

XENOPHON

CONVERSATIONS
OF
SOCRATES

Translated by Hugh Tredennick and Robin Waterfield,
and edited with new material by Robin Waterfield

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To T. J. S.

MEMOIRS OF SOCRATES

TRANSLATED BY HUGH TREDENNICK
TRANSLATION REVISED AND INTRODUCED BY
ROBIN WATERFIELD

MEMOIRS OF SOCRATES

BOOK ONE

I have often wondered what arguments Socrates' accusers can possibly have used to convince the people of Athens that he deserved execution. The indictment against him ran something like this: Socrates is a malefactor, firstly, in that he does not recognize the gods recognized by the State, but introduces new deities; secondly, in that he corrupts the young.¹

With regard to the first charge, that he did not recognize the gods recognized by the State, on what evidence can they possibly have relied? Everyone could see that he sacrificed regularly at home and also at the public altars of the State; and he made no secret of using divination; in fact it was common gossip that Socrates claimed that the divine communicated to him.² This, I imagine, was the chief reason for accusing him of introducing new deities. Yet he was no more heretical than any other people who believe in divination and rely on portents and omens and chance meetings and sacrifices. They do not suppose that the birds they see or the people they meet know what is the right course for those who are consulting the diviner; they believe that these things are simply means used by the gods to communicate, and Socrates took the same view. But whereas most people say that it is the omen or the encounter that dissuades or encourages them, Socrates asserted what he actually believed: he said that the divine

1. See pp. 32-6 on the charges against Socrates.

2. See pp. 34-5.

MEMOIRS OF SOCRATES I.I.1-I.I.8

does the communicating. He often warned his associates to do this or not to do that, at the prompting of the divine, and those who took his advice benefited from it, while those who did not were sorry for it afterwards. Surely anyone would agree that Socrates did not want to seem either a fool or an impostor to his companions; and he would have been thought both if he had been manifestly mistaken in making what he claimed to be divine revelations about the future. It seems obvious, then, that he would not have predicted the future if he had not been sure that his statements would come true; and who could base this trust on anything other than a god? And if he trusted in gods, he surely must have believed in gods.¹

Besides, towards his intimate friends he adopted the following line: if an action was unavoidable, he advised them to carry it out as they thought best, but where the result of an action was uncertain, he sent them to consult a diviner to see if the action should be taken. He said that anyone who proposed to run an estate or a country efficiently needed the help of divination. Skill in carpentry or metalwork or farming or government, or critical ability in these subjects, or proficiency in mathematics or estate-management or military science – all these attainments he considered to be within the scope of human choice and judgement; but he said that the most important aspects of these subjects the gods reserved for themselves, and none of them were revealed to mortals.² A man who has sown a field well cannot tell who will reap the harvest; and a man who has built a house well cannot tell who will live in it. A general cannot tell whether it is to his advantage to hold his command, and a politician cannot tell whether it is to his advantage to be the head of the State. The man who has married a beautiful wife for his pleasure cannot tell whether she will cause him pain, and the man who has secured influential connections in his native land cannot tell whether they

1. This misses the point, since Socrates was not charged with atheism, but with religious non-conformism.

2. See *The Estate-manager*, 5.18-20 (pp. 307-8) for an example.

will result in his banishment from it. To suppose that such consequences are all a matter of human judgement and contain no element of the divine was, he said, superstition; and he also said it was superstition to consult diviners about questions which the gods had enabled us to decide by the use of our wits (for example, supposing one were to ask whether it is better to engage a qualified or an unqualified driver for a carriage, or helmsman for one's ship), or to which the answers can be found by calculation or measuring or weighing. People who put this sort of question to the gods were, in his opinion, acting wrongly. He said that where the gods have given us power to act by the use of our intelligence, we ought to use it; but where the outcome is concealed from human beings, we should try to discover it from the gods by divination; for the gods communicate to those whom they favour.

Then again, Socrates was always in the public eye. Early in the morning he used to make his way to the covered walks and the recreation grounds, and when the agora became busy he was there in full view; and he always spent the rest of the day where he expected to find the most company. He talked most of the time, and anyone who liked could listen. But nobody ever saw Socrates do, or heard him say, anything that was heretical or irreverent. He did not discourse about the nature of the physical universe, as most other philosophers did,¹ inquiring into the constitution of the cosmos (as the sages call it)² and the causes of the various celestial phenomena; on the contrary, he pointed out the foolishness of those who concerned themselves with such questions. In the first place, he inquired whether they proceeded to these studies only when they thought they had a sufficient knowledge of human problems, or whether they felt that they were right in disregarding human problems and inquiring into divine matters.

1. According to Plato (*Phaedo*, 96a-99d), Socrates, when young, was interested in natural science, but became disillusioned with it and pioneered his new philosophy. See also Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 19b, 26b-d; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987b; and p. 255, n. 3.
2. The word 'cosmos' literally means 'order' or 'beauty'.

