

Chapter One

Socratic Philosophy and the Dialogue Form

PHILOSOPHY DOES NOT BECOME literature merely because it is written in dialogue form. We could take the latest issue of the *Journal of Philosophy*, invent dummy characters, think of leading questions, and come up with a "dialogue" which would have no literary significance whatever. Even if it were written by a gifted stylist, it would not become literature unless the dialogue form were an integral part of the author's conception of philosophy. To put this in a different way, not all philosophy can become literature. In most cases, a philosopher's ability to write well is a bonus: it makes him easier to read and teach but does not affect the direction of the argument.¹ Hume was an accomplished writer, but there is no reason to regard the *Treatise* as a work of literature. Its conclusions would not be altered even if they had been written in the rumble-bumble prose of Kant. It is only when form and content work together that a piece of philosophy can claim literary significance.

1. DIALOGUE AS A MORAL TEST

One case where they do work together is the Socratic dialogue.² It is clear that a great deal would be lost if Socratic philosophy were written in straight, expository prose. As Gregory Vlastos once noted, Socrates does not just have conclusions to impart but a method for arriving at them.³ That method is *elenchus*, which means to examine, refute, or put to shame. As practised by Socrates, it is a method which lends itself to the dialogue because it requires that at least two voices be heard. It requires, in addition, that the people whose voices we hear be intimately connected with the positions they take. The first rule of Socratic *elenchus* is that the respondent must say what he really thinks. When Protagoras attempts to break this rule by adopt-

ing a hypothetical view about the nature of virtue (331c), Socrates stops him immediately:

PROT: I don't think it is quite so simple, Socrates, so that I should grant that justice is holy and holiness just. It seems to me there is a distinction here. But what difference does it make? If you wish, let us agree that justice is holy and holiness just.

SOC: Oh, no! I don't want to examine this "If you like" or "If you think" but to examine you and me. When I say "you and me" I mean that one can best examine the issue by taking away the "ifs".

In the *Gorgias*, when Callicles shows hesitation in answering Socrates, Socrates replies that unless Callicles has the courage to speak freely, the inquiry cannot proceed (494c ff.). Even when the respondent's compliance would make his job much easier, Socrates insists that the respondent not say anything short of what he truly believes (e.g., *Crito* 49d).

The result is that the respondent has more at stake than the outcome of a philosophical argument: to the degree that he follows Socrates' rule, he is putting his life on the line. As Nicias tells Lysimachus in the *Laches* (187e-188a):

. . . whoever comes into contact with Socrates and talks with him face to face, is certain to be drawn into a discussion with him. And no matter where the discussion begins, he is carried round and cannot stop until he is led to give an account of himself, and of the manner in which he now lives his life and the kind of life he has lived up to that point. And once he has been led to do that, Socrates will not let him go until he has thoroughly and properly put all his ways to the test.

It is impossible in a Socratic context to defend a position at odds with one's own behavior. At stake are the moral intuitions which underlie everything one stands for. Protagoras has a great deal to lose if it should turn out that virtue is not teachable, Gorgias if it should turn out that rhetoric is not an art, Euthyphro if it should turn out that prosecuting one's father for murder is impious, Laches if it should turn out that courage requires knowledge not normally at the disposal of a battlefield general.

We may therefore agree with Dorothy Tarrant that there is more in a Socratic dialogue than the author's love of drama:⁴

The essence of dialogue lies in the interaction of human minds. For Plato the human individual—whether as perci-

cient, as moral agent, or as spiritual being—stands in the centre and forefront of his thought. Here he is obviously following Socrates, but he develops the theme in his own ways, and he seldom strays far from it. Because this is his central interest, it becomes natural to express all his thought in the form of personal utterance by one individual or another (not necessarily or always by the Socrates who is normally the chief speaker), and to work out its development in terms of progressive agreement between such individuals.

Tarrant's point cannot be emphasized strongly enough. What is at stake in a Socratic dialogue is not, at least not primarily, the logical relations between propositions but the interaction of moral agents. That is what Socrates means when he refuses to allow Protagoras to use hypotheticals and claims that what he really wants to examine are "you and me."

It follows that *elenchus* is more than an exercise in philosophical analysis. In asking people to state and defend the moral intuitions which underlie their way of life, Socrates inevitably reveals something about their characters. *Elenchus*, then, has as much to do with honesty, reasonableness, and courage as it does with logical acumen: the honesty to say what one really thinks, the reasonableness to admit what one does not know, and the courage to continue the investigation. Most of Socrates' respondents are lacking in all three. Protagoras becomes angry, Polus resorts to cheap rhetorical tricks, Callicles begins to sulk, Critias loses his self-control, Meno wants to quit. While their reactions leave much to be desired, Socrates' respondents do emerge from the pages of the dialogues as real people. Not only is there a clash of ideas but a clash of the personalities who have adopted them. So while the Socratic dialogues deal with virtue, they are never simple morality plays.

This book argues that *elenchus* is central to Socratic philosophy and that only if we understand how *elenchus* places moral demands on questioner and respondent will that philosophy make sense. The purpose of *elenchus* is to facilitate discovery, but in a Socratic context, discovery is not a sudden flash of illumination; it is something which must be prepared for, something which the soul must earn. The subject of Socratic epistemology, then, is, in Tarrant's words, a moral agent. To acquire knowledge, the soul must free itself of the anger, arrogance, and laziness present in so many of Socrates' companions. The importance of ethics to epistemology is all the more obvious if we conceive of the search for knowledge in dialogical terms. If nothing

else, dialogue requires cooperation with another person, which, in turn, requires appropriate forms of behavior. This entire way of looking at knowledge comes to a head in the Socratic dictum that virtue is knowledge. Unless we understand how knowledge comes to be present, this claim, the heart of Socratic philosophy, is likely to seem absurd.

