

The Sophists and Socrates

The first Greek philosophers focused on nature; the Sophists and Socrates shifted the concerns of philosophy to the study of human beings. Instead of asking large cosmic questions about the ultimate principle of things, they instead asked questions that more directly related to moral behavior. This transition from predominantly scientific concerns to basic ethical questions is explained in part by the failure of the pre-Socratic philosophers to arrive at any uniform conception of the cosmos. They proposed inconsistent interpretations of nature, and there appeared to be no way of reconciling them. For example, Heraclitus said that nature consists of a plurality of substances and that everything is in a process of constant change. Parmenides took the opposite view, arguing that reality is a single, static substance—the One—and that motion and change are illusions cast on our senses by the appearances of things. Philosophy might have stopped at this point if these contradictory cosmologies had simply produced an intellectual fatigue resulting from the sheer difficulty of deciphering the secrets of nature. As it was, the controversy over the ultimate principle of things had generated an attitude of skepticism about the ability of human reason to discover the truth about nature. But this skepticism provided the impulse for a new direction for philosophy since skepticism itself became the subject of serious concern.

Instead of debating alternative theories of nature, philosophers now addressed the problem of human knowledge, asking whether it was possible to discover any universal truth. This question was further aggravated by cultural differences between various races and societies. Consequently, the question about truth became deeply entwined with the problem of goodness. Could there be a universal concept of goodness if people were incapable of knowing any universal truth? The principal parties to this new debate were the Sophists and Socrates.

THE SOPHISTS

The three most outstanding Sophists who emerged in Athens during the fifth century BCE were Protagoras, Gorgias, and Thrasymachus. They were part of a

group that came to Athens either as traveling teachers or, in the case of Hippias of Elis, as ambassadors. They specifically called themselves Sophists, or “intellectuals.” Coming as they did from different cultures—Protagoras from Abdera in Thrace, Gorgias from Leontini in southern Sicily, and Thrasymachus from Chalcedon—they took a fresh look at Athenian thought and customs and asked searching questions about them. In particular, they forced Athenians to consider whether their ideas and customs were founded upon truth or simply upon conventional ways of behaving. Was the Athenian distinction between Greeks and barbarians, as well as that between masters and slaves, based on evidence or simply on prejudice? Not only had the Sophists lived in different countries with their different customs, but they had gathered a wide fund of information based on their observation of a multitude of cultural facts. Their encyclopedic knowledge of different cultures made them skeptical about the possibility of attaining any absolute truth by which society might order its life. They forced thoughtful Athenians to consider whether Hellenic culture was based on artificial rules (*nomos*) or on nature (*physis*). They had them question whether their religious and moral codes were *conventional*, and therefore changeable, or *natural*, and therefore permanent. In a decisive way the Sophists set the stage for a more deliberate consideration of human nature—specifically, how knowledge is acquired and how we might order our behavior.

The Sophists were primarily practical people, and especially competent in grammar, writing, and public discourse. These skills made them uniquely qualified to address a special social need within Athenian society. Under the leadership of the statesman Pericles (490–429 BCE), the old aristocracy of Athens had been replaced by a democracy. This, in turn, intensified political life by drawing free citizens into political discussion and making them eligible for leadership roles. But the older aristocratic educational system—based mainly on family tradition—did not prepare people for the new conditions of democratic life. There was no disciplined and theoretical training in the areas of religion, grammar, and the careful interpretation of the poets. The Sophists moved into this cultural vacuum, and their practical interest in teaching filled an urgent need. They became popular lecturers and were the chief source of new education. What made them particularly sought after was that they professed, above all, to teach the art of *rhetoric*, that is, persuasive speech. The power of persuasion was a political necessity in democratic Athens for anyone who hoped to rise to a position of leadership. The Sophists possessed the exact skills to facilitate this need.

The reputation of the Sophists was at first very favorable. They provided an immense service by training people to present their ideas clearly and forcefully. In a public assembly it would be disastrous to permit debate among unskilled speakers who could neither present their own ideas effectively nor discover the errors in their opponents' arguments. But rhetoric became somewhat like a knife, in that it could be employed for good or ill—to cut bread or to kill. On the one hand, those who possessed the power of persuasion could use that power to psychologically impel listeners to adopt a good idea. On the other hand, persuasive speakers could put over morally questionable ideas in which they had special interests. The inherent skepticism of the Sophists greatly facilitated a