He expressed surprise that it was not obvious to them that human minds cannot discover these secrets, inasmuch as those who claim most confidently to pronounce upon them do not hold the same theories, but disagree with one another just like lunatics. He pointed out that some lunatics don't even fear what is fearful, and others are terrified of things that aren't terrible; some don't scruple to say or do anything even in a crowd, and others feel that they can't even show themselves in public; some show no respect for temples or altars or anything else that is sacred, and others worship stones and odd pieces of wood and animals. In the same way, he said, some of those who ponder about the nature of the universe think that reality is one, and others that it is infinitely many; some think that everything is always in motion, and others that nothing can ever be moved; some think that everything comes to be and passes away, and others that nothing can come to be or pass away.¹

He also raised this further question about them: whether, just as those who study human nature expect to achieve some result from their studies for the benefit of themselves or of some other selected person, so these students of divine matters expect that, when they have discovered the laws that govern the various phenomena, they will produce at will winds and rain and changes of season and any other such required effect;² or whether they have no such expectation, but are content with the mere knowledge of how these various phenomena occur.

That is how he spoke about people who occupied themselves with these speculations. He himself always discussed human matters, trying to find out the nature of piety and impiety, honour and dishonour, right and wrong, sanity and lunacy, courage and cowardice, State and statesman, government and the capacity for government, and all other subjects the knowledge of which he thought marked truly good men, while those who were ignorant of them might fairly be called slavish.

1. The followers of Parmenides claimed that everything was one, unmoving and unchanging; the followers of Heraclitus held the opposite.
2. Empedocles promised such abilities to his students (Fragment 111).

In so far as his views were not clearly known, it is no wonder that the jury formed a wrong estimate; but is it not extraordinary that they should have taken no account of what was common knowledge? On one occasion, when he had been elected to the Council and had taken the councillor's oath, which included the clause 'I will act in accordance with the law', he was chosen to preside in the Assembly.¹ The people were bent on putting Thrasyllus and Erasinides² and all their colleagues to death by a single resolution in defiance of the law. But Socrates refused to put the motion to the vote, although the people were angry with him and a number of influential men threatened him; he thought it more important to keep his oath than wrongfully to curry favour with the people and defend himself against intimidation.

He believed that the gods care for men, but not in the way that most people believe they do. They suppose that the gods know some things but not others; but Socrates believed that they know everything, both words and actions and unspoken intentions, and that they are present everywhere and communicate to people about all kinds of human affairs. So I cannot understand how the people of Athens were persuaded that Socrates was heretical in his religious beliefs, when he never said or did anything irreverent, but on the contrary, in his relationship to the gods, said and did only what was recognizably consistent with the deepest reverence.

2

It also seems extraordinary to me that any people should have been persuaded that Socrates had a bad influence upon young men. Besides what I have said already, he was in the first place the

1. In spite of this statement, echoed in 4.4 (p. 195), Socrates was probably not presiding at the time, and merely voted against the illegal motion (see also Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 32b-c; *Gorgias*, 473e; Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 1.7.15). On the Council and the Assembly, see p. 46, n. 1.
2. Two of the Athenian commanders at the battle of Arginusae in 406. Although victorious, they were prosecuted for negligence in rescuing the crews of sunken warships.

most self-disciplined of men in respect of his sexual and other appetites; then he was most tolerant of cold and heat and hardships of all kinds; and finally he had so trained himself to be moderate in his requirements that he was very easily satisfied with very few possessions. So if he himself was like this, how could he have made others irreverent or criminal or greedy or sensual or work-shy? On the contrary, he rescued many from these states by inspiring them with a desire for goodness and offering them hope that, if they took themselves in hand, they would become truly good. At the same time he never undertook to teach how this could be done; but by obviously *being* such a person, he made those who spent their time with him hope that, if they followed his example, they would develop the same character.

He neither neglected the body himself nor commended others for doing so. He disapproved of over-eating followed by violent exercise, but approved of taking enough exercise to work off the amount of food that the mind accepts with pleasure; he said that this was quite a healthy practice and did not hinder the cultivation of the mind. He was certainly not foppish or ostentatious either in his clothing or in his footwear or in the rest of his daily life. Nor again did he make his associates money-lovers: he rid them of all other desires except for his company, and for that he charged no fee.¹ In eschewing fees, he considered that he was protecting his own independence; those who accepted a fee in return for their services he nicknamed 'self-enslavers', because they were obliged to converse with those who paid the fee. He expressed surprise that a man who offered to teach goodness should demand to be paid for it and, instead of anticipating the greatest possible gain through obtaining a good friend, should be afraid that the person who has become truly good will feel less than the deepest gratitude to his supreme benefactor. Socrates never made any such offer to anyone, but he believed that those of his associates who accepted the principles which he himself approved would be good friends all their life long to himself and to one another.

1. Unlike the sophists, who were professional teachers.

How, then, could such a person have a corrupting influence upon the young – unless the cultivation of goodness is a form of corruption?