2. DIALOGUE AND THE WRITTEN WORD

It is noteworthy that despite his literary gifts, Plato was suspicious of writing philosophy. In the *Phaedrus* (275d-e), he has Socrates say according to Hackforth's translation:⁵

You know, Phaedrus, that's the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive; but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words: they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing for ever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself.

An analogous sentiment is expressed in the *Seventh Epistle* (341-4) and suggests that Plato regarded the dialogue form as a philosophical *deuteros plous*, a second best. Though it cannot take the place of actual conversation, it is a better medium in which to represent such conversation than is prose. I say *represent* because Socrates goes on to claim in this passage that the written word is an image (*eidōlon*, 276a) of the spoken one.⁶ Still, it is possible for one image to be more faithful than another. The writer of a treatise is, in effect, delivering a long speech to the reader. Socrates' dislike of long speeches was notorious and is justified by reasons similar to those which led Plato to distrust the written word: the listener cannot question the speaker and is forced to become a passive participant.

In a dialogue, the author is not delivering a long speech but directing a conversation. If his direction is successful, if he has mastered the art of dialogue in the way Plato did, the reader is no longer feels that she is in a passive role. According to Paul Friedländer:⁷

For the written dialogue transmits its dialogical and dialectical dynamics to the reader. To him is addressed every question raised by Socrates; every eye of Glaukon or Lysis is his eye—or his nay—and this dialogical dynamics continues to echo within him beyond the conclusion. The dialogue is the only form of book that seems to suspend the book form itself.

The word *seems* is important. Nothing can take the place of actually submitting to the rigors of *elenchus*. But if we have to settle for a second best, the dialogue is superior to the treatise.

Yet there is more to the choice of dialogue than this. It is a cornerstone of Socratic epistemology that what people normally call *teaching* is impossible.⁸ That is, it is impossible to impart true propositions to another person and expect that person to come away with knowledge. It follows not only that Socrates cannot teach the respondent (*Apology* 33a), but that Plato, the author trying to preserve his memory, cannot teach the reader. It is not that the reader or the respondent is ignorant of something which Socrates and Plato are convinced they know. Rather it is that the reader or the respondent already has the knowledge he is looking for but is having trouble getting hold of it. As Laches says to Socrates after failing to define courage (194b):

I am truly angry with myself and am not able to say what I have in mind. It seems to me that I know what courage is, but somehow it has escaped me so that I cannot put into words exactly what it is.

It is true that Socratic philosophy involves *elenchus* or refutation; but we will miss an important point if we do not see that in this context, refutation is not purely destructive. It is destructive in order to be therapeutic (*Sophist* 230b–d)—like the doctor who must cut and burn in order to heal. In the last analysis, the purpose of such refutation is to enable the respondent to say what he feels he was trying to say all along.

Socrates never claims that *elenchus* can work miracles. In the *Republic* (518b–d), he is critical of those who think they can put sight in blind eyes. What it can do is “point the soul in the right direction” by helping someone who has a partial grasp of reality become clearer

about what he thinks he sees. To assume that the respondent comes to the discussion already in some sense aware of what he is trying to learn is to assume a particular theory of the human mind: that the contents of the mind extend beyond the fairly limited scope of immediate awareness. Thus Socrates claims in the *Meno* (85c) that the slave's opinions about geometry are somehow "in" his soul even though he has never had a lesson in the subject. The reason is that the slave's opinions are really his and that Socrates did not put them there: all Socrates did was ask questions. From a modern perspective, the claim that the slave's opinions are "in" the soul raises more questions than it answers. Does it commit Socrates to a theory of innate ideas or only to a theory of innate capacities? Is there a criterion to decide which ideas are "in" the soul and is this criterion anything more than our notion of *a priori* truth? What is the relation between the idea "in" the soul and the reality it depicts or represents? Some of these questions will be discussed in a later chapter. For the present, all we need to agree on is this: it is possible for a person to have opinions she has not considered or is not fully aware of. She has the opinions in the sense that she feels confident that a question should be answered in a particular way, but the question may never have been put to her before. Or, she can have opinions she is fully aware of but consequences she is not. That is why Socrates can tell Polus at *Gorgias* 474b that he does not really believe what he is saying. Obviously Polus is committed to what he is saying. The point is that unbeknownst to him, his views are incompatible with premises he and everyone else are predisposed to accept.

Once we admit that a person may have opinions she has not considered or may not really believe what she is saying, we allow for the possibility that the determination of what one *does* believe can constitute a genuine discovery. It is in this sense that Socrates can say that the ideas present in the soul may require considerable effort, even courage, to retrieve (*Meno* 81d). With the possible exception of Meno's slave, no one in the early dialogues is courageous enough. Euthyphro walks away, Meno leaves town, Critias and Alcibiades go on to other things. The irony is that they are running away from the discovery of what they themselves really think.

Notice, however, that on this view of philosophy, there is an additional reason for objecting to straight, expository prose. Prose, after all, is a teaching device in the sense in which Socrates was opposed to

teaching; its purpose is to fill the reader in rather than draw her out. If we ask what would be needed to draw the reader out, the answer is perhaps more psychological than logical: whatever it takes to get her to discard her old ways of thinking and approach the problem from a new perspective. The assumption at work here is that the purpose of a Socratic dialogue is, as Jacob Klein put it, to continue Socrates' work.⁹ As Klein points out, such a view is hardly novel; it derives from Schleiermacher. It is no surprise, then, that the dialogues contain a number of devices whose purpose is to foster the conceptual break-through which Socrates wants the respondent to achieve and which, in turn, Plato wants the reader to achieve: irony flattery, satire, paradox, myth, mockery—all the things which make the dialogues so delightful to read. It is important to understand, however, that these devices are not employed for their literary value alone. If it is a mistake to ignore the literary side of the dialogues and concentrate on the underlying "doctrine", it is equally a mistake to treat the literary side as pure art and thus, to use Klein's expression, render it autonomous.¹⁰ The literary devices are part of the *elenchus* and have a definite epistemological function: they are spurs to inquiry and therefore to discovery.

