THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL SOCRATES

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The quest for the historical Socrates is reminiscent in some ways of the attempt by Biblical scholars to discover the historical Jesus. In both the Platonic dialogues and the New Testament, we possess the dramatic account of a great teacher who often spoke in myths or parables, and whom we know as the hero of texts that he did not himself write. I do not intend to pursue this comparison in detail, and introduce it here only because it exhibits a question of fundamental importance. Let me put that question in a provocative manner. What difference does it make whether we are in a position to identify the historical Socrates or Jesus? In the latter case, some distinguished theologians have argued that it is irrelevant to the authority of the Biblical persona to search for the historical facts concerning the life of Jesus. One could even say that an excessive concern for historical fact obscures, and finally depreciates, the supernatural authority of holy texts. I note the inevitable tendency on the part of the historian to minimize the uniqueness of Jesus, to “interpret” the miracles in naturalistic or psychological terms, to explain the sense of Jesus’ message by reducing it to its historical and biographical environment, and in short, to bring Jesus closer to us by minimizing his role as the son of God in order to emphasize his human persona. After all, God has no history, except in his human manifestation.

One way in which to understand the Platonic dialogues is to see them as an idealized portrait of the philosophical nature. Socrates, although not a god, is certainly portrayed as a daimonic figure who transcends the limitations of ordinary mortals in spiritual stamina, intellectual acuteness, and sheer physical tenacity that permits him to engage in long conversations without stammering, losing the thread of the conversation, or the capacity to advance the discussion in an appropriate manner. The Platonic Socrates has no fear of death, is not merely a brave but also a tranquil soldier, and spends the final hours of his life in the attempt to prove to some of his companions the immortality of the soul. He is described as a man who can stand still for twenty-four hours while immersed in a philosophical meditation, who walks barefoot in the snow, and who, at least in his dramatic persona, never weeps or even laughs aloud, but only twice is said to laugh silently, and this on the occasion of his death by hemlock. Let me sum up this side of the Platonic Socrates by saying that he is a philosophical hero, and that in what he himself calls the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, Socrates is the Odysseus of philosophy.

It is extremely important to notice that whereas both Socrates and Jesus are much given to plain talk, they also employ riddles and parables (or in the case of Socrates, myths); more generally, although both seem to propound a relatively straightforward teaching, their views have been the subject of endless controversy. To limit myself to Socrates, he claims that his teaching is negative, or in other words, that he

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has no teaching, that he knows only that he does not know. To this, the appropriate reply is that it is a mark of great knowledge to know that one does not know. Furthermore, even if we emphasize the interrogative mood within which Socrates presents his opinions, theses like the identity of virtue and knowledge, the existence of the so-called Platonic Ideas, and the erotic nature of the soul, are positive in nature. One could say (although Socrates does not put it in quite this way) that Socrates believes, but does not know, the theses just mentioned. Nevertheless, there must be grounds for these beliefs; we have to know that some alternatives are superior to others, some things more likely than others; and this in turn requires considerably more than knowledge that one knows nothing.

Let us come directly to the point: the presentation of Socrates in the Platonic dialogue is so to speak a double riddle. On the surface, the riddle lies in the peculiar speech of Plato, who is both silent throughout his dialogues and at the same time their only speaker. It is not Socrates but Plato who speaks. And the Plato who speaks is not only the dramatic Socrates but all of the characters in his dialogues. Inside this surface lies a deeper riddle, since the portrait of Socrates is itself ambiguous. Plato’s hero, like Plato himself, shares in the Odyssean attribute of cunning, self-concealment, and the accommodation of discourse to the nature of the audience or the particular interlocutor.

Anglophone Plato scholars in particular were for a long time resistant to this double riddle, and preferred to ignore it by concentrating upon the “validity” or “soundness” of the “arguments” in the dialogues, which themselves, as dramas, were dismissed as “literary ornamentation” (to quote a famous and influential scholar of the previous generation). This approach was due in large part to the conviction that there is indeed a quarrel between philosophy and poetry, and that it is the task of the philosopher to present sound arguments in a straightforward manner, as befits a self-professed lover of the truth. Despite the direct counter-evidence of Socrates’ explanation of the pedagogical and political need for noble lies, one detects here the hypothesis that persons of good character do not conceal their views, and that philosophers are pre-eminently persons of good character. This amiable innocence had the unfortunate effect of rendering the actual Platonic texts invisible. The double riddle was solved by blindness.