But it is a fact, according to his accuser,¹ that he encouraged his associates to make light of constitutional practice by saying that it was foolish to appoint political leaders by lot,² and that nobody would employ a candidate chosen by lot as a pilot or a carpenter or a musician or for any other such post – although if these posts are badly filled, they cause far less harm than bad political appointments; and the accuser said that this sort of talk encouraged the young to despise the established constitution and made them unruly. But I think that those who exercise reason and believe that they are capable of teaching their fellow citizens what is for their good are most unlikely to become unruly, since they know that violence involves enmity and danger, whereas persuasion produces the same results without danger and in a friendly spirit; for the victims of violence feel that they have been deprived, and are resentful, while those who have yielded to persuasion are appreciative of having received a kindness. So violence is not to be expected of those who exercise reason; such conduct belongs to those who have strength without judgement. I may add that anyone who ventures to use violence will also need not a few accomplices, while the man who can persuade will need none, because he will be sure of his power to persuade even if he is single-handed. Also, such people are most unlikely to commit murder. Who would choose to kill a man rather than have him alive and acquiescent?

However, according to Socrates' accuser, Critias and Alcibiades, who had belonged to Socrates' circle, did more harm to their country than any other persons. Critias developed into the most avaricious and violent of all the oligarchs, and Alcibiades in

1. This prosecutor is probably not one of those who indicted Socrates at his actual trial, but Polycrates, who wrote a pamphlet, probably shortly after Socrates' death, attacking him. However, Xenophon returns to Socrates' actual trial at the end of this chapter (1.2.62).
2. This was the Athenian system for the majority of political appointments.

his turn became the most dissolute and arrogant of all the democrats. For my part, I shall not defend any wrong that these men did to the State; I shall merely explain how their connection with Socrates came about.¹

These two men were by nature the most ambitious persons in all Athens, determined to have personal control over all State affairs and to be famous above all others. They knew that Socrates lived quite contentedly on very slender resources, and that he was absolutely self-disciplined in respect of all pleasures, and that he could do as he liked in argument with anyone who conversed with him. Given that they were aware of these facts, and were men of the kind that I have described, should one say that they courted Socrates' society because they desired his way of life and the self-discipline which he had, or because they thought that by associating with him they would acquire the highest efficiency in speech and action? My opinion is that if God had offered them the choice between living out their lives as they saw Socrates living his, and dying, they would have preferred to die. They showed as much by their conduct: as soon as they felt superior to the rest of the company, they broke away from Socrates and took up politics, the object for which they had courted his society.

Perhaps it might be objected that Socrates should not have taught his associates politics before he taught them self-discipline. I do not dispute this, but I observe that all teachers show their pupils how they themselves practise what they preach, and lead them on by reasoned argument. I know that Socrates in the same way made it clear to his companions that he was a truly good man, and excelled in discussing ethical questions and all other human problems. And I know that both those men too were self-disciplined so long as they associated with Socrates – not because they were afraid of being punished or hit by him, but because they thought then that it was best to behave so.

No doubt many professed philosophers² would say that a just

1. For more on these two, see pp. 37–9.
2. Including Antisthenes, a Socratic who became a substantial philosopher in his own right.

man can never become unjust, nor a self-disciplined man a bully, just as one who has learned any other subject can never become ignorant of it. But this is not my view of the matter. It seems clear to me that just as those who do not exercise their bodies cannot carry out their physical duties, so those who do not exercise their characters cannot carry out their moral duties: they can neither do what they ought to do nor avoid what they ought to avoid. That is why fathers keep their sons (even if they are right-minded) away from bad men, because they believe that the company of good people is a training in virtue, while the company of bad men is the ruin of it. Witness to this fact is borne by the poet who says:

Good company will edify you; bad
Will rob you even of the wits you had.¹

And the one who says:

But good men are by turns both base and brave.²

And I can add my testimony to this. For I observe that just as epic poetry fades from the minds of those who fail to rehearse it, so those who neglect what their teachers tell them are liable to forget it. Now, when a person forgets the advice he has been given, it means that he has also forgotten the influences that set his heart on self-discipline; and when he has forgotten these, it is not surprising that he should forget self-discipline too. I observe also that those who have developed a taste for drinking, or have become involved in love affairs, are less capable of attending to what they ought to do and of abstaining from what they ought not to do.³ I mean, often those who were able to control their spending before they were in love, after they have fallen in love, can do so no more; and when once they have run through their money, they no longer reject in disdain the sources of profit which they rejected before. So how can it be impossible for one

1. *Theognis* 35-6.

2. The line is also quoted by Plato, *Protagoras*, 344d; but the author is unknown.

3. Compare *The Estate-manager*, 12.10-12 (p. 333).

who was self-disciplined before to be undisciplined later, or for one who was formerly able to act rightly to be unable later? On the contrary, it seems to me that every truly good thing needs to be exercised, and not least self-discipline; for the appetites that are implanted with the soul in the same body encourage it not to be self-disciplined, but to gratify both them and the body in the quickest possible way.

Critias and Alcibiades, then, as long as they kept company with Socrates, were able by his help to master their ignoble desires. But when they had parted from him, Critias was banished to Thessaly and attached himself to men who indulged more in law-breaking than in upright conduct. Alcibiades, on the other hand, was courted because of his good looks by many women of rank, and, because of his prestige in the city and among the allies, he was pampered by many influential men and held in honour by the people, and enjoyed an easily won supremacy; and just as athletes who easily achieve supremacy in athletic competitions neglect their exercises, so he neglected himself.