On the other hand, the Socratic understanding of philosophy gives to literature a greater significance than other philosophers would allow or than Socrates himself allows in passages where the issue of literature is brought up. If we assume that the reader is not a blank tablet but comes to the text with the latent knowledge required by the theory of recollection, why should literature not be as good as anything else in bringing ideas to a conscious level? Indeed, why should it not be far better than expository prose for just the reason Socrates gave: expository prose puts the reader in a passive position. Literature, on the other hand, engages her, arouses her, shocks or amuses her and therefore is better suited to the goals of Socratic philosophy. What I have in mind here is a theory of interpretation which takes as its model not *mimēsis*, which is the central notion in Klein's interpretation, but *anamnēsis*; not imitation but recollection. True, there are mimetic features in many Socratic dialogues. But they would serve no purpose unless we assume that, as the respondent comes to the discussion already aware of what he is trying to learn, so the reader comes to the text. The reason Plato has the characters imitate certain actions or exemplify the form of behavior they are trying

to understand is that such characterizations strike a responsive chord in the reader, i.e., they assist the reader in "recalling" the knowledge she has but cannot quite get hold of.

3. HIDING BEHIND THE WRITTEN WORD

To pursue the idea that the text is meant to assist in the process of recollection, we must rule out a tempting but textually unfounded suggestion. It is often argued that the reason Plato chose the dialogue form is that he had no system or doctrine. According to John Herman Randall: "Plato . . . knew too much about life to put it into a system."¹¹ On this view, the purpose of the dialogues is to present us with a variety of philosophical alternatives and allow us to watch as they play off against one another. The dialogues depict philosophical inquiry in all its stages and forms; they are, as one commentator put it, slices of the philosophical life.¹² Notice how this interpretation puts both the author and the reader in a peculiar role. The author, Plato, is not really saying anything, he is only exhibiting the things other people say. He possesses what Keats termed *negative capability* in the sense that no position taken in the course of a discussion can be attributed to the author.¹³ The reader is put in a position to observe a philosophical exchange but is not expected to come away from it with any particular feeling or attitude.

Without raising the time-honored question of which ideas belong to the historical Socrates and which to Plato, a question which centuries of debate have done nothing to resolve, we can say that *Plato* was asserting something when he had Socrates defend a particular conception of human life. And if we look at how Socrates is actually portrayed, we find that he was not someone who engaged in philosophical inquiry merely for its own sake. According to his account of the philosophical enterprise; he was engaged in a form of persuasion (*Apology* 30a, 36c). The dialogues present him as a man with deep moral convictions and as someone who strove to get others to share them. As Gregory Vlastos put it: "no man ever breathed greater assurance that his feet were planted firmly on the path of right."¹⁴ That is why Socrates can tell so formidable an opponent as Calicles that as long as he resists Socrates' conclusions about virtue, he will contradict himself (*Gorgias* 482b); in other words, there is no reasonable alternative to his view, or at least none that Calicles would be willing to accept. No doubt Socrates was willing to follow the best argument wherever it takes him (*Crito* 46b), but this did not prevent

him from having strong feelings about where that might be. When he tells Polus that the truth can never be refuted (*Gorgias* 473b), he does so in the context of his conviction that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it. What he is saying is that any argument which appears to overturn this conclusion must be spurious. So it is wrong to think that Socrates was interested only in pointing out the inconsistencies in other people's opinions.¹⁵ In the *Crito* and *Gorgias*, he points out inconsistencies in order to persuade the respondent of the truth of his own contention. In the *Apology*, he says several times that the purpose of the *elenchus* is to get people to pay more attention to the welfare of their souls. In the dialogues of search, it is to free people from what he regards as the evils of popular opinion.

To say that Socrates had deep convictions on how to live a life is not to say that he had knowledge.¹⁶ By his own admission, knowledge requires more than a conviction that one's opinions are true. It requires that one can define the key terms of moral discourse and show how his beliefs are necessitated by those definitions. This Socrates never claimed he could do. We will see in a later chapter that the knowledge he claimed to have is *human* knowledge, which means that it is by nature imperfect. All of this is compatible with saying that Socrates was as much in the business of saving souls as any radio dial preacher. He clearly believed that he was sent to awaken the city of Athens from its dogmatic slumbers. His methods might differ from those of a radio dial preacher, but he was just as serious about what he was doing and just as exuberant in his pitch. In the *Apology* (30b), he claims that from virtue as he conceives it comes money and "all other human goods, both public and private." So convinced was he of the truth of this message that he abandoned everything else in life to propagate it.

On the other hand, there can be little doubt that Socrates is not just a character in Plato's dialogues but a hero of extraordinary proportions. At the end of the *Meno*, he suggests that Socrates was among the living what Teiresias was among the dead: "He alone kept his wits, the rest darted about like shadows." To write these words about someone in the business of saving souls is to enter that business oneself. It follows that Plato was interested in more than slices of the philosophical life. Or, to put it another way, he was interested in slices of the philosophical life only to the extent that they made the reader turn to and reflect on the moral truths which Socrates espoused. With certain qualifications we can say that Plato, too, wished to assert that care of the soul ought to be the chief concern of one's life, that it

is better to suffer injustice than to commit it, etc. The reason he wrote dialogues was not to hide behind a veil of anonymity but to avoid having to teach what the soul must discover for itself.