shift from the commendable use of rhetoric to its regrettable use. In time the Sophists' skepticism and relativism made them suspect. No one could criticize them for training lawyers to argue either side of a case—a technique called *antilogic*. Surely the accused deserve to have their defense presented with as much skill as the prosecutor wields against them. As long as the art of persuasion was linked to the pursuit of truth, there could be no quarrel with the Sophists. But since they looked upon truth as a relative matter, they were eventually accused of teaching young citizens how to make a bad case look good or to make the unjust cause appear to be just. Furthermore, they developed the reputation of taking young people from good families and leading them in a critical and destructive analysis of their traditional religious and ethical views. As such, they moved youth away from an appreciation of tradition and toward a cynical egoism. To add to their ill repute, they departed from the earlier image of the philosopher as a disinterested thinker who engaged in philosophy with no concern for financial gain. The Sophists charged fees for their teaching, and they sought out the rich who were able to pay these fees. Socrates had studied under the Sophists but because of his poverty could only afford their "shorter courses." This practice of charging fees for their teaching prompted Plato to ridicule them as "shopkeepers with spiritual wares."

Protagoras

Among the Sophists who came to Athens, Protagoras of Abdera (ca. 490–420 BCE) was the oldest and, in many ways, the most influential. He is best known for his statement that "man is the measure of all things, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not." That is, each individual is the ultimate standard of all judgments that he or she makes. This means that whatever knowledge I might achieve about anything would be limited by my human capacities. Protagoras dismissed any discussion of theology, saying, "About the gods, I am not able to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they are like in form; for the factors preventing knowledge are many: the obscurity of the subject, and the shortness of human life." Knowledge, Protagoras said, is limited to our various perceptions, and these perceptions will differ with each person. If two people observe the same object, their sensations will be different, because each will occupy a different position in relation to it. Similarly, the same breeze blowing on two people might feel cool to one but warm to the other. Whether the breeze is or is not cold cannot be answered in a simple way. It is in fact cold for one person and warm for the other. To say that a person is the measure of all things is, therefore, to say that our knowledge is measured by what we perceive. If something within us makes us perceive things differently, there is then no standard for testing whether one person's perception is right and another person's is wrong. Protagoras thought that the objects we perceive by our various senses must possess all of the properties that different people perceive as belonging to them. For this reason it is impossible to discover what is the "true" nature of anything; a thing has as many characteristics as there are people perceiving it. Thus, there is no way to distinguish between the

appearance of a thing and its *reality*. On this theory of knowledge, it would be impossible to attain any absolute scientific knowledge since there are built-in differences in observers that lead each of us to see things differently. Protagoras concluded, therefore, that knowledge is relative to each person.

When he turned to the subject of ethics, Protagoras held that moral judgments are relative. He was willing to admit that the idea of law reflects a general desire in each culture to establish a moral order among all people. But he denied that there was any uniform law of nature pertaining to human behavior that all people everywhere could discover. He distinguished between nature and custom and said that laws and moral rules are based on custom, not on nature. Each society has its own laws and its own moral rules, and there is no way of judging some to be right and others wrong. But Protagoras did not carry this moral relativism to the extreme view that every individual can decide what is moral for him- or herself. Instead, he took the conservative position that the state makes the laws, and everyone should accept these laws because they are as good as any that can be made. Other communities might have different laws, and individuals within a state might think of different laws, but in neither case are these better laws; they are only different. In the interest of a peaceful and orderly society, then, people should respect and uphold the customs, laws, and moral rules that their tradition has carefully nurtured. In matters of religion, Protagoras took a similar view: Just because we cannot with certainty know the existence and nature of the gods, this should not prevent us from participating in the worship of the gods. The interesting outcome of Protagoras's relativism was his conservative conclusion that the young should be educated to accept and support the traditions of their society, not because this tradition is true but because it makes possible a stable society. Still, there is no question that Protagoras's relativism seriously dislodged confidence in the possibility of discovering true knowledge. Indeed, his skepticism drew the heavy criticism of Socrates and Plato.

Gorgias

Gorgias (late fifth century BCE) came to Athens from Sicily as ambassador from his native city of Leontini in 427 BCE. He took such a radical view regarding truth that he eventually gave up philosophy and turned instead to the practice and teaching of rhetoric. His extreme view differed from Protagoras's in that, while Protagoras said that everything is true relative to the spectator, Gorgias denied that there is any truth at all. With hair-splitting keenness, and employing the type of reasoning used by the Eleatic philosophers Parmenides and Zeno, Gorgias propounded the extraordinary notions (1) that nothing exists, (2) that if anything exists it is incomprehensible, and (3) that even if it is comprehensible it cannot be communicated. Taking this third notion, for example, he argued that we communicate with words, but words are only symbols or signs, and no symbol can ever be the same as the thing it symbolizes. For this reason knowledge can never be communicated. By this type of reasoning, Gorgias thought he could prove all three of his propositions, or at least that his

reasoning was as coherent as any used by those who disagreed with him. He was convinced, consequently, that there could be no reliable knowledge, and certainly no truth.