Since this is what happened to Alcibiades and Critias, and since they were exalted by their birth, elated by their wealth, puffed up with their power, and spoiled by many people, is it any wonder that, when they were corrupted for all these reasons and long separated from Socrates, they became overbearing? Socrates' accuser holds him responsible for all their faults; does he find nothing creditable in the fact that in their youth, when it was natural that they should be most irresponsible and undisciplined, Socrates made them behave decently? That is not how other cases are decided. If the teacher of a wind or string instrument or of some other art has made his pupils proficient, and they then attach themselves to other teachers and deteriorate, is the first teacher blamed for this result? If a man's son through attaching himself to some teacher becomes self-disciplined, and later through associating with somebody else becomes vicious, does the father blame the first teacher? Surely he gives him the greater credit in proportion as the son shows himself worse in the company of the latter. In fact, when fathers themselves look after their sons, if

the sons go wrong, the fathers are not blamed for it, if they themselves have been impeccable in their conduct. Socrates ought to be judged in the same way. If he himself had done anything bad, he might reasonably have been regarded as a bad person; but if he was consistently scrupulous, how can he justly be held responsible for a fault which he did not possess?

However, even though he himself did nothing discreditable, if he had expressed approval of these men when he saw them behaving badly, he would have deserved censure. Well, when he noticed that Critias was in love with Euthydemus and was trying to seduce him, like one seeking to gratify his sexual appetite, Socrates tried to dissuade him by insisting that it was slavish and improper for a truly good man to solicit his favourite, to whom he wishes to appear in a creditable light, importuning him like a beggar and entreating him to grant his favours, especially since those favours are far from honourable. And when Critias paid no attention to these protests and was not diverted from his purpose, Socrates is reported to have said, in the presence of several persons including Euthydemus himself, that Critias seemed to be suffering from pig's itch: he wanted to scratch himself against Euthydemus like a piglet scratching itself against a stone. This made Critias take a dislike to Socrates, so that when as one of the Thirty¹ he became a legislator along with Charicles, he held it against Socrates and introduced a law against teaching 'the art of debate'. He did this out of spite towards Socrates, since he had no means of attacking him other than misrepresenting him to the public by applying to him the usual layman's allegation against all philosophers.² I never heard Socrates do this myself, nor did I ever know anyone else claim to have heard him do so.

He made his position quite clear. When the Thirty were putting to death many of the citizens (and those not the worst among

1. The Thirty Oligarchs seized power in Athens in 404, but were soon overthrown.

2. Probably 'making the worse argument appear the better case': cf. Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 112 ff., 872 ff.; Plato, *Apology*, 18b, 19b. See also *The Estate-manager*, 11.25 (p. 331).

them) and were inciting many others to do wrong, Socrates observed on one occasion that it seemed extraordinary to him that a man appointed to look after a herd of cattle who made them fewer and worse than they were before should not admit that he was a bad herdsman, and still more extraordinary that a man appointed as a political leader who was making the citizens fewer and worse than they were before was not ashamed and did not consider himself a bad political leader. This was reported to the tyrants, and Critias and Charicles summoned Socrates, and, calling his attention to the law, forbade him to converse with the young. Socrates asked them if he was allowed to ask for information about anything in their proclamation that he did not understand. They said he could.

'Well,' said he, 'I am prepared to obey the laws; but in order that I may not unconsciously offend through ignorance, I want you to make this point clear to me. When you order abstention from the art of debate, is it because you think it is accompanied by correctness or by incorrectness of speech? If by correctness, clearly I would have to refrain from speaking correctly; and if by incorrectness, clearly I would have to try to speak correctly.'

Charicles was annoyed with him and said, 'As you are so dense, Socrates, we issue you this warning, which is easier to grasp: do not converse with the young at all.'

'Well, then,' said Socrates, 'to prevent any misunderstanding, give me a definition of the age up to which one should regard people as young.'

Charicles replied, 'As long as they are considered too immature to serve on the Council; on this principle you are not to converse with men below the age of thirty.'

'Not even if I am buying something,' asked Socrates, 'and the seller is below the age of thirty? Can't I even ask what the price is?'

'Yes, of course you can ask that sort of question,' said Charicles. 'But Socrates, most of the questions *you* like to ask are ones to which you know the answers. That is the kind you must stop asking.'

'Am I not to reply either, then,' said Socrates, 'when a young

man asks me something, if I know the answer – like “Where does Charicles live?” or “Where’s Critias?”?”

‘Yes, of course you can answer that kind,’ said Charicles.

Critias interposed, ‘The people you will have to keep off, Socrates, are the cobblers and carpenters and smiths. They must be worn out by now with all your talk about them.’¹

‘Then must I also keep off the topics that they lead to,’ said Socrates, ‘morality and piety and so on?’

‘Certainly,’ said Charicles, ‘and from herdsmen. Otherwise you had better take care that you don’t decrease the number of the herd yourself.’

This made it plain that their hostility to Socrates was due to their having been told of his remark about the cattle.

So much for the nature of the association of Critias with Socrates and the relations between them.

