**TWO OR THREE THINGS WE KNOW ABOUT SOCRATES**

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Today, we regard Socrates as one the most influential figures in antiquity. His admirers and detractors alike credit him with decisively shaping the Western philosophical outlook.¹ Yet the historical Socrates remains an enigma, particularly compared to the literary character from his followers’ writings, for two reasons. First, he left no writings of his own. Second, the writings on which we rely for our information about him have received widely different assessments regarding their character, veracity, and accuracy. This essay sketches the main contours of the debate about Socrates, the man and the philosopher, whose views have cast such a long shadow on the Western philosophical tradition.

Even during his life, Socrates provoked much ridicule, attack, and admiration—mostly ridicule from fifth century B.C. comic playwrights, his contemporaries, whose portrayal was anything but flattering. Aristophanes’ *Clouds* is the only complete work from Socrates’ lifetime that has survived, but several passages from other fifth century comic playwrights have also been preserved. Socrates’ contemporaries would hardly have found these depictions funny had they not borne some resemblance to the man himself.

Shortly after his death in 399 B.C., a new literary genre emerged: *Sokratikoi logoi*, Socratic discussions or discourses. Socratic discourses appear to have been quite popular in the fourth century B.C. The Socratic writings of Plato and Xenophon are perhaps best known today, but we also possess remnants of Socratic discourses by Antisthenes, Aeschines of Sphettos, Phaedo, and Euclides of Megara, as well as some information regarding the views of Aristippus.² Of course, Aristotle provided brief but significant information about Socrates.

Whereas some scholars regard Plato’s and Xenophon’s Socratic writings as instances of imaginative fiction—the aim of which is not historical portrayal of any kind—others take at least one of the two authors as sources of reliable information about the historical Socrates. To be sure, hardly anyone thinks that Plato and other fourth century Socratics intended their dialogues as accurate transcripts of the conversations the man Socrates actually held. It is equally naive to imagine that Plato and others aimed at anything like the accuracy we would nowadays expect of historical reports.

Even granted that all Socratic works—including Plato’s early dialogues, his *Apology of Socrates*, and Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* and *Symposium*—are literary creations, we must not write them off as entirely fictional or unrepresentative of historical facts or people.³ In other words, it will not do to declare,

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³ It would be wrong to assume that we know nothing about the views of authors whose work has been represented to us in literary accounts. For instance, much of our knowledge about various post-Aristotelian schools of thought derives from second-hand sources, and some of the material is to be found in fictitious dialogues. See, e.g., Cicero, *Academica*.
as Charles Kahn has done recently, that the Socratic discourses as a whole are a “genre of imaginative fiction,” never intended to have any relation to historical facts, and hence inapt as sources for the views of Socrates himself. 4

I think that we must keep in mind that if Socratic dialogues were a literary genre, so were courtroom speeches. For example, the conversations we find in Plato’s dialogues are probably fictitious and so is Socrates’ defense speech as given in Plato’s *Apology*. However, literary works can provide useful historical and doxographical information when we read them in a way that is responsive to the form, structure and purport of the work in question. Thus, I do not join Kahn in excepting Plato’s *Apology* from the category of “imaginative fiction.” The work’s utility as a source of knowledge about the historical Socrates does not derive from any radical difference from the dialogues.

Plato, in particular, succeeded in elevating the genre of Socratic discourses to its contemporary and current significance. He is the most important of our sources on Socrates’ philosophical activity and views. But the enigma of Socrates now becomes compounded by the enigma of Plato. Unlike Socrates, Plato did write; indeed, he was a prolific writer, combining a powerful philosophical mind with amazing literary gifts. As W.D. Ross observed, however, “it is a salient feature of [Plato’s dialogues] that they do not provide a key to their own interpretation.” 5 Hard work on the literary (and philosophical) interpretation of Plato’s dialogues, including especially the early ones, is needed in order to make any sense at all of the relation between Plato’s Socrates and Socrates the man.

In most of Plato’s more than twenty-five dialogues, Socrates is a principal interlocutor. (Only in Plato’s unfinished last work, *Laws*, does Socrates not appear.) In the early works, Socrates appears as a questioner and examiner who ultimately professes ignorance about the only issues that interest him: human virtue and the good human life. The early dialogues have traditionally been called “Socratic,” on the assumption that the views expressed by the Socrates figure in those dialogues bear a close resemblance to the views of the man Socrates himself. This traditional view of the early dialogues relies in part on the testimony of Aristotle, who distinguishes the views of Socrates from the views of Plato. 6 This view is further affirmed where the depiction overlaps with the picture that we get from Xenophon and other Socratic writers.

