respects they overlap with Plato’s, are also often different in many crucial respects.

It is staggering to see just how influential Socrates was in the centuries following his death. With few exceptions, the Hellenistic (i.e., broadly, post-Aristotelian) schools of philosophy tended to take Socrates as their founding figure. Yet their ‘Socrates’, even when partly culled from the pages of Plato—as often seems likely—is still fundamentally different from Plato’s. Here is the judgement of one recent writer, describing Epictetus, the first- to second-century CE Stoic:

‘In the *Discourses* of Epictetus, Socrates is *the* philosopher, a figure canonised more regularly and with more attention to detail than any other Stoic saint, whether Diogenes, Antisthenes, or Zeno. The reader who knew the history of Greek philosophy only from Epictetus would form the impression that Stoicism was the philosophy of Socrates ... [But, unlike Plato’s Socrates, *this* Socrates is no ironist, no sharp talker, no gadfly or sting-ray [two familiar images from Plato: the one from the *Apology*, the other from the *Meno*], no lover or symposiast [as in Plato’s *Symposium*] or philosopher chiefly characterised by self-confessed ignorance ... If, as I think certain, Epictetus has reflected hard on the Socratic writings of Plato and Xenophon, what he culls from those writings is an ideal of the philosophical life, *as he himself conceives of it*: “Now that Socrates is dead, the memory of what he did or said when alive is no less or even more beneficial to men” (*Diss.* 4.1.169)’ [A. A. Long, ‘Socrates in Hellenistic Philosophy’, *Classical Quarterly* n.s. 38 (1988) 150-1].

Of course, insofar as Epictetus was drawing on Plato, this still leaves it as a possibility that Plato’s picture is the authentic one. However we know that the early Stoics also had other sources available to them; Plato was not the only follower of Socrates, and people like Antisthenes, a figure who forms part of the background to the Cynic tradition, in turn implicated in the development of Stoicism, will have known Socrates at least as well as, if not better than, Plato himself. The sober historical judgement can only be, I think, that Plato’s Socrates—that is, even in the ‘Socratic’, early dialogues—is Plato’s construct, and not just in the sense that any picture we may have of anyone, even our nearest and dearest, is inevitably constructed. Plato is himself likely to have been in the same game as Epictetus, putting ‘an ideal of the philosophical life, *as he himself conceives of it*’. No doubt he would have claimed that what he presented was the genuine article; but he will deliberately have chosen at least which aspects of Socrates to emphasize or embellish, which to play down, and perhaps even which to invent altogether; and there is in any case no dispute that there are several different Socrateses, or perspectives on Socrates, that inhabit the Platonic corpus.

Here is one, the Socrates of the *Phaedo*, seen through the eyes of a visitor to the Metropolitan Museum and David's painting of the death of Socrates:

'There sits the unshackled Socrates, eternally poised on the brink of death. While one hand reaches for the cup [of hemlock] the other confidently points heavenward; the light pours endlessly over his straight, resolute figure. His friends, bowed and bent, cover faces from their loss, raise hands of despair, weep out forever their inaudible grief. In the dark distance Xanthippe makes one last gesture of farewell ...'

This description is taken from Paul Gooch's book on *Jesus and Socrates*, a parallel many find irresistible (it goes back at least to Erasmus). This tragic vision of Socrates, which Plato himself encourages in the *Phaedo*, can be combined with the story of Socrates, martyred by democracy (which is actually not Platonic):

'Socrates and Athenian democracy [I quote from an essay of M. I. Finley's, on 'Socrates and Athens'] are both dead, but his trial remains alive as a great myth, and like all myths, it is believed—by those who believe it—to exemplify a universal truth. Here is the proof, it is said, of the tyranny of the majority, of the trampling of the voice of reason and individual conscience by mass rule, of the common man's hatred of the man of genius ...'