Abandoning philosophy, Gorgias turned to rhetoric and tried to perfect it as the art of persuasion. In this connection tradition relates that he developed the technique of deception, making use of psychology and the powers of suggestion. Having earlier concluded that there is no truth, he was willing to employ the art of persuasion for whatever practical ends he chose.

Thrasymachus

In Plato's *Republic* Thrasymachus (late fifth century BCE) is portrayed as the Sophist who asserted that injustice is to be preferred to the life of justice. He did not look upon injustice as a defect of character. On the contrary, Thrasymachus considered the unjust person as superior in character and intelligence. Indeed, he said that "injustice pays," not only at the meager level of the pick-pocket (although there is profit in that, too) but especially for those who carry injustice to perfection and make themselves masters of whole cities and nations. Justice, he said, is pursued by simpletons and leads to weakness. Thrasymachus held that people should aggressively pursue their own interests in a virtually unlimited form of self-assertion. He regarded justice as being the interest of the stronger and believed that "might is right." Laws, he said, are made by the ruling party for its own interest. These laws define what is right. In all countries alike the notion of "right" means the same thing, since "right" is simply the interest of the party established in power. So, Thrasymachus said, "the sound conclusion is that what is 'right' is the same everywhere: the interest of the stronger party."

Here, then, is the reduction of morality to power. This is an inevitable consequence of the Sophists' skepticism, which led them to a relativistic attitude toward truth and ethics. It was Socrates' chief concern to unravel the logical inconsistencies of the Sophists, to rebuild some notion of truth, and to establish some firm foundation for moral judgments.

SOCRATES

Many Athenians mistook Socrates for a Sophist. The fact is that Socrates was one of the Sophists' keenest critics. That Socrates should have been identified with them was due in part to his relentless analysis of any and every subject—a technique also employed by the Sophists. Nevertheless, there was a fundamental difference between the Sophists and Socrates. The Sophists split hairs to show that equally good arguments could be advanced on either side of any issue. They were skeptics who doubted that there could be any certain or reliable knowledge. Moreover, they concluded that since all knowledge is relative, moral standards are also relative. Socrates, on the other hand, had a different motivation for his constant argumentation. He was committed to the pursuit of truth and considered it his mission to seek out the basis for stable and

certain knowledge. He was also attempting to discover the foundation of the good life. As he pursued his mission, Socrates devised a method for arriving at truth; he linked *knowing* and *doing*, so that to know the good is to do the good. In that sense “knowledge is virtue.” Unlike the Sophists, then, Socrates engaged in argumentation, not to attain ends destructive of truth or to develop pragmatic skills among lawyers and politicians, but to achieve substantive concepts of truth and goodness.

Socrates’ Life

Seldom has there been a time and place so rich in genius as the Athens into which Socrates was born in 470 BCE. By this time the playwright Aeschylus had written some of his great dramatic works. The playwrights Euripides and Sophocles were young boys who would go on to produce great tragedies that Socrates may well have attended. Pericles, who was to usher in a great age of democracy and the flowering of the arts, was still a young man. Socrates may have seen the Parthenon and the statues of Phidias completed during his lifetime. By this time, too, Persia had been defeated, and Athens was becoming a naval power with control over much of the Aegean Sea. Athens had reached a level of unprecedented power and splendor. Although Socrates grew up in a golden age, his declining years were to see Athens defeated in war and his own life brought to an end in prison. In 399 BCE, at the age of 71, he drank hemlock poison in compliance with the death sentence issued by the court that tried him.

Socrates wrote nothing. Most of what we know about him has been preserved by three of his famous younger contemporaries—Aristophanes, Xenophon, and, most importantly, Plato. From these sources Socrates emerges as an intense genius who, along with extraordinary intellectual rigor, possessed a personal warmth and a fondness for humor. He was a robust man with great powers of physical endurance. In his playful comedy *The Clouds*, Aristophanes depicts Socrates as a strutting waterfowl, poking fun at his habit of rolling his eyes and referring impishly to his “pupils” and “thinking shop.” From Xenophon comes the portrait of a loyal soldier who had a passion for discussing the requirements of morality and who inevitably attracted younger people who sought his advice. Plato confirms this general portrait and in addition pictures Socrates as a man with a deep sense of mission and absolute moral purity. In the *Symposium* Plato relates how Alcibiades, a fair youth, expected to win the amorous affections of Socrates, contriving in various ways to be alone with him. But, Alcibiades says, “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.” In military campaigns Socrates could go without food longer than anyone else. Others wrapped themselves up with “unusual care” against the bitter cold of winter, using “felt and little fleeces” over their shoes. But Socrates, Alcibiades says, “walked out in that weather, dressed in a coat that he was always inclined to wear, and he made his way more easily over the ice without shoes than the rest of us did in our shoes.”

