

Socrates and Christ

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A Study in the Philosophy of Religion

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTORY—SOCRATES AND CHRIST

SINCE the time of Bossuet's 'Histoire Universelle,' as Burnouf points out,¹ many have supposed the various forms of religion to be but corruptions of an original revelation. The Platonic doctrine of reminiscence was resuscitated after a fashion, and employed to explain the apparently inexplicable. If the Greek philosopher thought that man's sublimer moments were simply faint memories of a former pure state, the earlier modern investigators of the "science of religion" believed, similarly, that faith and worship were adaptations of a "primordial revelation." On this theory it would not be difficult to form a comparative estimate of any given religious system. For, if at the outset of the inquiry a *deus ex machina* be assumed, it is easy to deal with even the most formidable problems. But, unfortunately, the opinion of Bossuet and those who think with him is no longer tenable. Religion is progressing towards a pure manifestation rather than looking back with more or less distorted vision. Had a specific revelation been planted on this earth at the first, and left to take its chance, so to speak, then of the "Three Reverences"² the first alone would have been possible. The fear of the Lord is only the beginning of wisdom, and reverence for what is above us is only the beginning of religion. "The Second Religion," as Goethe has it, "founds itself on reverence for what is around us . . . The Third Religion is grounded on reverence for what is beneath us . . . And this being now attained, the human species cannot retrograde." For, "out of those three Reverences springs the highest reverence, reverence for one's self, and those again unfold themselves from this; so

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that man attains the highest elevation of which he is capable, that of being justified in reckoning himself the best that God and Nature have produced: nay, of being able to continue on this lofty eminence, without being again by self-conceit and presumption drawn down from it into the vulgar level.”³ In other words, each one has his own place in the spiritual order of the world, and his work cannot be done for him by any other person. His value is absolute because he is unique. If this doctrine be true universally, its significance in special cases is supreme. Those who have given shape to the ideals of entire nations and ages achieve a fuller immortality. Sacredness diffuses itself over all who have toiled amidst difficulty, or suffered for conscience’ sake, but of some few a double portion remains the peculiar possession.

“Such souls
Whose sudden visitations daze the world,
Vanish like lightning, but they leave behind
A voice that in the distance far away
Wakens the slumbering ages.”

From this point of view, the old opposition between the so-called sacred and the secular is not only hurtful but impossible. The two spheres overlap, or the one is complementary to the other. The recognition that everyday existence possesses a depth usually associated with religion, and that spiritual life has a usefulness reserved, as some are apt to suppose, for profession or occupation, is sure to lend added significance to individual effort. When, in some such way, the secular is transformed by the sacred, when the finer perceptions are permitted to qualify the grosser continually, and not at stated times only, then the growing identification of creed with conduct is an undeniable benefit.

Sometimes, however, this higher aspect seems to be forgotten; and of late years a false direction has on several occasions been given to the doctrine of spiritual continuity. It is not impossible to find a reputation for liberality in questions of faith based on a species of special pleading. Ingenious parallels between Greek and barbarian, striking coincidences in the lives of great teachers,

learned disquisitions on Christianity before Christ, and the like, serve to invest their inventors or authors with a superiority based on their presumed freedom from dogmatic prejudice. Now it is possible to be wholly in sympathy with those who desire to see in all religion a uniform manifestation of the higher life, and in all sincere searching after God a pathetic confession of finitude that cannot be too tenderly treated, and at the same time to pervert their views by an undue identification of ideas or individuals seemingly alike. The truth that *natura non facit saltus* has, as its reverse side, the fact that nature never stands still. The life of the Greek protomartyr invites compassion, misleading in its completeness, with that of Christ. Yet there is no immediate connection between the two. History and the ascertained course of religious development are arrayed against the parallelism. Nevertheless, some who take their stand upon these very principles—who well know how to use the historical and comparative methods—are prone to forget that a due sense of perspective is the one faculty with which their favourite study is unable to dispense. Wherein do we detract from the sublimity of Socrates' life and death when we say that he only originated, or perhaps only gave new direction to a growth which more than four centuries of half-hidden progress, and the influence of several civilisations, were at length to make perfect in weakness? There is little essential similarity between Socrates and Christ, for the simple reason that the work which was given them to do has value in that it was different for each.