Yet at the same time the *Phaedo* offers us powerful arguments for not taking Socrates' death as a tragedy at all. This aspect of the dialogue David, of course, misses entirely, and in that sense can be said to misread it altogether. That would be too hard: what he represents is what the ordinary reader is likely to feel, or rather, what those present in the final moments actually feel (according to the dialogue). What is more, Plato himself is careful to let us see that side of it—even while indicating that it is not

Socrates' own perspective (Socrates jokingly refers to himself as in one respect like a figure in a tragedy). There is no sense of strain between this picture, i.e. the one David recreates, and the one that we find in the *Symposium*, which plays on Socrates' comic, and satyric, aspect: I think here of Alcibiades' portrait of Socrates as lover, an erotic, even apparently lewd, figure (satyrs, in plays and on vases, are not only Socratically ugly, but suffer from permanent erections: Socratic eroticism, of course, is found to be rather more refined, and actually excludes physical contact).

So what should we do in the face of all of this? Should we just conclude that Socrates is, in the end, just a convenient vehicle for our own beliefs and convictions, or (as perhaps in Plato's case) as part of a rhetoric designed to

change our beliefs? In short, does Socrates have any real *use* for us? Couldn't we use someone else just as well? He can be a model for emulation, or an example of something to avoid, as he is for de Bono, and as he might be for a feminist: 'typical man', one might say (one has said), because of his treatment of his wife (one account says he was a bigamist, and there was evidently a comic opera on that theme put on in 1680: this information I cull from an essay by Paddy Fitzpatrick of this University, in a book edited by my Chairman, Barry Gower, and Michael Stokes [*Socratic Questions*, London 1992]). But there are plenty of other examples, unfortunately, that would do just as well as Socrates, perhaps even better—though admittedly his fame, and the fact that he's used as a model in so many other respects, *is* likely to make him an effective choice.

One response is to say that Socrates just is a set of fictions, to be used as *we* wish; and that is actually the limit of his usefulness. That is the position of Sarah Kofman, author of a book originally published in French ten years ago, but now translated into English under the title *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher* [London 1998]:

'With Socrates, we cannot escape from fiction. Not only because, by and large, there are no "facts". Generally speaking, any reading of any philosopher will be a symptomatic interpretation of the types of forces that lay claim to the work ...'

All, then, that we can do is to write 'Socratic novels' (most of the book is about such novels as written by Hegel, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard):

'It has been all the easier, and all the more necessary, to make a philosophical novel out of Socrates because he himself, as we know, wrote nothing at all. At least that is what we believe, although the matter is perhaps not as simple as we think: is there not a letter attributed to Plato declaring that some if not all of the texts signed by him were written by Socrates? ...'

(By combining this point with a thirteenth-century illustration of Socrates writing—actually telling Plato's fortune—with Plato standing behind him, Derrida was able to derive a great deal of not so innocent amusement for himself, as is Kofman: just who is dictating to whom?)

'... The Socratic novel [Kofman continues] ... begins in Socrates' own lifetime: each of the "disciples" heard Socrates' "lesson" in his own way, from his own perspective ... [Then, three pages later:] [t]he best-known readings of Socrates [by which Kofman means those of Hegel, Nietzsche

and Kierkegaard] ... have all attempted to answer these questions, to bring Socrates under control by forging, each in its own way, one or several Socrates(es) in their own image(s). Despite their best efforts at appropriation, they all more or less acknowledge that Socrates eludes all conventional categories; he resists all mastery, and this is where his own mastery lies. Plato's *Symposium* suggests that Socrates can be reduced neither to the portrait sketched by his good twin Aristodemus nor to the satyric images born of the drunkenness of the bad twin Alcibiades; the *Symposium* hints that he most closely resembles—but here is yet another fiction—the demonic Eros, a mythic figure of the intermediary who is neither knowing nor ignorant, neither tragic nor comic, neither grotesque nor sublime, neither feminine nor masculine: Eros is atopic, outside of all common places.²

But (as I understand Kofman to mean) each of Hegel, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard's 'attempts to immobilize this atopia by enclosing it within a specific dialectical space'; i.e.—I think—to fashion a specific Socratic identity out of so much loose and shifting material.

