

PHIL 31: Ancient Philosophy
Fall 2005; David O. Brink
Handout #2: Socrates

SOCRATES

We know only a few things about Socrates with much certainty.

1. Plato (427-347 BCE) was a younger contemporary and student of Socrates (470-399 BCE).
2. Socrates was the first truly systematic (Western) philosopher.
3. Socrates inspired Plato and other subsequent philosophers, including Aristotle (Metaphysics i 6, xiii 4) (who had some independent evidence about Socrates's views), and many Athenian youths, including the iconoclast aristocrats Critias and Alcibiades (associated with the Thirty Tyrants).
4. Socrates was brought to trial on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens, convicted, and executed in 399.
5. We have no record that Socrates ever wrote anything.

We have two main sources about Socrates's views -- Plato and Xenophon -- but they present somewhat different portraits of Socrates.

- A. Plato's Socrates is both paradoxical and ironic; Xenophon's Socrates is neither.
- B. Plato's Socrates may win arguments, but rarely persuades his opponent; Xenophon's Socrates persuades all those with whom he argues.
- C. Plato's Socrates is concerned primarily with human affairs; Xenophon's Socrates is concerned with theology.
- D. Plato's Socrates denies that one should ever harm one's enemies in flat contradiction of then conventional Greek (e.g. Homeric) moral views; Xenophon's Socrates rarely contradicts Greek popular morality.

It's hard to see how Xenophon's account explains (3) or (4), whereas Plato's account explains these facts well. Plato's Socrates is a moral gadfly who questions Athenian citizens and educators (e.g. sophists) about the nature of virtue (What is courage? What is piety? ...). His interlocutors give confident answers initially but find themselves saying and believing inconsistent things under Socratic cross-examination. The Socratic dialogues all end on a negative note, having refuted various definitions of the virtues but apparently having defended none.

SOCRATES AND PLATO

Socrates is the main character in most (though not all) of Plato's dialogues. Is Plato just Socrates' intellectual biographer, or is he a philosopher in his own right? Attention to the content and style of Plato's dialogues and the testimony of Aristotle (Metaphysics i 6; xiii 4) allows us divide the dialogues reasonably well into four main groups.

- **Early or Socratic Dialogues**
 - Apology, Crito, Euthyphro, Laches, Charmides, Euthydemus, and Lysis
- **Transitional Dialogues**
 - Protagoras and Gorgias
- **Middle or Platonic Dialogues**
 - Meno, Phaedo, Republic, Symposium, Phaedrus, Parmenides, and Theaetetus
- **Later Platonic Dialogues**
 - Timaeus, Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, and Laws

The Socratic dialogues purport to provide a fairly accurate picture of the historical Socrates. Transitional dialogues involve Plato reflecting on Socratic commitments. Middle Period dialogues reflect Plato's own philosophical doctrines and arguments, and Late Period dialogues involve a reconsideration of Plato's earlier ideas. This division of the dialogues is not completely uncontroversial, but something like it is commonly accepted.

SOCRATIC PARADOXES

Socrates is famous for some striking and sometimes paradoxical commitments.

1. **Moral Knowledge and Socratic Ignorance.** (a) Socrates seems to believe that we should expect to find expertise in matters ethical, as in other crafts (Cri 46c 47d); (b) yet he claims to be ignorant himself and believes that others know even less than he does (Ap 19c, 20c e, 21d, 33b); (c) yet he seems quite confident about some moral claims and is willing to rely on them in arguing with others (Ap 17bc, 28b, 29b, 41e). Though (a) and (c) are consistent, both appear to conflict with (b).
2. **Virtue and Happiness.** Socrates believes that (a) an agent's own happiness (eudaimonia) is or ought to be the ultimate end of all of her action (La 181ce, 192d; Ch 169b, 173e; Euthyd 278e w/ 280b6, 282a), yet he believes that (b) familiar, other-regarding virtues (e.g. courage and justice) are admirable. (a) and (b) commit him to other claims. He believes that (c) one should be virtuous at any price (Ap 28b, 29b, 32bc; Cri 48cd, 49b). In fact, Socrates believes that (d) virtue (e.g. temperance, justice, courage, piety, wisdom) is both necessary and sufficient for the agent's happiness (Ap 29b 30b, 30d, 36c, 41d e). This implies that (e) a good person cannot be harmed (Ap 41cd) and that (f) one cannot profit by vice (e.g. injustice).
3. **Virtue is Knowledge.** This cognitive account of virtue seems to imply several things: (a) that knowledge is necessary for virtue (La 192cd; Ch 159a), and by (1b), that no one is virtuous (because no one has the requisite knowledge); (b) that knowledge is sufficient for virtue (Ap 25c 26a, 37a), which implies that weakness of will is impossible (you can't know what virtue requires without acting virtuously); and (c) the unity of the virtues (La 199e), which implies that you cannot have one virtue without the others.

Many of these claims would be surprising to ancient, as well as modern ears. What's even more surprising is that Socrates thinks that he can defend these claims by an examination of his interlocutor's own beliefs (the elenchus).