I myself would deny that anyone can be instructed by a person of whom he disapproves; and it was not because they approved of him that Critias and Alcibiades associated with Socrates while they did associate with him, but because from the very first they had set out to be supreme in the State. Even while they were still in Socrates’ company, they tried to converse with the leading politicians in preference to anybody else. There is a story that when Alcibiades was still under twenty, he had the following conversation about the laws with Pericles, who was his guardian and the head of the State.

‘Tell me, Pericles,’ he said, ‘could you explain to me what law is?’

‘Most certainly,’ said Pericles.

‘Then please do so,’ said Alcibiades. ‘I hear people being praised for being law-abiding, and I presume that nobody can rightly win this praise if he does not know what law is.’

‘Well,’ said Pericles, ‘it’s not at all a difficult object that you’re seeking, Alcibiades, if you want to find out what law is. When the

1. Socrates used to support his arguments by analogies drawn from the trades and professions. On this Craft Analogy, see p. 14.

people, meeting together, approve and enact a proposal stating what should or should not be done, that is a law.’

‘On the assumption that good actions should be done, or bad ones?’

‘Good ones, of course, my boy, not bad ones.’

‘Supposing that instead of the whole people a small section of it (as happens when there is an oligarchy) meets and enacts what ought to be done – what is that?’

‘Everything that the powers that be in the State enact, after deliberating what should be done, is called a law.’

‘Then supposing a despot, being in power in the State, enacts what the citizens are to do, is that a law too?’

‘Yes, even the enactments of a despot in power are called laws.’

‘And what is violence and lawlessness, Pericles? Isn’t it when the stronger party compels the weaker to do what he wants by using force instead of persuasion?’

‘So I believe,’ said Pericles.

‘Then anything that a despot enacts and compels the citizens to do instead of persuading them is an example of lawlessness?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Pericles. ‘I retract the statement that what a despot enacts otherwise than by persuasion is law.’

‘And if the minority enacts something not by persuading the majority but by dominating it, should we call this violence or not?’

‘It seems to me,’ said Pericles, ‘that if one party, instead of persuading another, compels him to do something, whether by enactment or not, this is always violence rather than law.’

‘Then if the people as a whole uses not persuasion but its superior power to enact measures against the propertied classes, will that be violence rather than law?’

‘You know, Alcibiades,’ said Pericles, ‘when I was your age I was very clever too at this sort of thing; I used to practise just the same sort of ingenuity that I think you practise now.’

‘I wish I could have met you when you were at your cleverest, Pericles,’ said Alcibiades.

Well, as soon as they thought that they were a match for the

politicians, they stopped associating with Socrates – because, apart from their general lack of sympathy with him, whenever they came into his company they had the annoyance of having their mistakes exposed – and took up politics, which was the very object for which they had attached themselves to Socrates.

But Crito was Socrates' companion, and so were Chaerephon, Chaerecrates, Hermogenes, Simmias, Cebes, Phaedondas and others, who associated with him not because they wanted to become politicians or barristers, but because they wanted to become truly good men and to be able to behave properly towards their family, servants, relatives and friends, their State and their fellow citizens. Not one of these men at any period of his life did anything wrong, or was accused of doing so.

But Socrates, according to his accuser, taught children to treat their fathers with contempt by claiming to make those who associated with him wiser than their fathers, and asserting that it was legal to put even one's father in confinement after first getting him certified insane, and citing as evidence that it was lawful for the ignorant to be kept under restraint by the wise. Actually, Socrates thought that anyone who imprisoned people on the ground of ignorance might fairly be confined himself by those who understood what he did not. Such reflections led him often to examine the difference between ignorance and madness; and he considered that, whereas for mad people to be confined would be an advantage both to themselves and to those who were fond of them, the right thing for those who lacked necessary knowledge would be to learn from those who had it.

Socrates' accuser said that he lowered the regard of his associates not only for their fathers, but also for their other relatives, by saying that it is not their relatives that help the victims of disease or litigation, but doctors in the one case and competent advocates in the other. Still on the subject of friends, Socrates said, according to his accuser, that their goodwill is useless, unless there was a prospect of their being actually able to help one; and that the only friends who deserved to be esteemed were those who knew what was right and could make it clear to others. In this way, the

accuser said, Socrates, by prevailing on the young to believe that he was the wisest of men and best qualified to make others wise, so influenced his associates that nobody else had any position in their eyes by comparison with himself.

I know that Socrates did express these views both about fathers and other relatives and about friends; and what is more, that he said that when the soul, which is the one and only seat of the intelligence, had departed, people lose no time in carrying out and putting away the body of the person dearest to them. He used to say that even in life, although everyone is especially fond of his body, he is ready to give up any part of it that is useless or unprofitable, either removing it himself or getting someone else to do it. People cut their own nails and hair and corns, and allow surgeons to amputate and cauterize with consequential pain and suffering, and feel bound to show them gratitude and pay a fee; and they spit out phlegm from their mouths as far as they can, because its presence there does them no good and is much more likely to harm them. It was not with the object of instructing his friends to bury their fathers alive or cut themselves to pieces that Socrates stated these facts; by showing that what is without intelligence is without value, he was appealing to people to take pains to be as intelligent and helpful as possible, so that if a person wished for the regard of father or brother or anyone else, he might not rely on the relationship and take no trouble, but try to be of service to those whose regard he wished to obtain.