My question is whether this is the fate to which interpreters of Socrates are inevitably condemned—and so too interpreters of Plato, like myself, insofar as Plato is our main source of Socratic texts, in the broadest sense, and also insofar as, in a way, he appears to us only as an extension of his Socrates. That is, are interpreters like me simply forever constructing new fictions, which succeed in telling our audience only about ourselves, if indeed about that? This I find a dispiriting thought, though I recognize that that wouldn't prevent it from being true. Perhaps more to the immediate point, I see no particular reason why anyone should pay me for writing such fictions, especially if they all turned out to be autobiographical. (Why should I suppose that anyone should be interested in reading about me, or, worse still, about my image of myself?) There are posts in creative writing, but mine isn't one of them, and I don't suppose that the Leverhulme Trust would be too impressed to discover that that was what they were actually funding—I imagine that they thought they were assessing a project which would somehow come up with something new, and true, and indeed that was how I presented it.²

Well, my answer is, first, that it is surely possible to examine Plato's strategies as a writer of fiction, and so to understand his Socrates, or Socrateses, better. This is in fact part of my larger project, on Plato as a writer. But it is specifically a project on Plato as a philosophical writer, or as a

² Christopher Rowe was awarded a five-year Leverhulme Research Professorship as from October 1999.

writer of philosophy. Part of what I want to do is also to try to get a clearer notion of how he employs his fictions in order to further his purposes both as an advocate and as a practitioner of philosophy. But that necessarily entails a concern with his philosophical strategies themselves, his ideas and arguments. And here we may return to Socrates in a more specific sense.

One of the most illuminating aspects of my recent career as a student of Plato (I guess autobiography is allowed in an inaugural lecture) has been the discovery of what appears to be a powerful theory in some of the dialogues, which is either abandoned or perhaps fatally weakened in others. When I talk here about ‘discovery’, I do not mean to suggest that I was the first one there; rather I mean that I finally saw the point. The main influence here has been my friend and past and future collaborator, Terry Penner, a Canadian philosopher and Platonist working in Madison, Wisconsin. What he in particular has allowed me to understand is the precise nature, and force, of what is sometimes labelled as Socratic ‘intellectualism’, as it appears in the ‘Socratic’ dialogues—and when Penner says ‘Socratic’, he means Socratic: the position in question is genuinely Socratic. His main argument for this goes roughly like this: it is philosophically an extremely powerful position; so is the position that Plato introduces in later dialogues (especially the *Republic*), which contradicts it; no one person is ever likely to have been able to invent two such powerful, and mutually opposed, sets of ideas in a single lifetime; Socrates is available as the author of one of them; so let’s suppose that it is his. I am not sure if I have represented Penner’s argument properly (he and I will both be taking part in a colloquium in Washington, D.C., which is designed to confront these and other related issues), and I’m even less sure that I believe it, though I seem to remember Einstein having said something to the same sort of effect. It seems to me uncomfortably close to the usual argument, viz.: we know that Plato was close to Socrates; his style and approach change between the early and maturer dialogues; it seems generally plausible to suppose that someone will be closer to their master earlier on; so let’s suppose the early dialogues are more or less faithful to Plato’s master. Both arguments seem to me to rely rather too heavily on psychological plausibility. However, Penner’s case at least has the virtue of underlining a real and genuine difference between the two sets of dialogues.

Here I return to a point somewhere nearer the beginning of this lecture. Then I described one view of the ‘Socratic’ dialogues, which saw in them a Socrates who was content to stand back and ask questions, committing himself to nothing; and I suggested that I thought that this interpretation was at best incomplete. What it obscures is that while Socrates may claim not to have any *knowledge*, he has plenty of *convictions*. He knows what he thinks, but he does not have what he thinks are adequate grounds for thinking it. Now according to the greatest student of Socrates in this century, Gregory Vlas-

tos (who remains a dominant figure in Platonic scholarship [see especially his *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*]), what Socrates stood for, above all, was a *moral* life. Explaining his cheerfulness when faced with death, Vlastos asks:

‘Is this surprising? If you say that virtue matters more for your own happiness than does everything else put together, if this is what you say and what you mean—it is for real, not just talk—what is there to be wondered at if the loss of everything else for virtue’s sake leaves you light-hearted, cheerful? If you believe what Socrates does, you hold the secret of your happiness in your own hands. Nothing the world can do to you can make you unhappy.’