Socrates was capable of intense and sustained concentration. On one occasion during a military campaign, he stood in deep contemplation for a day and night, "till dawn came and the sun rose; then walked away after offering a prayer to the sun." He frequently received messages or warnings from a mysterious "voice," or what he called his *daimon*. Although this "supernatural" sign invaded his thoughts from early childhood, it suggests more than anything else Socrates' "visionary" nature, particularly his sensitivity to the moral qualities of human actions that make life worth living. He must have been familiar with the natural science of the earlier Greek philosophers, although he does say in Plato's *Apology* that "the simple truth is, O Athenians, that I have nothing to do with physical speculations." For him such speculations gave way to the more urgent questions about human nature, truth, and goodness. The decisive event that confirmed his mission as a moral philosopher was the reply of the Delphic Oracle. As the story goes, one day a young religious zealot named Chaerophon went to the temple of Apollo near Delphi and asked whether there was any living person who was wiser than Socrates; the priestess replied that there was not. Socrates interpreted this reply to mean that he was the wisest because he realized and admitted his own ignorance. In this attitude Socrates set out on his quest for unshakable truth and wisdom.

Socrates as a Philosopher

Because Socrates left no writings of his own, there is today some disagreement over what philosophical ideas can be properly attributed to him. Our most extensive sources of his thought are the *Dialogues* of Plato, in which he is the leading character. But the persistent question is whether Plato is here reporting what Socrates actually taught or is expressing his own ideas through the figure of Socrates. Some argue that the Socrates found in Plato's dialogues is the historically correct Socrates. This would mean that Socrates must get all the credit for the novel philosophical activity these dialogues contain. On this view Plato would get credit only for the literary form he devised for preserving, elaborating on, and lending precision and color to Socrates' thought. On the other hand, Aristotle distinguished between the philosophical contributions made by Socrates and Plato. Aristotle gave Socrates credit for "inductive arguments and universal definitions," and to Plato he ascribed the development of the famous theory of Forms—the notion that universal archetypes exist independently of the particular things that embody them. In essence, the argument is over whether Socrates or Plato developed the theory of Forms. Since Aristotle was himself particularly interested in this subject and had discussed it at length with Plato in the Academy, it seems reasonable to suppose that his distinction between Socrates' and Plato's ideas is accurate. At the same time some of the early dialogues appear to represent Socrates' own thought, as in the case of the *Apology* and the *Euthyphro*. The most plausible solution to the problem, therefore, is to accept portions of both views. Thus, we can agree that much of the earlier dialogues are portrayals of Socrates' philosophic activity, while the later dialogues especially represent Plato's own philosophic development,

including his formulation of the metaphysical theory of the Forms. On this basis we should see Socrates as an original philosopher who developed a new method of intellectual inquiry.

If Socrates was to be successful in overcoming the relativism and skepticism of the Sophists, he had to discover some immovable foundation upon which to build an edifice of knowledge. Socrates discovered this foundation within people, and not in the facts of the external world. The inner life, said Socrates, is the seat of a unique activity—the activity of knowing, which leads to the practical activity of doing. To describe this activity, Socrates developed the conception of the soul, or *psyche*. For him the soul was not any particular faculty, nor was it any special kind of substance. Instead, it was the capacity for intelligence and character; it was a person's conscious personality. Socrates further described what he meant by the soul as "that within us in virtue of which we are pronounced wise or foolish, good or bad." By describing it in these terms, Socrates identified the soul with the normal powers of intelligence and character, not as some ghostly substance. The soul was the structure of personality. However difficult it may have been for Socrates to describe exactly what the soul is, he was sure that the activity of the soul is to *know* and to influence or even direct and govern a person's daily conduct. Although for Socrates the soul was not a *thing*, he could say that our greatest concern should be the proper care of our souls so as to "make the soul as good as possible." We take best care of our souls when we understand the difference between fact and fancy, and thereby build our thought upon a knowledge of what human life is really like. Having attained such knowledge, those who have the proper care of their soul in mind will conduct their behavior in accordance with their knowledge of true moral values. In a nutshell Socrates was primarily concerned with *the good life*, and not with mere contemplation.