4. EPISTEMOLOGICAL OPTIMISM

It will be objected that Socrates was so committed to saving souls, the appropriate form in which to preserve his memory is not dialogue but something like homily. Instead of having him pull someone aside and inquire about virtue, Plato should have him mount the pulpit and exhort people to live better lives. That there is real force to this objection is seen by the fact that there are passages where he does just this: the end of the *Gorgias* is an obvious example. The objection points out the problem Plato faced as a dramatic artist. Because he was suspicious of the written word, he could not put his thoughts on paper in an unreflective way. He had to take seriously the relation of the reader to the text. If the reader came to approach the text as a student approaches a teacher, then from Plato's perspective, the text would fail. These considerations led him to choose the dialogue over the treatise. But if the purpose of the dialogue is to assist the soul in recovering moral truths, he ran the risk of turning the dialogues into sermons in which Socrates gets the interesting lines and all the respondents say is "Amen." A sermon is not a true dialogue; on the other hand a true dialogue might leave the reader confused on what the point of the conversation was. What makes the Socratic dialogues lasting works of art is the way Plato overcame this difficulty. In Plato's hands the dialogue form is more than a convenient way of refuting opponents, it is a form in which the characters enjoy a remarkable degree of autonomy. Whatever else they might be, Callicles, Thrasymachus, and Alcibiades are not straw men. Although they may not win their respective arguments, they state them as persuasively as anyone has and leave a lasting impression on the reader.

On the other hand, Socrates does not win either, or at least not always. We know that he was committed to the unity of virtue and knowledge, but for all its attractiveness, this thesis never appears as a dialectical panacea. It is raised explicitly in the *Laches*, *Meno*, and *Protagoras*; but in no case is it the final conclusion of an argument. As Myles Burnyeat put it: "The idea of virtue as knowledge is indeed less a conclusion at which discussion can rest than a starting-point for

a new approach—a better one to be sure, but not without difficulties of its own to be cleared up before its philosophical benefits can be finally confirmed."¹⁷ Thus the *Meno* and *Protagoras* each end by saying that the search for a definition must now *begin*. It is safe to say, then, that while Socrates normally gets the best of his opponent, his victories are partial. He never emerges from a conversation in the triumphant way that Augustine emerges from some of his dialogues or Philonous emerges from Berkeley's. Take the *Protagoras*. After a series of preliminary skirmishes, the great sophist stakes his reputation on a distinction between courage and knowledge. While Socrates manages to convince him that they are the same, the dialogue never suggests that Socrates is wholly right. Knowledge is teachable. Therefore if courage is knowledge, it is teachable. But at the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates had argued, against Protagoras, that virtue is *not* teachable. So it seems that the two major characters have switched positions. Who, then, is the victor? Plato does not tell us.

It could still be objected that if his silence overcomes the tendency to preach, it creates an equally serious problem: the tendency to confuse. To the extent that a Socratic dialogue produces confusion, it runs the risk that like so many of Socrates' respondents, the reader will grow weary and want to quit. Consider the case of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Here the three main characters all succeed in destroying one another's arguments. There are some beautifully written speeches and some *Protagoras*-like reversals. Yet the reader is not left with the impression that inquiry on theological questions ought to continue. She begins to suspect, as Hume no doubt wanted her to, that the paradoxes encountered in the course of the discussion are unavoidable. That is, she begins to be suspect that there is something wrong with the subject matter so that further inquiry along these lines is a waste of time.

No such impression is created by the Socratic dialogues. On the contrary, the reader is led to believe that, like *Meno's* slave, she is on the verge of a great discovery—that he has only to fiddle with the premises of the argument to see what Plato is trying to say. Again the response of Laches: "It seems to me that I know what courage is, but somehow it has escaped me so that I cannot put into words exactly what it is." That is how the reader feels, too, and is why she comes away from the text with a surge of optimism. The answer is staring her in the face. If she does not see it at first, it must be that she has a mental block. As Grote put it: "Interpreters sift with microscopic ac-

curacy the negative dialogues of Plato, in hopes of detecting the ultimate elements of that positive solution which he is supposed to have lodged therein, and which, when found, may be put together so as to clear up all the antecedent difficulties."¹⁸ So the reader does not come away thinking there is something wrong with the subject matter. Once the fog clears, all the pieces will fit together like a puzzle.

That this impression is false is attested to by centuries of Platonic scholarship and by the fact that Socrates never claimed to have cleared up all the "antecedent difficulties." But the illusory quality of the impression does not belittle Plato's ability as an artist. He has managed to convince the reader that the obstacles which stand in the way of a solution are temporary. The classic expression of optimism is found in the *Meno* (81c-d):¹⁹

Therefore since the soul is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all things in this world and the next, there is nothing it has not learned. So it should not surprise us that it can recollect what it knew before—concerning virtue and other things as well. Since all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things, there is nothing to prevent someone, having recalled only one thing—what we call *learning*—from discovering all the rest, if he is brave and does not grow tired of inquiring.

We have only to pull ourselves together and continue the search to unlock the mysteries of the universe.

It is easy for the reader to get swept away by this optimism and to lose sight of her own limitations. This point was not lost on Nietzsche, who said in *The Birth of Tragedy*: "Anyone who has ever experienced the pleasure of Socratic insight and felt how, spreading in ever-widening circles, it seeks to embrace the whole world of appearances, will never again find any stimulus toward existence more violent than the craving to complete this conquest and to weave the net impenetrably tight."²⁰ The result is what Nietzsche terms "Greek cheerfulness." Whether cheerfulness is all that the Socratic dialogues convey will be discussed below. For the present it is worth noting how the dialogues are structured so as to constantly reassure the reader that she is making progress.