Vlastos’ Socrates believes that virtue (essentially, according to Vlastos, our ‘moral’ virtue) is sufficient for the happiness of every individual; since he also holds that it is his or her own happiness that everyone wants, it turns out that no one can willingly, deliberately do wrong—they will only do so out of ignorance, i.e. ignorance of what will contribute to the best life for them, i.e. virtue. So this is why it matters so much for him to ask his questions, about what justice is, what courage is, and so on—because only if we know what these things are (which will turn out to include knowing their *value*), only then can we live the best life of which we are capable. One central result of his inquiries, so Vlastos holds, was the discovery of the ‘simple and absolutely fundamental moral truth’ that ‘*if someone has done a nasty thing to me this does not give me the slightest moral justification for doing the same nasty thing, or any nasty thing, to him*’: this is the Socratic innovation, starkly contrasting with contemporary Greek attitudes; an insight that even Aristotle didn’t manage to ‘get through his head’ [all this in *Socrates*, p. 190].

The power and authority with which Vlastos promoted this vision of Socrates the moral philosopher, the truth-telling ironist, were such that it has rarely been challenged; and it is in many ways a beguiling vision, at least for someone with suitably liberal principles. It certainly squared with Vlastos’ own view of what made life worth living: here was a person (Socrates) of high, unbending, moral purpose, in whom one could *believe*, and use as a model. One special advantage of the model is that one can, as it were, have Plato without all Plato’s excesses, whether political or metaphysical. No Platonic forms, no writing off of the majority of mankind as just incapable of seeing things properly—because they are ruled by passion, rather than by reason. This is how Vlastos deals with what Penner and I think is the crucial, Platonic move, the introduction of irrational parts of the soul, themselves capable of moving us to action: it simply provides an alternative, or additional, explanation of why we go wrong, which Plato may have put to

deplorable use but which is in itself highly plausible (isn't it, after all, a plain fact that Socrates was wrong in supposing that we never do what we know or believe we shouldn't do?).

One trouble I find with this interpretation is just that it does make Socrates look merely like a cleaned-up Plato; and since his Socrates is still one constructed mainly from Plato's dialogues, I can see no reason not to call Vlastos' Socrates 'Plato Mark I', rather than 'Socrates', with the Plato of the maturer dialogues as 'Plato Mark II', essentially a development or extension of Mark I. The evidence for saying that this Socrates is what the real Socrates was like simply isn't good enough. Putting it less guardedly than I'd want to in writing, Vlastos himself seems to me to be doing what so many of Socrates' immediate successors did (including Plato), and attaching the name 'Socrates' to that image of the ideal philosopher that he prefers. In other words, we seem to be back again in the world of fiction.

All the same, one might say, it is a matter of *philosophical* fiction, and even if 'Socrates' is in a way incidental to the whole enterprise, much may well have been gained along the way. So too, incidentally, with the Nietzschean and Hegelian Socratic 'fictions': it is only from Socrates' point of view that these are, as Kofman puts it, mere 'novels', and there is no reason why Nietzsche, Hegel or anyone else shouldn't use 'Socrates', as it were, to think with. But there will be this difference in Vlastos' case, that he is at the same time putting a lot of hard graft into the interpretation of Plato's texts. Maybe what he ends up with is in fact the best reading of the 'Socratic' dialogues. Yet at the same time, for the reasons I've given, I'm not sure that we couldn't actually do without Socrates altogether, except as the grey eminence behind Plato's output as a whole: there would just be early Plato, middle Plato, and late Plato, using Socrates and his peculiar traits and ways of doing things for whatever purposes it suited him.

But what if there turned out to be some really *distinctive and important* set of ideas in the early, 'Socratic' dialogues that was absent from, or was positively inconsistent with, later ones? This is Penner's position. As I have already indicated, the ideas in question centre around the question about what it is that explains our actions: according to Penner's Socrates, this is our beliefs about the best life for us, and about what will contribute to that; for it is what is best for us that we all, always, desire. There is, literally, nothing else that we desire except what is good for us; if ever we do things that will not in fact contribute to that, then that will be because our beliefs are mistaken, and the things we did were not after all what we wanted to do. This is 'intellectualism', which says that if we ever want to change the ways people behave, we have to talk to them; there will be no point—except perhaps in the short term—in punishing them, or beating them up, or using any other irrational means of 'persuading' them. Nor will there be any cases

where desires *overcome* our beliefs: there will be no doing things ‘under the influence of passion’, no doing things ‘from impulse’, against one’s better judgement, because there is nothing stronger than one’s reason, in whatever state it happens to be in. (‘I don’t know what came over me’, then, won’t wash any more as an excuse: whatever you, or I, did or do is what seems best to us at the time.) If this looks dangerously like egoism, it actually *is* egoism—a version of what is known as ‘psychological egoism’; but it is saved from mere selfishness by the special feature that it will always turn out that behaving in just, or fair, or courageous ways will contribute to the best life for us, while behaving in unjust, or unfair, or cowardly ways will not.