For Socrates the key point in this conception of the soul concerns our conscious awareness of what some words mean. To know that some things contradict others—for example, that justice cannot mean harming others—is a typical example of what the soul can discover simply by using its abilities to know. We thus do violence to our human nature when we act in defiance of this knowledge, such as when we harm someone while fully aware that such behavior is contrary to our knowledge of justice. Socrates was certain that people could attain sure and reliable knowledge, and that only such knowledge could be the proper basis of morality. His first major task, therefore, was to clarify for himself and his followers just *how* one attains reliable knowledge.

Socrates' Theory of Knowledge: Intellectual Midwifery

Socrates was convinced that the surest way to attain reliable knowledge was through the practice of disciplined conversation, with this conversation acting as an intellectual midwife. This method, which he called *dialectic*, is a deceptively simple technique. It always begins with a discussion of the most obvious aspects of any problem. Through the process of dialogue, in which all parties to the conversation are forced to clarify their ideas, the final outcome of the conversation is

a clear statement of what is meant. Although the technique appeared simple, it was not long before anyone upon whom Socrates employed it could feel its intense rigor, as well as the discomfort of Socrates' irony. In the earliest dialogues in which this method is displayed, Socrates pretends to be ignorant about a subject and then tries to draw out from the other people their fullest possible knowledge about it. His assumption was that by progressively correcting incomplete or inaccurate notions, he could coax the truth out of anyone. He would often expose contradictions lurking beneath the other person's views—a technique called *elenchus*—and thereby force the person to abandon his or her misdirected opinion. If the human mind was incapable of knowing something, Socrates would want to demonstrate that, too. Accordingly, he believed that no unexamined *idea* is worth having any more than the unexamined *life* is worth living. Some dialogues therefore end inconclusively, since Socrates was concerned not with imposing a set of dogmatic ideas upon his listeners but with leading them through an orderly process of thought.

We find a good example of Socrates' method in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*. The scene is in front of the hall of King Archon, where Socrates is waiting in the hope of discovering who has brought suit against him for *impiety*, which was a capital offense. Young Euthyphro arrives on the scene and explains that he plans to bring charges of impiety against his own father. With devastating irony Socrates expresses relief at his good fortune in meeting him, for Euthyphro is making the identical charge against his father that has been made against Socrates. Sarcastically, Socrates says to Euthyphro that "not every one could rightly do what you are doing; only a man who is well advanced in wisdom." Only someone who knew exactly what impiety meant would charge anyone with such a serious offense. And to bring such a charge against one's *father* would only corroborate the assumption that the accuser knew what he was talking about. Socrates professes ignorance of the meaning of impiety and asks Euthyphro to explain what it means, since he has charged his father with this offense.

Euthyphro answers Socrates by defining piety as "prosecuting the wrongdoer" and impiety as not prosecuting him. To this Socrates replies, "I did not ask you to tell me one or two of all the many pious actions that there are; I want to know what is the *concept* of piety which makes all pious actions pious." Since his first definition was unsatisfactory, Euthyphro tries again, this time saying that "what is pleasing to the gods is pious." But Socrates points out that the gods quarrel among themselves, which shows that they disagree about what is better and worse. The same act, then, can be pleasing to some gods and not pleasing to others. So, Euthyphro's second definition is also inadequate. Trying to repair the damage, Euthyphro offers a new definition, saying that "piety is what *all* the gods love, and impiety is what they *all* hate." But, asks Socrates, "do the gods love an act because it is pious, or is it pious because the gods love it?" In short, what is the *essence* of piety? Trying again, Euthyphro says that piety is "that part of justice which has to do with the attention which is due to the gods." Again, Socrates presses for a clearer definition by asking what kind of attention is due to the gods. By this time Euthyphro is hopelessly adrift, and Socrates says, "It cannot be that you would ever have undertaken to prosecute

your aged father . . . unless you had known exactly what is piety and impiety." And when Socrates presses him once more for a clearer definition, Euthyphro answers, "Another time . . . Socrates. I am in a hurry now, and it is time for me to be off."

The dialogue ends inconclusively as far as the subject of piety is concerned. Nevertheless, it is a vivid example of Socrates' method of dialectic and a portrayal of his conception of the philosophical life. More specifically, it illustrates Socrates' unique concern with *definition* as the instrument of clear thought.