It is very rare that a Socratic dialogue is a haphazard discussion or a simple deductive exercise. In most cases there is a pattern to the various twists and turns. We have seen that in the *Protagoras*, it is a criss-cross. Socrates thinks virtue is not teachable, Protagoras that it

is; but in the end they appear to be on opposite sides of the issue. In the *Laches* and *Charmides*, it is a Scylla and Charybdis. A particular virtue is at issue. One of the characters (e.g., Critias) is too brash while the other (e.g., Charmides) is too shy.²¹ In the *Symposium*, it is an ascending hierarchy. Each speaker raises the level of discussion and prepares the way for the speech of Socrates. These structures do more than satisfy the reader's desire for tidyness, they make her think that she is being carried along by a logical current which will deposit her in exactly the right place. In the *Symposium* she becomes so caught up in the flow of the argument that she almost forgets it is an argument. The epistemological effect is equally pronounced: the reader comes to feel that she knows what is going to happen next. It is like listening to a symphony and being asked to predict the last five notes. The difference is that in a Socratic dialogue, we never find out what the last five notes are. The structures which Plato works so hard to establish point us in the right direction but never quite give the problem away. The result is, as Kierkegaard once noted, that if we do make a discovery after reading a Socratic dialogue, the credit does not go to Socrates but to us.²² Socrates, it will be remembered, is not a teacher because teaching is impossible.

It is no accident, then, that in the *Theaetetus* Plato has Socrates compare himself to a midwife. It is the respondent, and by implication the reader, who gives birth to an idea. All Socrates does is facilitate the delivery. In this way, the reader is given every possible motive to inquire. She is taken to the doorstep of a solution and told that if she crosses the threshold, she is the one who will receive praise.

5. IMPENDING TRAGEDY

If such optimism went unchecked, the Socratic dialogues might qualify as works of literature, but they would still leave a lot to be desired. Socrates lived through a long and bitterly contested war which culminated in the collapse of the Athenian empire. Although Socrates served the city in combat, he was eventually put to death by the people most in need of his message. Plato had no choice but to balance Socrates' optimism with a sense of impending tragedy. The *Euthyphro* and *Meno* contain obvious references to his trial for impiety. In the *Gorgias*, Callicles tells him point blank that if he is brought to trial on trumped up charges, he will have nothing to say in his own defense (486a ff.). The *Symposium*, often regarded as Plato's great

comedy, is narrated by a man who cannot control his weeping in the *Phaedo*. But these references have been discussed many times. I believe the real sense of impending tragedy is psychological—that for all of his efforts, Socrates never does persuade anyone to alter his life. His closest associates, Critias and Alcibiades, became a disgrace to the city. Meno went on to a life of treachery in Asia Minor and was executed. Laches and Nicias both met with misfortune. Neither Gorgias nor Protagoras was moved to abandon sophistry and pursue philosophy. Worst of all, his longtime companion Crito accused him of cowardice for not breaking the law (*Crito* 45c ff.)—thereby proving that he missed the whole point of Socrates' speech to the jury. Callicles sums up the feeling of most respondents when, after hearing Socrates discourse on how to live a life, he says (*Gorgias* 513c): "I don't know why but somehow what you say strikes me as right, Socrates, and yet I feel as most people do: you don't quite convince me."²³

Nor, as far as I can determine, does he convince the reader. We are anxious to follow Socrates through the pages of the dialogue and equally anxious to go on talking about virtue after putting the dialogue down. But do we really think our lives will be transformed? We know that we will not, and if my interpretation is right, Plato knew it too. There is a profound truth in Alcibiades' claim that the one overriding emotion Socrates produces is shame (*Symposium* 216b): "I cannot disavow the duty to do what he bids me to do, but as soon as I am out of his presence, I fall victim to the worship of the crowd. So I run away from him, and when I see him again, become ashamed of my former admissions." We have seen that by definition shame is an essential part of the elenctic process. In the *Apology* (29d-e), Socrates summarizes his mission in the following way:

My good man, you are a citizen of Athens, the greatest city in the world and most famous for wisdom and power, are you not ashamed for paying more attention to wealth, reputation, and honor than to wisdom, truth, and the perfection of your soul?

He is equally explicit in the *Sophist* (230c-d), where he claims that the soul will receive no benefit from the application of knowledge until it is refuted and brought to shame.

Socrates showed that when it came to virtue, the great thinkers of his day knew next to nothing. We watch with great relish as he brings

Gorgias and Protagoras to their knees. But it is impossible to read these dialogues without thinking that *our* claim to knowledge would fair no better. The Socratic dictum that compared to the knowledge a god might possess, human knowledge is of little or no value (*Apology* 23a-b), is not restricted to fifth century Athens. It is offered as a general comment about the human condition. So if Gorgias, Protagoras, and the others pull themselves together and go on pretending to be wise, it is likely that we will too. Like Alcibiades, we may feel shame when confronted with our former admission and think about running away, but neither emotion will prevent us from repeating the story over again.