This is Penner’s Socrates, and he differs from Vlastos’ especially in that he does not recognize a category of the ‘moral’; instead of searching all the time for ‘moral principles’, he is actually looking for a proper understanding of *what is good for the agent*, i.e. what is good for you and good for me, individually. This is why whenever we seem to get close to answers to the question what justice is, or what this or that ‘virtue’ is, it seems to have something to do with knowledge of what is really good for us, and what is really bad. There are no such things as altruistic motives, or a categorical imperative, or duties, or obligations—and yet what always seems to emerge is a figure resembling the very person whom we would describe as ‘living by the highest principles’: Socrates himself, who despite his satyr-like appearance is always in control, prepared to do anything for his friends and fellow-citizens, and actually caring for them, enough even (if we believe the myth) to die for them, not just in battle but by upsetting them so much by his continual questioning that they finally got fed up with him and killed him off.

It is this position on which (whether he saw it or not) Plato turns his back in the *Republic*, when he argues for irrational parts of the soul, which can dominate us and make us act according to their own projects, and which are specifically said *not to be good-directed*. So it will now no longer be the case that all our desires are for the good; we have basic desires for food, drink, sex, all sorts of things, whether or not they are good, as they may very well not be. Reason will still direct us towards our real good, but there will always be parts of us driving us in other directions; these we shall need to control, if not in some cases suppress altogether. Here is the ancestor of our familiar model of human nature as a mixture of the rational and the irrational, the human and the beastly, our conscious and unconscious selves: Aristotle takes it up, as does practically everybody else, the only major exception being the Stoics.

Whatever we think of the merits of these two rival positions, it seems to me that they are very clearly distinct, and importantly distinct; it may not be too much to say that the invention, in the *Republic*, of the irrational soul is one of the turning-points in Western culture. And the first of these two posi-

tions is closely associated with Socrates: the real one, I mean. It is not just something Plato invents for him; that the Stoics got it from Plato is possible, but not, I think, likely. Indeed it is not clear that Plato himself fully appreciates its strength, for otherwise I am not sure that he would have moved against it quite so casually as he seems to do, almost as if he were supporting it rather than negating it.

Here then, I propose, really is something to pin on Socrates, along with his snub nose, his thick lips, protruding eyes, and obsession with philosophical argument. Yet at least for a time Plato too took it on, for the *Symposium* (a good, honest, middle, non-Socratic dialogue, written after Plato, and Platonic metaphysics, takes over) itself contains an unmixed version of it. It is around here that my new project is located, in the intersection—perhaps—between Socrates and Plato, and certainly between two rival views of what makes us tick. For the record, the first part of the project will be a book which I shall be writing with Terry Penner on the *Lysis*, which happens to include what we think is a more formal version of the main argument of the *Symposium*.

In this case, I think, historical and philosophical concerns really do coincide. It is not simply that it is convenient, here, to stick a position on Socrates; there really is a possibility that it was genuinely Socrates'. Thus in following out the arguments of the *Lysis* we shall not only be exploring a philosophical theory—which, I repeat, we think potentially very powerful—but actually doing some history of philosophy as well. Since all our sources seem to be agreed that there was a complete congruity between the man and his ideas, in describing the theory we shall (maybe: who knows?) be describing a real individual—and a strange and unfamiliar one. Here, to end with, is part of what Alcibiades says about Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* (he has just recounted how Socrates, as ever under full rational control, once resisted his own irresistible sexual charms):

'Well, there are many other things too that one could find to say in praise of Socrates, and amazing things at that; but whereas in the case of the other aspects of his behaviour, one might perhaps also say such things about someone else, the fact that there is no human being like him, whether among past generations or among those alive now—that's what deserves our complete amazement. With the sort of man Achilles was, one could compare Brasidas and others, and for Pericles' sort there'd be Nestor and Antenor ... But as for the sort of man this one is, so strange is he, both in himself and in the things he says, one wouldn't come even close to finding anyone like him if one looked ...'