The Importance of Definition Nowhere is Socrates' approach to knowledge more clearly displayed than in his preoccupation with the process of definition. It is also in his emphasis on definition that Socrates most decisively combats the Sophists: Terms have definite meanings, and this undermines relativism. For him a definition is a clear and fixed concept. Although particular events or things varied in some respects or passed away, Socrates was impressed with the fact that something about them was the same—that is, never varied and never passed away. This was their definition, or their essential nature. It was this permanent meaning that Socrates wanted Euthyphro to give him when he asked for that "concept of Piety which makes all pious acts pious." In a similar way Socrates sought after the concept of *Justice* by which acts become just, and the concept of *Beauty* by which particular things are said to be beautiful, and the concept of *Goodness* by which we recognize human acts to be good. For example, no particular thing is perfectly beautiful; it is beautiful only because it partakes of the larger concept of Beauty. Moreover, when a beautiful thing passes away, the concept of Beauty remains. Socrates was struck by our ability to think about general ideas and not only about particular things.

He argued that in some way we think of two different kinds of objects whenever we think about anything. A beautiful flower is at once *this particular flower* and at the same time an exemplar or partaker of the general or *universal meaning of Beauty*. Definition, for Socrates, involves a process by which our minds can distinguish or sort out these two objects of thought, namely, the particular (this beautiful flower) and the general or universal (the concept of Beauty of which this flower partakes so as to make it a beautiful flower). If Socrates asked, "What is a beautiful flower?" or "What is a pious act?" he would not be satisfied with your pointing to this flower or this act. For, although Beauty is in some way connected with a given thing, that thing does not either equal or exhaust the concept of Beauty. Moreover, although various beautiful things differ from each other, whether they are flowers or people, they are each called beautiful because, in spite of their differences, they share in common that element by which they are called beautiful. Only by the rigorous process of definition can we finally grasp the distinction between a particular thing (this beautiful flower) and the general fixed notion (Beauty or beautiful). The process of definition, as Socrates worked it out, is a process for arriving at clear and fixed concepts.

Through this technique of definition, Socrates showed that true knowledge is more than simply an inspection of facts. Knowledge has to do with our ability

to discover in facts the abiding elements that remain after the facts disappear. Beauty remains after the rose fades. To the mind an imperfect triangle suggests *the* Triangle; imperfect circles are seen as approximations to the perfect Circle, the definition of which produces the clear and fixed notion of Circle. Facts can produce a variety of notions, for no two flowers are the same. By the same token no two people and no two cultures are the same. If we limited our knowledge simply to uninterpreted facts, we would conclude that everything is different, and there are no universal likenesses. The Sophists did just this, and from the facts they collected about other cultures, they argued that all notions of justice and goodness are relative. But Socrates would not accept this conclusion. To him the factual differences between people—for example, the differences in their height, strength, and mental ability—did not obscure the equally certain fact that they were all people. By his process of definition, he cut through the obvious factual differences about particular people and discovered what makes each person a person, in spite of the differences. His clear concept of *humanness* provided him with a firm basis for thinking about people. Similarly, though cultures differ, though their actual laws and moral rules differ, still, said Socrates, the notions of Law, Justice, and Goodness can be defined as rigorously as the notion of human being. Instead of leading to intellectual skepticism and moral relativism, Socrates believed that the variety of facts around us could yield clear and fixed concepts, so long as we employed the technique of analysis and definition.

Behind the world of facts, then, Socrates believed there was an order in things that we could discover. This led him to introduce into philosophy a way of looking at everything in the universe, namely, a *teleological* conception of things—the view that things have a function or purpose and tend toward the good. To say, for example, that a person has a definable nature is also to say that a special activity is appropriate to his or her nature. If people are rational beings, acting rationally is the behavior appropriate to human nature. From this it is a short step to saying that people *ought* to act rationally. By discovering the essential nature of everything, Socrates believed that he could thereby also discover the intelligible order in everything. On this view, not only do things have their own specific natures and functions, but these functions have some additional purpose in the whole scheme of things. There are many kinds of things in the universe, not because of some haphazard mixture, but because each thing does one thing best, and things acting together make up the orderly universe. Clearly, Socrates could distinguish between two levels of knowledge, one based upon the *inspection* of facts and the other based upon the *interpretation* of facts. Alternatively, one is based on particular things and the other on general or universal concepts.

The fact that universal concepts, such as Beauty, Straight, Triangle, and Human Being, are always used in discourse certainly suggests that there is some basis in reality for their use. The big question is whether these universal concepts refer to some *existing reality* in the same way that particular words do. If the word *John* refers to a person existing in a particular place, does the concept *Human Being* also refer to some reality someplace? Whether Socrates dealt with this problem of the metaphysical status of universals depends on whether we

consider Plato or Socrates to be the author of the theory of the Forms. Plato certainly taught that these conceptual Forms, whatever they are, are the most real things there are and that they have a separate existence from the particular things we see, which partake of these Forms. Aristotle rejected this theory of the separate existence of Forms, arguing that in some way universal forms exist only in the actual things we experience. He showed, too, that Socrates had not "separated off" these Forms from things. If Socrates was not the author of the theory of Forms, found in the Platonic dialogues, he was, nevertheless, the one who fashioned the notion of an intelligible order lying behind the visible world.