The emotional reaction most closely associated with the tragic hero is not shame but pity and fear. With Oedipus, we have someone as committed to inquiry as Socrates was. In the context of Sophocles' play, however, the audience knows what the major character does not: that the inquiry, if successful, will lead to a catastrophic result. The tragedy of the situation is that divine omniscience has to assert itself but can do so only at the cost of human suffering. The result is pity for the person who must bear the brunt of that suffering and fear to the extent that our situation resembles his. As Bernard Knox put it: ". . . even the most profoundly religious spectator must recoil in horror from the catastrophe to which Oedipus so energetically forces his way."²⁴

Socrates' tragedy is quite different. In the first place, there is no catastrophe waiting for him at the end of the intellectual process. Rather than the victim of divine omniscience, the Socrates of the *Apology* describes himself as its servant (23b-c).²⁵ In pursuing philosophy, he is carrying out the wishes of god. As for the prospect of his own death, he is convinced that no evil can befall a good man either in this life or the next (*Apology* 41c-d). Instead of recoiling at the prospect of his death, Socrates approaches it with equanimity. According to Nietzsche: "He went to his death with the calm with which, according to Plato's description, he leaves the Symposium at dawn."²⁶ Where then, is there an occasion for pity and fear?

The answer is that there is not insofar as Socrates, the tragic hero, is concerned. Phaedo, the one who reports on the death scene, claims that he was filled with a strange emotion (*Phaedo* 58e). Instead of feeling pity, as he naturally would at the death of a friend, he felt an unusual mixture of pleasure and pain. At the end of the dialogue, Phaedo, like others begins to weep—not for Socrates but for himself. The reader will recall that in the *Apology* (30c), Socrates maintained

that his death would not injure him as much as it would the citizens of Athens. In any case, Socrates scolds those who begin to weep at the end of the *Phaedo*, and in characteristic fashion, they feel ashamed of themselves (*Phaedo* 117e).

The dramatic impact of Socrates' death is exactly the one he had in life: an unusual mixture of pleasure and pain. It is impossible for the reader not to be aroused by the optimism generated by the inquisitive process but simultaneously to be dismayed by the realization that like so many others, she will resist the conclusions to which it leads her. We saw before that the knowledge already present in the soul requires courage to recover. To the extent that we do not recover it, we, too, are made to feel shame. In this way, the image of the dying Socrates produces in the audience a sense of unworthiness. We stand in awe of Socrates, but for that very reason, we know that our own actions will never compare to his. We are not going to put aside our careers, detach ourselves from all unsupported beliefs, and follow what Nietzsche and Vlastos jointly describe as Socrates' "despotic logic."

Nietzsche objected that in Socrates' optimism lies the death of tragedy.²⁷ We can now see why this judgment is unfair. It would be more accurate to say that in his portrayal of Socrates, Plato has created a new kind of tragedy. Instead of the hero bearing the brunt of the suffering and allowing the audience to think "There but for the grace of God go I," Plato reverses things. It is the audience who suffer when the dying hero forces them to examine their lives. Despite everything Socrates has said about the immortality of the soul, the audience, too, is inclined to weep and to be scolded. Unlike Oedipus and the other classical heroes, Socrates does not give the audience the luxury of vicarious emotions. As *Phaedo* rightly points out, we weep for ourselves. The effect of Plato's reversal is thus clear: in a real sense, the tragedy is ours.

6. THE FUSION OF TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

It was argued above that what makes the Socratic dialogues lasting works of art is the way Plato overcame the desire to preach. He did this by affecting a subtle interplay between opposite tendencies or emotions. We are given enough confidence to think that a solution to the problem at hand is immanent but not so much confidence that we

lose sight of our own limitations in trying to solve it. At the end of the *Symposium*, there is a famous passage in which Socrates suggests that tragedy and comedy might be two sides of the same thing. From the context it is not clear whether Plato intended this remark to apply to his own work. But intended or not, the comparison is obvious. It is no accident that Phaedo finds himself both laughing and crying at the death of Socrates. Socratic philosophy combines what Nietzsche termed "Greek cheerfulness" with what several characters, including Socrates, refer to as a sense of shame.

Friedländer maintained that the greatest testament to Plato's artistic genius is that we take what he created as historical reality.²⁸ So successful was Plato in overcoming the desire to preach that the dialogues read like actual conversations. But actual conversations are not necessarily worth repeating. It is not only their liveliness which makes the Socratic dialogues unsurpassed works of art, or the care with which Plato sets the scene, or the many literary and historical illusions they contain. These things are important but not sufficient for the production of a work of genius. What makes them unsurpassed works of art is the way in which they stimulate inquiry and with it, self-examination. It is, in short, the fact that the Socratic dialogues assist in the process of recollection which makes them succeed both as art and as philosophy. Let us recall Socrates' remark about putting sight in blind eyes. If a simple morality play makes for dull reading, it is also a poor way in which to lead a person to an insight. It is a truth of aesthetics as much as epistemology that the only insights worth having are those we can somehow call our own. The greatness of the Socratic dialogues is the way in which truth and beauty, form and substance, are ultimately united.

The purpose of this chapter has been to set forth the principles of Socratic philosophy in a general way and show how they make dialogue the proper vehicle for its expression. But it will not do for a discussion of Socratic philosophy to remain at such a level of generality. The real test of whether truth and beauty, form and substance, work together must lead to the analysis of specific texts. In what follows, I will examine a number of dialogues, chiefly the *Apology*, *Gorgias*, and *Meno*, to prove my point. All of this will help us to understand how the elenctic method, knowledge, and virtue are related. With this understanding in hand, we will be in a position to discuss the Socratic identification of virtue with knowledge.