Another charge against Socrates was that he used to pick out the most immoral lines of the most famous poets and by using their evidence, taught his associates to be criminals and autocrats. The line of Hesiod, 'No work is shame, but idleness is shame,'¹ he is supposed to have explained as meaning that the poet bids us shrink from no kinds of work, not even such as are wicked or discreditable, but to do even these for the sake of gain. Actually, when Socrates had agreed that to be a worker was beneficial to a person and a good thing, while to be an idler was harmful and a

1. *Works and Days*, 309.

bad thing – in other words that to work was good and to be idle was bad – he used to add that only those who performed a good action were working and were good workers, while those who played dice or performed any other kind of worthless and punishable action he denounced as idlers. On this basis, 'No work is shame, but idleness is shame' would be quite correct.

He was also accused of constantly quoting the passage from Homer¹ which says about Odysseus:

Whenever he met some king, or man of distinction,
He would stand there and try to stop him with gentle words:
'Sir, you ought not to be scared, like any base coward;
Keep a grip on yourself and check the rest of the people . . .'
But when he came across a common man and found him wailing,
He would lash out with his staff and address him imperiously:
'Sir, stop your trembling and listen to the words of others
Who are your betters – you unsoldierly weakling,
Worthless in battle and in council.'

It was alleged that he interpreted this as meaning that the poet commended the beating of commoners and poor people. But that was not what Socrates meant. If it had been, he would have thought that he ought to be beaten himself. What he did say was that any people who could neither say nor do anything useful, and who were incapable, if the need arose, of helping the army or the State or even the citizen body, ought to be placed under every kind of restraint (especially if they are presumptuous too), even if they happen to be very rich. No; on the contrary, Socrates was obviously a friend of the people and well disposed towards all mankind. Although he gained many admirers, both native and foreign, he never charged any of them a fee for his company, but shared his resources unhesitatingly with everyone. Some people, after getting some scraps of wisdom from him free, sold them to others at a high price, and were not as democratic as he was,

1. *Iliad*, 2.188–91, 199–203. The Greeks are considering abandoning the siege of Troy. Comparison with Plato's *Protagoras* and *Hippias Minor*, for instance, suggests that Socrates used to imply that you could make poets mean anything you want.

because they refused to converse with those who could not pay. But Socrates, even in the eyes of the world at large, brought greater honour to his city than the celebrated Lichas did to Sparta. Lichas used to give a dinner to the foreigners who visited Lacedaemon for the festival of the Gymnopaedia,¹ but Socrates spent his life conferring the highest benefits at his own expense upon all who wanted them, for he never let his associates go without improving them.

Since Socrates was as I have described him, in my opinion he deserved to be honoured by the State rather than executed.² Consideration of the law would lead one to the same conclusion. According to law, death is the penalty for conviction as a thief or pickpocket or cutpurse or housebreaker or kidnapper or temple-robber: but Socrates was the last man on earth to commit these crimes. Moreover, in his public life he was never guilty of involving his country in an unsuccessful war, or in sedition or treason or any other calamity; and in his personal dealings he never deprived anyone of a benefit or got anyone into trouble, and he was never even accused of any such action. How, then, could he be guilty of the charge? So far from being an atheist, as was alleged in the indictment, he was obviously the most devout of men; and so far from corrupting the young, as he was accused of doing by his prosecutor, he obviously rid his associates of any wrong desires that they had and urged them to set their hearts on the finest and most splendid form of excellence, which makes both countries and estates well managed. By acting in this way he surely deserved high honour at the hands of his country.

3

I said above that in my opinion he actually benefited his associates, partly by practical example and partly by his conversation. I shall record as many instances as I can recall.

1. The 'Festival of Unarmed Dancing' (or possibly 'The Festival of the Naked Boys') was the most splendid of the Spartan festivals. All male Spartans participated by age-groups in the singing, dancing and sport.
2. Compare Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 36b–37a.

As regards religion, anyone can see that Socrates' behaviour accorded exactly with the Pythia's advice to those who inquire what they ought to do about sacrifices or showing respect to ancestors or any other such observance.¹ The Pythia replies that they will show proper piety if they act in accordance with the law of the land. Socrates both acted on this principle himself and urged others to do so; and he thought that those who acted otherwise were acting excessively and foolishly.

He prayed to the gods simply to give him what was good, recognizing that they know best what is good for us. He thought that to pray for gold or silver or unlimited power or anything of that sort was just like praying for a throw of dice or a battle or anything else with an obviously unpredictable sequel. He thought that in offering small sacrifices to the gods from small resources he was in no way falling behind those who offered ample ones from ample resources. He said that it was a poor thing for the gods if they took more pleasure in great sacrifices than in small ones, because then they would often be better pleased with the offerings of the wicked than with those of the good; and for human beings life would not be worth living if the offerings of the wicked pleased the gods better than those of the good. On the contrary, he believed that the gods appreciated most the honours paid to them by the most devout people. He also used to commend the line 'Offer your utmost to the immortal gods',² and he said that it was also a sound maxim to offer one's utmost to friends and strangers and in all other departments of life. If he thought that he was receiving any communication from the gods, he could no more have been persuaded to act against it than if someone had tried to persuade him to accept a blind guide who didn't know the way in preference to one who could see and did know it. And he denounced the folly of others whose actions go against the gods' communications because they are trying to avoid the

1. The Pythia is the priestess of Apollo at Delphi: see p. 43, n. 4.
2. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 336.

disapproval of men. He himself disregarded all human opinions in comparison with the advice of the gods.