Socrates' Moral Thought

For Socrates knowledge and virtue were the same thing. If virtue has to do with "making the soul as good as possible," it is first necessary to know what makes the soul good. Therefore, goodness and knowledge are closely related. But Socrates said more about morality than simply this. He in fact identified goodness and knowledge, saying that to know the good is to do the good, that knowledge is virtue. By identifying knowledge and virtue, Socrates meant also to say that vice, or evil, is the absence of knowledge. Just as knowledge is virtue, so, too, vice is ignorance. The outcome of this line of reasoning was Socrates' conviction that no one ever indulged in vice or committed an evil act knowingly. Wrongdoing, he said, is always involuntary, being the product of ignorance.

To equate virtue with knowledge and vice with ignorance may seem to contradict our most elementary human experiences. Common sense tells us that we frequently indulge in acts that we know to be wrong, so that wrongdoing for us is a deliberate and voluntary act. Socrates would have readily agreed that we commit acts that can be called evil. He denied, however, that people deliberately performed evil acts because they knew them to be evil. When people commit evil acts, said Socrates, they always do them thinking that they are good in some way.

When he equated virtue and knowledge, Socrates had in mind a particular conception of virtue. For him virtue meant fulfilling one's function. As a rational being, a person's function is to behave rationally. At the same time, every human being has the inescapable desire for happiness or the well-being of his or her soul. This inner well-being, this "making the soul as good as possible," can be achieved only by certain appropriate types of behavior. Because we have a desire for happiness, we choose our acts with the hope that they will bring us happiness. Which acts, or what behavior, will produce happiness? Socrates knew that some forms of behavior *appear* to produce happiness, but *in reality* do not. For this reason we frequently choose acts that may in themselves be questionable but that we nevertheless think will bring us happiness. Thieves may know that stealing as such is wrong, but they steal in the hope that it will bring them happiness. Similarly, we pursue power, physical pleasure, and property, which are the symbols of success and happiness, confusing these with the true ground of happiness.

The equating of vice with ignorance is not so contrary to common sense after all, since the ignorance Socrates speaks of refers to an act's ability to

produce happiness, not to the act itself. It is ignorance about one's soul, about what it takes to "make the soul as good as possible." Wrongdoing is, therefore, a consequence of an inaccurate estimate of types of behavior. It is the inaccurate expectation that certain kinds of things or pleasures will produce happiness. Wrongdoing, then, is the product of ignorance simply because it is done with the hope that it will do what it cannot do. Ignorance consists in failing to see that certain behavior cannot produce happiness. It takes a true knowledge of human nature to know what is required to be happy. It also takes a true knowledge of things and types of behavior to know whether they can fulfill the human requirements for happiness. And it requires knowledge to be able to distinguish between what *appears* to give happiness and what *really* does.

To say, then, that vice is ignorance and is involuntary is to say that no one ever deliberately chooses to damage, disfigure, or destroy his or her human nature. Even when we choose pain, we do so with the expectation that this pain will lead to virtue and to the fulfillment of our human nature—a nature that seeks its own well-being. We always think we are acting rightly. But whether our actions are right depends on whether they harmonize with true human nature, and this is a matter of true knowledge. Moreover, because Socrates believed that the fundamental structure of human nature is constant, he also believed that virtuous behavior is constant as well. This was the basis for his great triumph over the Sophists' skepticism and relativism. Socrates set the direction that moral philosophy would take throughout the history of Western civilization. His thought was modified by Plato, Aristotle, and the Christian theologians, but it remained the dominant intellectual and moral tradition around which other variations developed.

Socrates' Trial and Death

Convinced that the care of the human soul should be our greatest concern, Socrates spent most of his time examining his own life, as well as the lives and thoughts of other Athenians. While Athens was a secure and powerful democracy under Pericles, Socrates could pursue his mission as a "gadfly" without serious opposition. He relentlessly looked for the stable and constant moral order underlying people's irregular behavior. This quest proved alternately irritating and amusing and gave him the reputation as an intellectual who dealt in paradoxes. Worse still, people believed that he thought too freely about sensitive issues that, according to many Athenians, shouldn't be questioned. Nevertheless, as long as Athens was in a position of economic and military strength, Socrates could question things as he pleased, without penalty. However, as Athens' social climate moved toward a condition of crisis and defeat, Socrates was no longer immune from sanction. His efforts to develop dialectical skill among young people from leading families had raised suspicions—particularly the skill of asking searching questions about customs in moral, religious, and political behavior. But his actions were not considered a clear and present danger until Athens was at war with Sparta.