Notes to Chapter One

1. On this point, see the introduction to Bryan Magee's interview with Iris Murdoch in Magee, *Men of Ideas* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 264. It is unfortunate that neither Magee nor so gifted a writer as Iris Murdoch ever consider the possibility that the literary qualities of a work may be essential to its success as a piece of philosophy.
2. For the purpose of this discussion, the term "Socratic dialogue" will refer primarily to the dialogues of Plato's early period. This does not mean, however, that supporting evidence from later dialogues will be excluded if it bears on an important point. The best overall discussion of the literary significance of the Socratic dialogues is Paul Friedländer, *Plato: The Dialogues . . . First Period*, translated by H. Meyerhoff (New York, Bollingen, 1964). Other sources include: Julius Stenzel, "The Literary Form and Philosophical content of the Platonic Dialogue," in *Plato's Method of Dialectic*, translated by D. J. Allan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 1-22, Philip Merlan, "Form and Content in Plato's Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 8 (1947), 406-30, Dorothy Tarrant, "Style and Thought in Plato Dialogues," *Classical Quarterly* 42 (1948), 28-34, Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 3-31, Drew Hyland, "Why Plato Wrote Dialogues," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (1968), 38-50, Rudolph H. Weingartner, *The Unity of the Platonic Dialogue* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), and Ronald Hathaway, "Explaining the Unity of the Platonic Dialogue," *Philosophy and Literature* 8 (1984), 195-208. I take it for granted, as virtually all of these people do, that the dialogues are characterized by a unity of form and content. For an opposing view, see Josiah B. Gould, "Klein on Ethological Mimes, for example, the *Meno*," *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969), 253-65. In regard to the *Meno*, the specifics of my disagreement with Klein and Gould will be spelled out in Chapter Seven below.
3. Vlastos, "The Paradox of Socrates," in Vlastos (ed.), *The Philosophy of Socrates* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1971), 12.
4. Tarrant, *op. cit.*, 28.
5. R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 158.
6. Later, at 276b ff. Socrates suggests that writing is a frivolous activity comparable to the hasty planting of shrubs and repeats his basic criticism: that written words cannot defend themselves. Socrates' attack on the written word has led some scholars to conclude that Plato's real thought was transmitted orally so that rather than looking to the dialogues, we should try to construct it from other sources, in particular Aristotle. As far as I am concerned, this view was refuted once and for all by Harold Cherniss in *The Riddle of the Early Academy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles:

University of California Press, 1945). But it has resurfaced in the writings of K. Gaiser, *Platons Ungeschriebene Lehre* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1963) and H. J. Krämer, *Arte bei Platon und Aristoteles* (Heidelberg: Abhandlungen Heidelberger Akademie, 1959). For a review of Kramer, see Vlastos, "On Plato's Oral Doctrine," *Gnomon* 41 (1963), 641-55. The esoteric view is also defended by J. N. Findlay in *Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974). See, in particular, 19-20, where Findlay claims that Plato's teaching ". . . cannot have been confined to a study of the Dialogues, on which in fact it seems that Plato commented little, though some like the *Phaedo*, and later the *Timaeus*, were closely studied. But the whole gist and thrust of Plato's main thinking is not to be found in the Dialogues taken alone, however much some have tried to find it there. The Dialogues themselves (for example *Phaedrus*, 275-6) proclaim the superiority of oral over written exposition, the latter consisting of words that resemble life-like paintings that maintain an august silence when interrogated, and are unable to defend themselves if attacked or abused, whereas the former create living 'writings' in the soul, that are able to speak for and defend themselves. And the Dialogues themselves constantly refer to a more thorough treatment that must occur 'elsewhere,' and would be hollow productions were these promises themselves hollow. Thus Socrates in the *Republic* says (506) that he must 'now leave the question as to what the Good Itself is, for it seems to be beyond my present powers to bring out what I have in mind on the present occasion,' or that, despite all effort, a great deal is being left out and must be left out in the development of the likeness of the Sun (509c). The whole account of the Good in the *Republic*, in fact, points to a missing elucidation, and is unintelligible without it, and so do such statements as that about the soul as being something whose uniformity or triformity can only be established by methods more accurate than those followed in the Dialogues (435d, 612a). The missing elucidation is, however, largely available, even if it itself demands further elucidation. . . ." In contrast to Findlay, I do not see why Plato's words in the *Republic* or anywhere else are unintelligible without an esoteric doctrine which must be reconstructed from a variety of texts. To point out the limitations of the written word, to warn against passive acceptance of philosophic truths, is not necessarily to imply that one has a separate body of truth which is being withheld from the reader.

7. See *Gorgias* 447c, 449c, *Protagoras* 329a ff., *Euthydemus* 275a, *Hippias Major* 282b-c.
8. Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction*, translated by H. Meyerhoff (New York, Bollingen, 1958), 166.
9. *Meno* 81d, 82a, 84d, 85d. Compare these references with Socrates' frequent skepticism about the teaching of virtue, e.g., *Apology* 20a-c, *Laches* 186a ff., and *Protagoras* 319a ff. By "teach" in these passages, Socrates

