

CHAPTER 4

to have fought through the last four or five years of the war with Sparta; he grew up in those years of defeat and of economic, social, and moral dissolution that have been described. He must have experienced the dissatisfaction and the difficulty of "making an adjustment" that the returning veteran seems always to face—exaggerated when, as in Plato's case, it is a return to a defeated, rather than a victorious, home.

Another matter of importance in Plato's life (as in everyone else's) was the family he was born into. Plato could hardly have been "better" born. On his mother's side he was descended from Solon, the great Athenian statesman and reformer; on his father's side, from the god Poseidon, via (naturally) a long line of distinguished Athenians. His uncle, Charmides, and his cousin, Critias, were prominent nobles of the day and leaders of the oligarchical faction.

Political leadership was traditional in his family, and Plato's whole life, as will be seen, was deeply affected by this background of ambition and service. In the good old days, a leading political role would have been his as a matter of course. But even by the beginning of the Peloponnesian War it was no longer a "matter of course," and, during the years of strain and defeat, members of noble families found themselves at ever greater disadvantage in the competition for the electorate's favor. By the time Plato had reached the age when an ambitious young man might begin to think of his political career, only two courses were open to him—he could give himself over to flattery and cajolery of the people, or he could join in a plot to overthrow the democratic regime by a *coup d'état*. The former course involved a compromise of principles that Plato's perhaps overscrupulous moral sense rejected. An opportunity for the latter alternative came at the end of the war, when a number of nobles, including Critias and Charmides, set themselves up in power. This must have seemed to the young Plato a hopeful change from rule by the venal and bungling demagogues who had led Athens to defeat. But the excesses of The Thirty (as the oligarchs were called) showed him that the will of the few is no better per se than the will of the many. And the savagery of the revived democracy, which shortly afterwards overthrew the oligarchy, did nothing to convince him that it, for its part, had learned a lesson.

Socrates

What made more impression on Plato than anything else, however, was Socrates and the example of his fate. Something therefore should be said about this extraordinary man. Socrates was over forty years old when Plato was born. Unlike Plato, who reached manhood in a time of defeat, he had grown up during the period of Athens' greatest power and success—the half-century following the victories over the Persians. Socrates was a contemporary of Thucydides and a

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member of the generation that made the war with Sparta and lost it. But though he fought bravely as a soldier and performed all those political duties that the democratic state expected of its citizens, Socrates was not a politician or a leader. He claimed to differ from his fellow Athenians only in knowing that he knew nothing, and he spent his days in the highly unpopular but thoroughly successful task of proving to the Athenians their ignorance of things about which they had hitherto believed themselves well informed.

He must have seemed to his fellow citizens more like a Sophist than anything else. But he had a profound, and entirely un-Sophistic, conviction of the reality of goodness and the goodness of reality. He combined an intensely realistic and down-to-earth common sense with a passionate mysticism, a cool and dispassionate scepticism about ordinary beliefs and opinions with a deep religious sense. Plato's dialogue, the *Symposium*, which describes a dinner party Socrates attended at a friend's house, gives a good account of him.¹ By way of entertainment, each guest made an extemporary oration in praise of love.²

[As the last speech was finished] suddenly there was a knocking at the outer door, which had a noisy sound like that of revellers, and they heard notes of a flute-girl. "Go and see to it," said Agathon to the servants; "and if it be one of our intimates, invite him in: otherwise, say we are not drinking, but just about to retire."

A few moments after, they heard the voice of Alcibiades in the forecourt, very drunken . . . : he stood at the door, crowned with a bushy wreath of ivy and violets, and wearing a great array of ribands on his head.

The assembled company decided that Alcibiades too must fulfill the contract to praise love. He agreed, providing he was permitted to praise Socrates instead of the god of love himself:

"Were it not that I might appear to be absolutely tipsy, I would have affirmed on oath all the strange effects I personally have felt from his words, and still feel even now. For when I hear him I am worse than any wild fanatic; I find my heart leaping and my tears gushing forth at the sound of his speech, and I see great numbers of other people having the same experience. When

¹ Agathon was the host, and Alcibiades, who arrived late and tipsy, a guest. Agathon (born about 447 B.C.) was a successful young playwright celebrating a recently won dramatic prize. The dinner party is supposed to have taken place in 416 or 415 B.C., shortly before the start of the Sicilian expedition (see p. 46), of which Alcibiades, then at the height of his popular success, was the designated leader. But readers of the dialogue (which of course was written long after these events occurred) knew that this brilliant, spoiled, and unscrupulous young man was soon to be charged with profanation of the Mysteries and to begin his tragic career of treason and intrigue against his country. Modern readers must remember that in the society for which Plato was writing and whose life he was describing, homosexuality was acceptable. What was remarkable about Socrates was not his affection for handsome young men but his refusal to allow it to develop into sexual relationships.

² For Socrates' speech on this occasion, see pp. 139-42.