He disciplined both his mind and his body by a way of life which would enable any mortal human being who followed it to live with confidence and security, and to have no difficulty in meeting his expenses. In fact, he was so economical that I doubt whether anyone could work so little as not to earn enough for Socrates' needs. He took only so much food as he could eat with pleasure, and he was so ready for a meal when he came to it that his appetite was sauce enough. Any drink was agreeable to him, because he drank only when he was thirsty. If he ever accepted an invitation to dinner, he very easily resisted what costs most people the greatest effort – namely, the temptation to fill oneself beyond repletion. Those who could not resist this he advised to avoid anything that impelled them to eat when they were not hungry or drink when they were not thirsty; for that, he said, was what ruined stomachs and heads and characters. He used to say jokingly that he believed Circe turned people into pigs by entertaining them with this kind of fare; and that the reason why Odysseus was not turned into a pig was partly the prompting of Hermes and partly the fact that he was self-controlled and refrained from partaking of the dishes beyond the point of repletion.¹ Such were the views that he expressed on this subject humorously but seriously.

He urged resolute avoidance of sexual relations with beautiful people, because it was not easy for one who became involved with them to preserve self-control. Indeed on one occasion, when he had discovered that Critobulus the son of Crito had kissed the handsome son of Alcibiades, he said to Xenophon in Critobulus' presence: 'Tell me, Xenophon: didn't you think that Critobulus was the sort of person to be more sober than reckless, and more prudent than thoughtless and foolhardy?'

'Yes, indeed,' said Xenophon.

'Well, now you must look on him as a thorough hot-head and

1. For the story of Circe the witch, see Homer, *Odyssey*, 10.

desperado. He would turn somersaults over sword-points¹ and jump into a fire.'

'Why,' said Xenophon, 'what have you seen him do to make you accuse him of this?'

'Isn't it a fact,' said Socrates, 'that he dared to kiss Alcibiades' very handsome and attractive son?'

'Well, really,' said Xenophon, 'if that's the type of a foolhardy act, I think I might face such a risk myself!'

'Very rash of you,' said Socrates. 'What good do you think you would do yourself by kissing him? Don't you realize that you would instantly be a slave instead of a free man, and spend a lot of money on harmful pleasures, and have no time to take an interest in anything truly good, and be forced to exert yourself for ends that not even a lunatic would bother about?'

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Xenophon. 'What a sinister effect a kiss has, according to you!'

'Does that really surprise you?' asked Socrates. 'Don't you know that spiders not a quarter of an inch long by the mere contact of their mouths distract people with pain and drive them crazy?'

'Yes, of course,' said Xenophon, 'because they inject something in the act of biting.'

'You are dense,' said Socrates. 'Do you think that good-looking people inject nothing in the act of kissing, just because you can't see it? Don't you realize that this creature which they call the bloom of youth is even more dangerous than spiders? They produce their effect by contact, but this needs no contact; if one looks at it, even from quite a distance, it can inject a kind of poison that drives one crazy. No; I advise you, Xenophon, when you see an attractive person, to take to your heels as fast as you can; and I advise you, Critobulus, to go away for a year. That may give you just enough time to recover.'

In the same way, he thought that those who are not proof against sexual attraction should confine their relations to such as the mind would not tolerate unless there were strong physical

1. See *The Dinner-party*, 2.11 (p. 232).

need, and such as would not disturb the mind by being needed. He himself was obviously so well schooled in this respect that he could avoid the best-looking and most attractive people more easily than others could avoid the ugliest and most unattractive.¹

This, then, was his attitude towards food, drink and sex; and he considered that in this way he would obtain no less satisfaction, and would suffer much less discomfort, than those who devoted a large part of their energy to these objects.

4

If anybody thinks, as some of the spoken and written accounts of him have held, that Socrates, though excellent at setting people on the road to goodness, was incapable of leading them to their goal, I invite him to consider not only the way in which Socrates used to question and refute (by way of correction) those who thought they knew everything, but also the way in which he used to spend the whole day in conversation with the members of his circle; and then to decide whether Socrates was capable of making his companions better men.

I shall relate first a conversation about religion which I once heard between him and Little Aristodemus, as he was called. Socrates had learned that this man was known for neither sacrificing to the gods nor praying nor using divination, and went so far as to scoff at those who did so. 'Tell me, Aristodemus,' he said, 'have you ever admired any people for their artistry?'

'Yes,' he replied.

'Tell us their names.'

'Well, in epic poetry the man I have most admired is Homer, and in dithyrambic Melanippides, and in tragedy Sophocles, and in sculpture Polyclitus, and in painting Zeuxis.'²

1. See also *The Dinner-party*, 8 (pp. 257-65) for Socrates on sex. For the famous story of Socrates' resistance to Alcibiades' attractions, see Plato, *Symposium*, 216c-219d.