It need hardly be said that one by no means intends to dispute the many literary and other references to the likeness between Socrates and Christ. When, for example, Justin Martyr claims inspiration for Socrates, and almost classes him as a Christian;⁴ when Shelley calls him “the Jesus Christ of Greece;” when, in the preface to Lamartine's ‘La Mort de Socrate,’ it is written, “Il avait combattu toute sa vie cet empire des sens que le Christ venait renverser; sa philosophie était toute religieuse;” when Hugo exclaims—

“Dieu que cherchait Socrate, et que Jésus trouva,”

or cries—

““Oui, c’est un prêtre que Socrate!”—

no one need question the appropriateness of the parallel.

Nor, again, is it possible to complain when Professor Mayor⁵ and Mr Benn, following Schleiermacher—who speaks of “the too prosaic Xenophon, and the idealising Plato,”—write that “there is, curiously enough, much the same inner discrepancy between Xenophon’s ‘Memorabilia’ and those Platonic dialogues where Socrates is the principal spokesman, as that which distinguishes the Synoptic from the Johannine Gospels.”⁶ Rhetorical licence and legitimate illustration lend little aid in the creation of illegitimate identities.

But another and widely different kind of comparison merits attention, even if it do not excite immediate opposition. In the introduction to his large work on ‘Le Christianisme et ses Origines,’ M. Ernest Havet, writing of the general relation between Greek philosophy and Christianity, makes the following remarkable statement: “J’étudie le Christianisme dans ses origines, non pas seulement dans ses origines immédiates, c’est-à-dire la prédication de celui qu’on nomme le Christ et de ses apôtres, mais dans ses sources premières et plus profondes, celles de l’antiquité hellénique, *dont il est sorti presque tout entier*,”⁷ and again, “C’est précisément ce que je me propose d’établir, que le Christianisme est beaucoup plus hellénique *qu’il n’est juif*.”⁸ Further, coming now more particularly to the connection between Socrates and Christ, another author has committed himself to a somewhat extreme opinion. “The Christian movement was, in many respects, analogous to the philosophic movement begun with Socrates . . . Ideal righteousness, the search for divine perfection, the endeavour to be ‘as good and wise as possible,’ these were the true and only means of ‘escape,’ or salvation contemplated both by Socrates and Jesus. *To the truths already uttered in the Athenian prison, Christianity added little or nothing, ex-*

cept a few symbols, which, though perhaps well calculated for popular acceptance, are more likely to perplex than to instruct, and offer the best opportunity for priestly mystification.”⁹ Comparisons of this sort are doubtless instituted sincerely in the name of scientific inquiry. Yet, although they have an element of truth, they are in many ways misleading. For, having assumed the fact of development in religion, their authors proceed to forget its chief characteristic.¹⁰ In religious as in other progress, growth is from the less to the greater, from the half to the whole truth.¹¹ Christianity is a historical religion in the strictest sense only because, as Novalis said, “the spirit leads an eternal self-demonstration.” It may possibly be profitable to consider some of the phases of this “self-demonstration” now in question.

At the outset, it must be admitted with F. C. Baur that “the well-known parallel drawn by so many writers between Socrates and Christ . . . is certainly not without justice.”¹² Yet, as we hope to see in the sequel, for the very reason that “Christianity closes a movement which arose upon the soil of pagan religion and philosophy, and the seed of which was sown by Socrates,” that “each of the principal forms assumed by Greek philosophy during this interval must have been a step in the preparation for Christianity,”¹³ the comparison is, in what may fairly be termed essentials, of external interest only. It is easy to show that the life of Socrates, like that of Christ, was remarkable for its consistency. Neither the one nor the other found a kingdom in this world; gain and loss were not meted out to them in terms of drachma or shekel, notwithstanding the mina of silver and the reward of Judas. We know, again, that the personality of each was endowed with a wonderful magnetic charm, a faculty of drawing men to it. Both were inspired, not only in their ability to rise superior to their age, but because they were quite conscious of this power. An unseen spiritual force—the Daemon of Socrates, the Father in heaven of Christ—ruled them alike. Both were faithful unto death that they might in no wise deviate from their obedience to this strange self-consciousness. For this reason, if for none other, “Christians deem it no irreverence to compare” Socrates “with the Founder of their religion.” Continuing the parallel, one might further show that

the aims of both were not unlike. Socrates continually insisted upon man's ignorance of himself, and pled for self-knowledge—for the recognition that his moral nature makes man half divine. Christ came preaching repentance, calling upon men to recognise their own sinfulness, and bidding them render satisfaction by striving to be at one with God as of old.

