

Socrates

Socrates had all the dialectical skills of a sophist, but, like his pupil Plato, he intensely disliked the relativism in the service of which so many sophists deployed their abilities. We cannot be sure what absolute truths he espoused. Socrates left no written works behind, and the account we have of his views depends to a very large extent on Plato who, in his dialogues, makes Socrates his spokesman. It is difficult to disentangle what might have been the views of the historical Socrates from the opinions attributed to him by Plato but which were really Plato's own. Socrates is reported as being brilliant at asking questions about concepts, definitions, and philosophical positions, but as having been reluctant to give any clear answers himself: "I know that I do not know" is one of the famous sayings attributed to him. The sophists, too, had claimed that they did not know the ultimate truth, but that was because they did not think an ultimate truth existed. Socrates, however, assumed that there *was* such a thing, however difficult it was to reach a full understanding of it. As Professor Myles Burnyeat has put it, at the end of a session with Socrates, "you end up not with a firm answer, but with a much better grasp of the problem than you had before."¹

Socrates had begun by studying natural philosophy; asking questions about motion, about atomistic theory etc., as the Greek Cosmologists had done. But he soon realized that what really interested him was not an understanding of material facts or of the origin of matter, but questions of values and ends, of ethics and of politics. These, he thought, were much more important.

This reversal of the priorities of the Cosmologists had a profound influence on European thought for many centuries. With the notable exception of Aristotle, philosophers for the next 1600 years or so were not very interested in the sciences and considered scientific pursuits as an inferior form of intellectual activity. A concern with ethics, religion and politics was the mark of an educated gentleman; experimentation and practical application in science were not. The classical education which the upper classes continued to receive until the early years of this century reinforced this social attitude; and although from the sixteenth and especially the seventeenth century onwards some gentlemen did a little experimental work in laboratories, that did not greatly increase the social status of those who engaged in applied science. The pursuit of Pure Science was somewhat more prestigious – and that, too, is part of the heritage of classical thought which tended to privilege universal principles over particular manifestations of them.

1 Discussion with Bryan Magee in *The Great Philosophers*, p. 16, BBC Books, 1987.

To what extent has this attitude affected the progress of science in Britain? in France? in Germany? in the United States? in Japan? To what extent does the progress of science depend on the cultural climate in the upper classes?

Certainly in our own time our society has paid more and more attention to the applied sciences. Does it still attach the same importance that Socrates did to the pursuit of values and ends? If not, why not? And if not, what have been and are likely to be the consequences?

Socrates (or perhaps it was Plato) believed that the knowledge of values was *innate*: the Soul had possessed it before it entered the human body, but that knowledge was then clouded or hidden. It was the task of the Socratic teacher, by skilful questioning, to bring it out of the clouded state back into consciousness. Socrates compared his task to that of a midwife. (His mother had in fact been a midwife). The teacher of philosophy is literally an educator; the word “educate” originally means “to lead out”, “to bring forth”.

The knowledge of values, in other words, is not something to *be inculcated in* the student, but is something to be elicited from him. That procedure is of course much more time-consuming, but many educators believe that the best education is one that forces students to work out answers for themselves, perhaps with the help of skilful questioning.

For the questioning one has to rely on the integrity and wisdom of the person who is asking the questions. The Socrates of the Platonic dialogues is often a little like a sheep-dog: by asking questions in a certain way, Socrates does not really leave the answer open, but herds the replies in the direction in which he wants them to go. A clever teacher, like a clever barrister, can abuse the inexperience of his pupils by asking loaded questions which the student does not recognize as such. The answers brought forth by that technique would then be a distortion of the innate knowledge that the pupil is said to possess.

Some educators are not so opposed to the inculcation of values, provided, of course, that they are the “right ones”. It does not disturb them that their critics may call that conditioning. They would answer that children, in particular, need to be given a firm framework of values at an early age. The young may not be capable of working values out for themselves and may not even be interested in trying. If asked to do so, they may merely become confused.

In fact, the pupils of Socrates were not children or early adolescents. It was young men, whom he invited to work out values for themselves. What they were encouraged to draw out from within themselves for examination were ideas that were not really innate at all, but had been inculcated in them in their earlier years. We will see that the Socrates who is the spokesman for Plato’s educational ideas in *The Republic* will himself impose a drastic system of conditioning upon the very young.