A series of events connected with this war eventually led to the trial and sentence of Socrates. One event was the traitorous actions of Alcibiades, whom the Athenians knew was Socrates' pupil. Alcibiades actually went to Sparta and gave valuable advice to the Spartans in their war with Athens. Inevitably, many Athenians concluded that Socrates must in some way be responsible for what Alcibiades did. In addition, Socrates found himself in serious disagreement with the Committee of the Senate of Five Hundred, of which he was a member. The issue before them was the case of eight military commanders who were charged with negligence at a naval battle off the islands of Arginusae. The Athenians won this battle, but at the staggering cost of 25 ships and 4000 men. It was decided that the eight generals involved in this expensive campaign should be brought to trial. However, instead of determining the guilt of each general one by one, the Committee was instructed to take a single vote concerning the guilt of the whole group. At first the Committee resisted this move, holding it to be a violation of regular constitutional procedures. But when the prosecutors threatened to add the names of the Committee members to the list of generals, only Socrates stood his ground; the rest of the Committee capitulated. The generals were then found guilty, and the six of them who were in custody were immediately put to death. These events occurred in 406 BCE. In 404 BCE, with the fall of Athens, Socrates once again found himself in opposition to a formidable group. Under pressure from the Spartan victor, a Commission of Thirty was set up to fashion legislation for the new government of Athens. Instead, this group became a violent oligarchy, arbitrarily executing former supporters of Pericles' democratic order and seizing property for themselves. Within a year this oligarchy had been removed by force and a democratic order restored. Unfortunately for Socrates, however, some of the members of the revolutionary oligarchy had been his close friends, particularly Critias and Charmides. This was another occasion of guilt by association, as in the case of Alcibiades, whereby Socrates was put in the position of being a teacher of traitors. By this time, irritation had developed into distrust, and in 399 BCE, Socrates was brought to trial on the charge, as the Greek philosopher Diogenes Laertius recorded it, "(1) of not worshipping the gods whom the State worships, but introducing new and unfamiliar religious practices; (2) and, further, of corrupting the young. The prosecutor demands the death penalty."

Socrates could have gone into voluntary exile upon hearing the charges against him. Instead, he remained in Athens and defended himself before a court whose jury numbered about 500. His defense, as recorded in Plato's *Apology*, is a brilliant proof of his intellectual prowess. It is also a powerful exposure of his accusers' motives and the inadequacy of the grounds for their charges. He emphasized his lifelong devotion to Athens, including references to his military service and his actions in upholding constitutional procedures in the trial of the generals. His defense is a model of forceful argument, resting wholly on a recitation of facts and on the requirements of rational discourse. When he was found guilty, he was given the opportunity to suggest his own sentence. Being convinced not only of his innocence but of the value of his type

of life and teachings to Athens, he proposed that Athens should reward him by giving him what he deserved. Comparing himself to someone "who has won victory at the Olympic games with his horse or chariots," Socrates said, "such a man only makes you seem happy, but I make you really happy." Therefore, he said, his reward should be "public maintenance in the prytaneum," an honor bestowed on eminent Athenians, generals, Olympians, and other outstanding people. Affronted by his arrogance, the jury sentenced him to death.

To the end his friends tried to make possible his escape, but Socrates would have none of it. Just as he refused to play on the emotions of the jury by calling attention to his wife and young children, so now he was not impressed by the plea of his student, Crito, that he should think of his children. How could he undo all he had taught others and unmake his conviction that he must never play fast and loose with the truth? Socrates was convinced that to escape would be to defy and thereby injure Athens and its procedures of law. That would be to strike at the wrong target. The laws were not responsible for his trial and sentence; it was his misguided accusers, Anytus and Meletus, who were at fault. Accordingly, he confirmed his respect for the laws and the procedures by complying with the court's sentence.

Describing Socrates' last moments after he drank the poisonous hemlock, Plato writes in his *Phaedo* that "Socrates felt himself, and said that when it came to his heart, he should be gone. He was already growing cold . . . and spoke for the last time. Crito, he said, I owe a cock to Asclepius; do not forget to pay it . . . Such was the end . . . of our friend, a man, I think, who was, of all the men of his time, the best, the wisest and the most just."