The methods employed in the furtherance of those aims also present a certain likeness. Mixing with all sorts and conditions of people, both teachers strove, by cross-examination, and by a species of enigmatic exhortation, to impress upon their hearers the illusiveness of this present life. Once more, Socrates before the Dicastery, and Christ before the Sanhedrim, were alike accused of endangering public morals. They came not to send peace on earth, but a sword. Christ openly proclaimed that the good tidings would cause division; Socrates was condemned because the judges considered that his message had separated the children from their fathers. In short, the Socratic method, and the parabolic discourse, both served to reveal a new order of existence. Finally, it might even be allowed that a "Passion" was common to Socrates and to Christ. Be this as it may, there is no question that one so disposed could easily institute a satisfactory comparison between the two "apologies." "Socrates, this time we will let you go, but on one condition, that you cease from carrying on this search, and from philosophy . . . Athenians, I hold you in the highest regard and love; but I shall obey the God rather than you: and so long as I have life and strength I shall not cease from philosophy, exhorting any one whom I meet after my manner, and setting forth the truth, saying: O my friend, you are a citizen of Athens, a city very great and very famous for wisdom and power of mind; are you not ashamed of caring so much for the making of money, and for reputation and honour? Will you not spend thought or care on wisdom and truth, and the perfecting of your soul? . . . And therefore, Athenians . . . either acquit me, or do not acquit me; but be sure that I shall never alter my life, not even if I have to die many times."¹⁴ "Jesus answered him, I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing . . . My kingdom

is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence. Pilate therefore said unto Him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth.”¹⁵ Socrates died because he was a philosopher, Christ because He was the founder of a new religion. But, notwithstanding this difference with its wealth of significance, later ages owe the poison-cup and the cross a debt which can never be estimated. The doctrines of the dead were transfigured, their followers touched, and transformed into living epistles. This no other cause could have wrought. Out of death came life. The Athenian prison gave Plato to humanity, Golgotha gifted Paul.

Yet, even allowing all this, the parallel holds of externals rather than of essentials. Although it refers to certain personal traits, it tells nothing of the genesis of character, or of the surroundings in relation to which life came to be what it was. Consider the mutual interaction of individual and environment, compare the varied conditions out of which Greek philosophy and Christianity respectively grew, and it must become abundantly plain that, saving the external resemblances already noted, there is no more parallelism between Socrates and Christ than between Plato and Paul. Nay, sometimes the undeniable similarity serves only to confuse. The familiar puzzle about the pound of lead and the pound of feathers is, in a sense, more fully solved when wrongly answered. External points of contact for the most part obscure internal differences.

As a rule exceptional standards are applied to great men. Perhaps those whom “the great man condemns to the task of explaining him” have no other convenient means of revenge. But in practice this is so far disadvantageous that two errors often occur. The tendency is either to magnify the hero overmuch or to belittle him unfairly. Hegel and Emerson estimate Plato somewhat differently from De Quincey, to make no mention of the *naïve* utilitarian Bentham.¹⁶ One living writer, again, regards the ‘Critique of Pure Reason’ as the key to modern philosophy, another rests satisfied