More recently, however, the self-evident truth that Plato wrote dialogues, not treatises, and that the distinction between the author and his leading dramatis personae, of whom Socrates is one of several, is, to say the least, impossible to draw with precision, has been accepted by those who previously denied the obvious. This has removed blinkers from eyes that were once obscured by the excessive illumination of the modern Enlightenment. The upshot is that the double riddle is once more visible, but not, unfortunately, resolved. The inescapable suspicion arises that the dialogues are themselves noble lies. In other words, Plato carries out the task of the philosopher in the disguise of a dramatic poet. Logic and philology are faced with a task for which they are ill-suited, the task of mastering Plato’s psychology of concealment.

Current debates about Platonic interpretation range from the extreme view that there is indeed a detailed teaching concealed within the exoteric surface of the text, to the assertion that Plato’s reticence, as exemplified in the elusive aporetic wisdom of Socrates, is pedagogical in intention, and leads us to think through for ourselves the incomplete analyses and enigmatic myths of the fictional conversations of the dialogues. The only aspect of this complex situation that I have space to notice, and that cursorily, is the question of the historical or “authentic” Socrates. I put to one side the secondary fact that there are texts by other authors in which Socrates appears as a dramatic character. Our concern is with Plato. And I regard it as quite clear that Plato did not wish us to pursue the historical Socrates, except in an entirely tangential
sense. One might as well ask for the historical Odysseus, or even the historical Jesus. In all three cases, we are presented with an ideal type or, to use a Greek term, a paradigm of an extraordinary type, and not a representative specimen of that type. The exaggerated virtues of Socrates should also not blind us to the fact that he may exemplify exaggerated faults. On this point, the crucial text is the revelation in the Symposium\(^1\) by the drunken Alcibiades of Socrates’ unerotic nature. It is not enough to say that Socrates pretends to love handsome youths but actually loves disincarnated Platonic Ideas. One must also reflect upon the phenomenon of philosophical coldness, and how this affects Socrates’ understanding of human existence, an understanding that is certainly different from that of Odysseus or Jesus.

To take this series of observations one step farther, it would be a serious error to restrict one’s reflections to the puzzle of Socrates. The puzzle, after all, was designed by Plato. Again, I mention only the most obvious hint. Socrates wrote nothing, presumably because (as he says in the Phaedrus)\(^2\) writings are rigid and dogmatic; they say the same thing to everyone, no matter how different the intelligence and character of the readers. Are we to assume that Plato believed himself to be superior to Socrates because he had solved the problem of how to write, whereas his teacher had not? This was the ingenious suggestion of Leo Strauss. But it leaves us with the task of understanding, and therefore explaining, a doctrine that cannot be directly presented.

I have space for one more remark about how to read the Platonic dialogues, and it seems appropriate to end with a hint that is especially relevant to students of law. Much has been made of the trial of Socrates for atheism and the corruption of the young. Seven dialogues take place just before, during, and after that trial. It has seemed evident to many that this striking dramatic fact has some connection with the substance of these seven dialogues. I want to suggest here that this casts the net too narrowly. The Socratic disguise is Plato’s version of the rhetoric by which the philosopher defends himself against the accusations of the non-philosopher, among whom we may include Odysseus and Jesus. Plato is himself ambiguously both the prosecutor and the defense attorney.

It would make for a tidy ending to this miniature essay if I were to say that we are the judge and the jury. But that would be too facile, as well as unjust. Perhaps the most that can be said is that the Platonic dialogues are not the trial of philosophy itself so much as the pre-trial ceremony by which the competing lawyers examine the prospective jurors. This allows us to retain the previously mentioned dual identity of Plato, who is not only the author of his dialogues, but its sole speaker, a monologist of many voices, and in that sense, a ventriloquist.

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