2. Dithyrambic poetry was a form of choral lyric connected with the worship of Dionysus and very popular in the fifth and early fourth centuries. Melanippides of Melos, Sophocles, Polyclitus of Argos and Zeuxis of Heraclea in south Italy were all active in the fifth century.

by which the gods communicated to men about events, he said, was never in lack of divine counsel.

8

If anyone thinks that Socrates was convicted of making a false claim about the divine because he was condemned to death by the jury even although he claimed that the divine communicated to him in advance what he ought and ought not to do,¹ let him reflect, first, that Socrates was already so far advanced in age that he would soon have reached the end of his life, even if he had not done so then; and second, that he escaped the most disagreeable part of life, in which everybody's intellect deteriorates, and instead of this displayed his strength of mind and won distinction by pleading his cause with unparalleled veracity, dignity and integrity, and by facing the death-sentence with the utmost serenity and fortitude.

It is generally agreed that no one in the memory of man has ever met his death more nobly. He had to live on for thirty days after his trial, because the festival of Delos² fell in that month, and the law does not permit any publicly sanctioned execution until the mission has returned from Delos. It was evident to his intimate friends that during this time he did not deviate at all from his former way of life – and he had previously been remarkable above all men for the cheerfulness and equanimity of his life. How could anyone die more nobly than this? What death could be nobler than a death most nobly accepted? What death could be more happy than the noblest? And who could be more beloved of the gods than the happiest?

I shall relate also what I heard about him from Hermogenes the

1. See pp. 34–5. Both Plato's *Apology of Socrates* and especially Xenophon's (pp. 41–9), of which there are verbal echoes, are worth comparing with this chapter.

2. See p. 142, n. 1. As a matter of fact, however, it was the return of the annual Athenian mission to Delos which delayed his death, not the quinquennial festival, as Xenophon here suggests. See also Plato, *Crito*, 43c–d, *Phaedo*, 58a–c.

son of Hipponicus. He said that, after Meletus had already laid his indictment, he heard Socrates discussing anything rather than the trial and told him that he ought to be considering his defence. At first Socrates said, 'Don't you think that my whole life has been a preparation for it?' And when Hermogenes asked him how, he replied that he had spent all his time in studying nothing but questions of right and wrong, doing what was right and refraining from what was wrong; and he considered that this was the finest preparation for a defence. Then Hermogenes tried another tack: 'Don't you see, Socrates, that the jurors at Athens have often before now been prevailed upon by argument to put innocent men to death and to acquit guilty ones?'

'Yes, but as a matter of fact, Hermogenes,' he said, 'when I was trying to consider my defence before the jury, the divine opposed me straight away.'

'That's remarkable,' said Hermogenes.

Socrates answered, 'Do you think it's remarkable that God should decide that it is better for me to end my life now? Don't you realize that up to now I would not have conceded to anyone that he had lived a better or more pleasant life than I? For I believe that the best life is lived by those who take the best care to make themselves as good as possible, and the pleasantest life by those who are most conscious that they are becoming better. Up to the present time I have felt that this was happening to me, and, in my contacts with other people and in comparing myself with others, I have invariably come to this conclusion about myself. And not only I, but my friends have always come to this conclusion, not because they love me (because if that were all, everyone who is fond of someone else would come to the same conclusion about his friends), but because they believe that they are likely to improve most by associating with me. But if I go on living, I shall probably have to pay the penalties of old age: my vision, hearing and intelligence will become impaired; I shall become in consequence slower to learn and more forgetful, and inferior to those to whom I used to be superior. Now, even if one were unconscious of this, life would not be worth living; and when one is conscious

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of it, surely it must make one's life worse and more disagreeable. Then again, if I am wrongly executed, this may be discreditable to those who wrongly put me to death, because if it is shameful to do wrong, it is surely shameful to do *anything* wrongly; but what disgrace is it to me if other people fail to decide or act rightly with regard to me? I see also that the reputation left to posterity by the dead is not the same for the doers as for the sufferers of wrong. I know that, even if I die now, people will regard me and those who put me to death in different lights; for I know that it will always be testified of me that I never wronged anybody or made anybody a worse person, but always tried to make my associates better people.

This was what he said in conversation with Hermogenes and the rest. Of those who knew what Socrates was like, all who have virtue as their goal continue still to miss him more than anything, because they feel that he was their greatest help in the cultivation of virtue.

In my experience, Socrates was, as I have described him, so devout that he never did anything without the sanction of the gods; so upright that he never did the slightest harm to anybody, but conferred the greatest benefits upon those who associated with him; so self-disciplined that he never chose the more pleasant course instead of the better; so wise that he never made a mistake in deciding between better and worse, and needed no advice, but was self-sufficient for such decisions; he was capable of explaining and defining such matters, and capable moreover of both assessing and refuting errors and encouraging people towards virtue and true goodness. In view of these qualities, he seemed to me to be the perfect example of goodness and happiness.

If anyone disapproves of this assessment, let him compare other people's characters with these qualities, and then make his own decision.

THE DINNER-PARTY

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