- may have in mind the teaching methods of the sophists. That leaves open the question of whether teaching is possible in a different sense, i.e., elenctic teaching. This issue will be taken up in Chapters Six and Seven.
10. Klein, *op. cit.*, 7.
 11. Klein, *op. cit.*, 20.
 12. Randall, *Plato: Dramatist of the Life of Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 122. A less extreme version of this position can be found in Merlan, *ibid.* I agree with Merlan that "The form of Plato's writings attracts and repels at the same time," 429. I will develop this theme below. But I think Merlan goes too far when he says that Plato "never communicated what was essential to him." Surely the issues Socrates talks about were essential to Plato and the stands Socrates takes, ones which Plato sought to recommend. We can admit, with Merlan, that the dialogues leave us cross-examined rather than instructed without positing an absolute and ineffable truth which lies behind them. All we have to say is that the dialogue form allows for the possibility of genuine discovery on the part of the reader.
 13. Rudolph Weingartner, *op. cit.*, 5.
 14. Letters of John Keats, selected by F. Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 53. Cited in Weingartner, *op. cit.*, 4.
 15. Vlastos, *op. cit.*, 7. In view of *Apology* 29d-e, 30a, and 36c, it is hard for me to understand how anyone could have argued that the purpose of *elenchus* is merely to point out inconsistencies in others. And if that evidence is insufficient, the text of the *Crito*, where Socrates uses *elenchus* to argue that it is better for him to remain in prison, ought to be decisive. But this position was argued by Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Socrates* Vol. I (London: John Murray, 1875), 236-77, 281 ff. and Vlastos in his introduction to the *Protagoras* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956). It has since been rejected by Vlastos in "The Socratic Elenchus," in J. Annas (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 27-58. For further comment on Vlastos' paper, see Richard Kraut's paper in the same volume. I agree with Kraut that Vlastos puts entirely too much emphasis on *Gorgias* 479e, which is hardly the place where Socrates thinks he has a positive moral result. The price one pays for thinking that the purpose of *elenchus* is merely to expose inconsistency is that Socrates becomes something of a dogmatist. If, as the dialogues clearly show, he had deep moral convictions, and if *elenchus* could not be used to support them, on what basis did Socrates think they were true?
 16. Burnyeat, "Virtues in Action," in Vlastos (ed.), *The Philosophy of Socrates*, *op. cit.*, 213.
 17. Cf. Terence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 40: "... a disclaimer of knowledge does not require a disclaimer of all positive convictions." Failure to see this point destroys the uniqueness of Socrates' position. Anyone can disclaim knowledge if he has no real con-

victions about how to live a life. What makes Socrates' position so interesting is that he *had* such convictions and disclaimed knowledge anyway. At *Gorgias* 509a, he claims to have arguments of adamant and steel that his view of moral life is correct; but earlier, at 506a, he explicitly disclaimed knowledge (cf. *Republic* 354b). There is, however, one passage in the *Apology* which appears to contradict this. At 29b, Socrates says he *does* know that it is disgraceful to do wrong and disobey one's superior. Does this negate what he says in the rest of the *Apology*, the *Gorgias*, and elsewhere? I believe it does not. The use of *know* at *Apology* 29b is referring to the strength of Socrates' moral commitment. This does not mean, nor does Socrates ever say, that his belief follows from a completed moral theory or science. He is committed to it even though he cannot give a totally satisfactory justification for it. Such commitment would be objectionable only if it led Socrates to say either (1) that he refuses to subject it to further scrutiny, or (2) that others must accept it on his authority. But he never says either one. This is essentially the view taken by Vlastos in "The Paradox of Socrates," *op. cit.*, 10-2. A very different view is defended by Richard Kraut in *Socrates and the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 274-9. According to Kraut, Socrates' position in the *Apology* is different from that found in later dialogues like the *Meno*. In the *Apology*, Socrates cannot define justice but thinks he knows something about it: that it is wrong to disobey a superior. In the *Meno* and elsewhere, he thinks that without a definition, such knowledge is impossible. Here we should note, as Kraut admits, that the evidence for putting the *Apology* among Plato's very early dialogues is inconclusive. Though it is often treated as an elementary text, it is a defense of Socrates' entire life and one of our best sources for understanding the elenctic process. In view of the fact that the *Apology* is a public oration, I see nothing untoward or insincere in Socrates' using *know* to mean "is strongly committed to" rather than "has the best possible grounds for asserting." True, this means Socrates is equivocating but (1) once understood, the equivocation is not harmful to his position, and (2) there is no reason to think that straight, univocal predication is always to be preferred. For these reasons, I side with Vlastos.

18. Grote, *op. cit.*, 291-2.
19. Grote, *op. cit.*, 291-2.
20. The tone of this passage stands in marked contrast to that of *Phaedo* 66b-67b. On the other hand, the *Meno* passage occurs in a context which assumes multiple incarnations so that the discovery of "all the rest" may require more than one lifetime. Cf. *Philebus* 24d.
20. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by W. Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1976), 97.
21. I owe this insight to Robert Brumbaugh. For a similar analysis of the *Laches*, see Michael J. O'Brien, "The Unity of the *Laches*." in Anton and

- Kustan (eds.), *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1971), 303-315.
22. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, originally translated by D. F. Swenson, translation revised by H. W. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 75-6.
 23. I agree with Irwin, against Dodds, that this passage still leaves open the possibility that Callicles, or someone like him, can be reached through rational argument: "If we thoroughly examine the same issues often and better, Callicles, you'll be persuaded." See Irwin, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 233. In fact, as Irwin points out, this passage calls to mind *Meno* 85c, where Socrates suggests the slave can obtain as good a knowledge of geometry as anyone else if questions are put to him over and over. But the fact that Callicles *could* be reached by rational argument only heightens the tragedy that, in fact, he will not be. In Chapter Seven, I will use a similar line of argument in regard to *Meno*: contrary to Klein, he is not depraved and could learn about virtue if he stayed in Athens and submitted to Socratic questioning. But the audience knows that none of this happened.
 24. Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1957), 51.
 25. This theme, that Socrates is the loyal servant of Apollo is continued in the *Phaedo* 60d, 61b, 85b. It is the essence of Socrates' conception of himself as a religious hero and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.
 26. Nietzsche, *op. cit.*, 89. Compare Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 4.3.2: ". . . no one in human memory ever bore death in a nobler way. He was forced to live for 30 days after he was sentenced . . . During that time, as every one of his associates could see, he lived as he had lived before."
 27. Nietzsche, *op. cit.*, 91.
 28. Friedländer, *op. cit.*, 158.