Of course only a certain kind of knowledge can be elicited from within – namely the kind that Socrates thought the most important: knowledge about values and ends, ethics and politics. The technique will not be able to elicit *factual* knowledge, like the date of a battle or the composition of a chemical. That must be acquired from an *outside source*, which may be verbal or written or experimental. But we have already seen that Socrates did not consider that kind of knowledge particularly important.

The knowledge of the Good is to be found by the intellect: it is not handed down by the gods. Good is not good because the gods approve of it; the gods approve of it because it is Good.

Socrates was asking his young men to elucidate for themselves what is good rather than having it handed down by priests. The opponents of Socrates saw this as tantamount to questioning the role of the gods. One of the charges on which Socrates would be condemned to death was that he had not worshipped the gods of Athens. He therefore opened another debate which was to run for centuries between the exponents of free enquiry and those of orthodox intolerance.

A true knowledge of values enables one to be virtuous: the more one knows about them, the more virtuous one is. Indeed, Socrates goes as far as to say that knowledge is virtue, and that sin is the result of ignorance. He argues it in this way: a virtuous Soul is a healthy and therefore a happy soul; a vicious soul (which perpetrates vicious acts) is a damaged soul such as no one would want to have. Those who commit vicious acts, therefore, obviously have no knowledge of the damage they are doing to their soul. That harm is usually much more serious than the harm they inflict on their victims: the injury done to them is generally inflicted only on their bodies. Socrates concludes from this that evildoers are more in need of being *taught* where they have gone wrong than of being *punished*.

What about people who do something which they *know* is wicked?

Socrates believed that in such a case *true* knowledge, which shows that virtue is always ultimately more rational than vice, is being clouded by psychological impulses and weaknesses.

There is a modern parallel to this view: that wrongdoing is a kind of psychological illness for which people are not responsible. What wrongdoers need, so the argument goes, is not punishment but therapy, and the way that therapy works is to make the patient understand the source of his sickness and, by knowing it, enable him to control it.

Socrates agreed with this; the wise man must be aware of his impulses so as to be able to control them, and therefore one of his cardinal rules was that you should "know yourself".

Self-knowledge is of course important, but is it sufficient? What happens if we know that we are poisoned by, say, envy, but find ourselves incapable of controlling it?

Does Socrates attach too much importance to intellectual knowledge as the basis of virtue? What about moral instincts? The form that moral instincts take in each one of us are, we know, mostly conditioned by our environment, and they may or may not subsequently be refined by intellectual thought. Could this not often be a sounder basis for virtuous behaviour than pure intellect?

And what about the honourable behaviour of many people who are not very bright? Socrates accepted that a person may behave well – he may, for instance, show courage – but he did not regard a courageous individual as *virtuous* unless that person *knew* what courage is. Is there some unacceptable intellectual élitism here?

Socrates was certainly no egalitarian. He particularly disliked the idea that all Athenian citizens are equally capable of making sound judgments on political

matters. Pericles, in his famous Funeral Oration (431 BC), had proclaimed: "An Athenian citizen does not neglect the state because he takes care of his own household; and even those of us who are engaged in business have a very fair idea of politics. We alone regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs not as a harmless but as a useless character; and if few of us are originators, we are all sound judges of policy." The Athenians prided themselves on their "happy versatility". But during the lifetime of Socrates, Athens was rent between the democrats who supported the Periclean ideal and the oligarchs. The oligarchs had twice briefly seized power from the democrats; but these were back in power in 403 BC. Among Socrates' pupils were several who supported the oligarchs' ideas and poured scorn on the democrats. Doubtlessly they availed themselves of the arguments of their teacher that knowledge is needed for good government; that knowledge required training, and that therefore it was absurd to believe that all Athenians were "sound judges of policy". We will look at the arguments that supported the élitist idea of politics when we come to Plato. Here it suffices to say that the democrats held Socrates responsible for the views of his oligarchic pupils; he was accused, among other things, of "corrupting the young" with such ideas – and he was condemned to die. In the *Apology*, the famous last speech attributed to him by Plato, Socrates told his grieving friends that he did not fear death: it was either a dreamless sleep or else a happy after-life, but that in any case he died happy because all his life he had pursued the truth. (399 BC)