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I listened to Pericles and other skilled orators I thought them eloquent, but I never felt anything like this; my spirit was not left in a tumult and had not to complain of my being in the condition of a common slave: whereas the influence of our Marsyas here has often thrown me into such a state that I thought my life not worth living on these terms. . . . For he compels me to admit that, sorely deficient as I am, I neglect myself while I attend to the affairs of Athens. . . . For he brings home to me that I cannot disown the duty of doing what he bids me, but that as soon as I turn from his company I fall a victim to the favours of the crowd. So I take a runaway's leave of him and flee away; when I see him again I think of those former admissions, and am ashamed. . . .

"Such then is the effect that our satyr can work upon me and many another with his piping. . . . [Next] observe how Socrates is amorously inclined to handsome persons; with these he is always busy and enraptured. . . . And believing he had a serious affection for my youthful bloom, I supposed I had here a godsend and a rare stroke of luck, thinking myself free at any time by gratifying his desires to hear all that our Socrates knew; for I was enormously proud of my youthful charms. . . . Yes, gentlemen, I went and met him, and the two of us would be alone; and I thought he would seize the chance of talking to me as a lover does to his dear one in private, and I was glad. But nothing of the sort occurred at all: he would merely converse with me in his usual manner, and when he had spent the day with me he would leave me and go his way. After that I proposed he should go with me to the trainer's, and I trained with him, expecting to gain my point there. So he trained and wrestled with me many a time when no one was there. The same story! I got no further with the affair. . . .

"Now all this, you know, had already happened to me when we later went on a campaign together to Potidaea; and there we were messmates. Well, first of all, he surpassed not me only but everyone else in bearing hardships; whenever we were cut off in some place and were compelled, as often in campaigns, to go without food, the rest of us were nowhere in point of endurance. Then again, when we had plenty of good cheer, he alone could enjoy it to the full, and though unwilling to drink, when once overruled he used to beat us all; and, most surprising of all, no man has ever yet seen Socrates drunk. Of this power I expect we shall have a good test in a moment. But it was in his endurance of winter—in those parts the winters are awful—that I remember . . . : we all preferred not to stir abroad, or if any of us did, we wrapped ourselves up with prodigious care, and after putting on our shoes we muffled up our feet with felt and little fleeces. But he walked out in that weather, clad in just such a coat as he was always wont to wear, and he made his way more easily over the ice unshod than the rest of us did in our shoes. . . .

"One day, . . . immersed in some problem at dawn, he stood in the same spot considering it; and when he found it a tough one, he would not give it up but stood there trying. The time drew on to midday, and the men began to notice him, and said to one another in wonder: 'Socrates has been standing there in a study ever since dawn!' The end of it was that in the evening some of the Ionians after they had supped—this time it was summer—brought

out their mattresses and rugs and took their sleep in the cool; thus they waited to see if he would go on standing all night too. He stood till dawn came and the sun rose; then walked away, after offering a prayer to the Sun.

"Then, if you care to hear of him in battle—for there also he must have his due— . . . let me tell you, gentlemen, what a notable figure he made when the army was retiring in flight from Delium: I happened to be there on horseback, while he marched under arms. The troops were in utter disorder, and he was retreating along with Laches, when I chanced to come up with them. . . . I noticed, first, how far he outdid Laches in collectedness, and next I felt—to use a phrase of yours, Aristophanes—how there he stepped along, as his wont is in our streets, 'strutting like a proud marsh-goose, with ever a sidelong glance,' turning a calm sidelong look on friend and foe alike, and convincing anyone even from afar that whoever cares to touch this person will find he can put up a stout enough defence. . . ."

[When Alcibiades had finished his speech] a great crowd of revellers arrived at the door. . . . [Soon] the whole place was in an uproar and, losing all order, they were forced to drink a vast amount of wine. Then, as Aristodemus related, Eryximachus, Phaedrus, and some others took their leave and departed; while he himself fell asleep, and slumbered a great while, for the nights were long. He awoke towards dawn, as the cocks were crowing; and immediately he saw that all the company were either sleeping or gone, except Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates, who alone remained awake and were drinking out of a large vessel, from left to right; and Socrates was arguing with them. As to most of the talk, Aristodemus had no recollection, for he had missed the beginning and was also rather drowsy; but the substance of it was, he said, that Socrates was driving them to the admission that the same man could have the knowledge required for writing comedy and tragedy—that the fully skilled tragedian could be a comedian as well. While they were being driven to this, and were but feebly following it, they began to nod; first Aristophanes dropped into a slumber, and then, as day began to dawn, Agathon also. When Socrates had seen them comfortable, he rose and went away . . . ; on arriving at the Lyceum, he washed himself, and then spent the rest of the day in his ordinary fashion; and so, when the day was done, he went home for the evening and reposed.^a

SOCRATES' TRIAL

Though Socrates was extravagantly admired by a group of bright young men who enjoyed watching him trap their elders in contradictions, such a character was inevitably disliked and misunderstood by the general public. He set up his own moral convictions in opposition to those of the public—he was indifferent to "public opinion," in a democracy a most dangerous practice. It is not altogether surprising, therefore, that he should have been brought to trial. One of the principal charges was atheism. The evidence the prosecution could present was convincing to an Athenian jury, for Socrates certainly did not believe in the gods in the sense in which his accusers did. But one of the motives underlying the indictment was surely a political animus. We have already seen that the