Some scholars dispute that the consistency between the picture of Socrates we get from Xenophon and Aristotle and what we find in the early Platonic dialogues evidences the actual views of the historical Socrates. This argument holds that the testimony of Xenophon and Aristotle is not independent of Plato’s writings. Indeed, many students of the subject think that Xenophon bases some or all of his characterization of Socrates from Plato’s dialogues. Likewise, some detractors assert that the claims Aristotle makes about

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6 The philosophical concerns, activities and views that Aristotle assigns to Socrates are consistent with the Socrates depicted in Plato’s early dialogues. In these works, the larger metaphysical and epistemological concerns of Plato’s later dialogues seem to be absent. Tellingly, so is his Theory of Forms. Aristotle unambiguously assigns the Theory of Forms to Plato. See generally Terry Penner, *Socrates and the Early Dialogues*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Richard Kraut ed., 1992).
Socrates owe much to Plato’s dialogues.

The latter belief seems to me quite implausible. Aristotle came to Athens in 367—about thirty years after the death of Socrates but, significantly, during Plato’s lifetime. Thirty years is a long time. Nonetheless, it is difficult to believe that no oral tradition existed in Plato’s Academy, or that Aristotle only had Plato’s dialogues for source material. Aristotle, in his writings, clearly distinguishes the *dramatis persona* of Plato’s dialogues from the man Socrates, and his works also convey information about Plato that he could not have gotten from Plato’s writings. As for Xenophon, he probably did rely to a considerable extent on Plato’s dialogues. However, it has been plausibly argued that he also relied on other Socratic authors, in particular Antisthenes.

Generally speaking, the Socratic writers must have influenced one another. After all, they were all working in the genre, *Sokratikoi logoi*—inventing it as they practiced it. Thus, it is hardly to be expected that any one of them is an entirely independent source. Still, the sum of their depictions must establish certain aspects of Socrates’ person and philosophy.

If we use these sources critically, we have good reason to attribute to Socrates certain general concerns and views. Plato’s *Apology* suggests the following picture: The most important thing one can do in life is to care for one’s soul. This care requires getting to know oneself and ridding oneself of ignorance, especially ignorance of one’s own ignorance. Rational inquiry, which involves cross-examination, contributes to this positive goal. The soul is harmed whenever one does anything that is wrong. Suffering injustice is better for the soul than committing it.7

At the same time, several philosophical theses associated with Socrates are paradoxical in the sense that they go against common opinion about the relevant matter. (*Doxa* is Greek for “opinion” or “belief”; *para* means “against.”) The theses in question are the following: Virtue is a certain kind of knowledge. Virtue is one and indivisible; in other words, the names for particular virtues—“moderation,” “justice,” “courage,” and so on—all refer to one and the same thing. Finally, there is the most famous (and least well understood) thesis that no one errs willingly. Closely connected is the Socratic claim that *akrasia*—weakness of the will—does not exist.

For centuries, these theses have been taken as the cornerstones of Socratic intellectualism. Someone who thinks that living well involves living in accordance with a certain kind of knowledge can reasonably be counted as intellectualist of some sort. I tend to think, however, that much of the criticism directed toward Socratic intellectualism begins with a misunderstanding of what sort of intellectualist Socrates was. The main issue here is what kind of knowledge, in Socrates’ view, constitutes human virtue. A reinterpretation and reassessment of Socratic intellectualism is, thus, in order.8

An examination of the historical Socrates may advance this broader effort of redefining Socrates. I conclude by accepting the words of Arnaldo Momigliano, who writes that the Socratics, including Plato,

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moved “in that zone between truth and fiction which is so bewildering to the professional historian.”9 The centuries-long debate over the problem of the historical Socrates—which is likely to continue—might owe some of its force to the discomfort many of us feel when confronted with the ambiguities of this zone. Had the Socratics invented Socrates, their literature would still be of interest. But let us not, for fear of ambiguity, lose sight of the ambiguous man and philosopher himself.

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