when he has reduced it to its lowest terms. Such variations serve to hint that genius is paradoxical in nature. And so it is. The individual is never greater than his age. Yet, if he have any sort of inspiration, he is always greater than his age. His work is wrought out of elements which he finds lying ready to hand; these are given to him. No *man* ever created anything out of nothing. But, on the other side, the unity of purpose which pervades all, the faculty that sets all the endless parts in fresh relations to one another and to the whole, those are his own. Genius cannot indeed destroy, but it can build up. “What is history but a series of biographies? When “the power of the man and the power of the moment concur,”¹⁷ the present is thereby rendered the sure foundation of the future. Even Mill, with his tinkering “permanent possibilities of sensation,” is constrained to put aside his baneful “acuteness,” and to admit that “the volitions of exceptional persons . . . may be indispensable links in the chain of causation by which even the general causes produce their effects . . . Philosophy and religion are abundantly amenable to general causes; yet few will doubt, that had there been no Socrates, no Plato, and no Aristotle, there would have been no philosophy for the next two thousand years, nor in all probability then; and that if there had been no Christ, and no St Paul, there would have been no Christianity.”¹⁸ A man cannot rise superior to his environment, except as he is able to fertilise what he receives from it, and thus to fill it with the promise of new life.

Goethe was right when, in reply to Eckermann’s suggestion—that every line of ‘Faust’ bore marks of a careful study of life and the world—he said, “Perhaps so; yet, had I not the world already in my soul through anticipation, I should have remained blind with seeing eyes, and all experience and observation would have been dead, unproductive labour.”¹⁹

He knew there was that within him which no study could give. In like manner, it may be affirmed of every master-spirit, that “the more you take from it the greater it appears.” The secret source of its significance is an inalienable property. Nor can Socrates be deprived of this. What is indestructible in him does not pertain to this or that aspect of his life, as others saw it; his relation to the

entire movement of Greek thought, and, very specially, the new direction which he gave to the search for self-knowledge, these constitute his own contribution to universal history. In a degree rarely paralleled he was both product and producer. Free, under certain conditions, those very limitations rendered his freedom worth the name.

Attention thus divides itself naturally between the character of Greek life, especially as influencing Socrates, and Socrates' interpretation of that life, with its results.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ANTECEDENTS OF SOCRATES

DESPITE the long age of laborious scholarship, with all its subtle reconstruction and minute explanation of the ancient world, Greek thought must ever remain remote from us. Some, no doubt, like Landor, or Winckelmann, or Hegel in his early period, are richer than others in pagan affinities. Still, even for them, a great gulf is fixed between the Greek and the modern mind. It is no more possible to set aside completely the achievements of the Christian centuries than to be unaffected by the law of gravitation. And, in proportion to this inability, is the past, or any given part of it, mysterious. "We know little indeed of the ways our own thoughts take; still less of those of our best friends. What, then, can we know of the thoughts of men whom we never saw, who lived centuries before us? What of the intellectual current which prevailed when they lived? For each age has its peculiar atmosphere, through which it must be viewed if we are to understand it clearly. . . . Shakespeare describes Caesar as fighting with cannon; of course, we all know better. But how his battles were carried on no one can say; for, were his own accounts of them twice as clear and exact as they are, there would still be so much omitted that was familiar to his contemporaries, that we should need the Roman public of his day to interpret Caesar's words precisely in the sense in which he uses them, to enable us to obtain a distinct picture of his manner of action."²⁰

But, on the other hand, there had been no progress in civilisation did not all, unconsciously perhaps, share the legacy of the past. Nor would any knowledge of olden time be possible did not a

select mind, once and again, put forth “an infinite and electrical power of combination, bringing together from the four winds, like the angel of the resurrection, what else were dust from dead men’s bones, into the unity of breathing life.” Greek thought was *sui generis*; as such it has become an integral portion of later culture. Yet, in so far as it can be disentangled from this highly complex growth, it presents certain peculiar qualities which the abundant records of history, art, religion, and social life mirror with tolerable vividness even at so late a day.

Athens during the life of Socrates—B.C. 469-399—was the most marvellous microcosm that the world has ever witnessed. In later times whole empires must be laid under contribution to furnish a galaxy of talent at all comparable with that which once graced a single city. Yet even thus, traces of that mysterious oft-repeated writing on the wall—“Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting,”—were not absent. The Greek religion is not altogether “the religion of the beautiful,”²¹ as is frequently supposed. And, even amid the glory of the Periclean era, the ideal of the beautiful had experienced several rude shocks.

Greek mythology, rooted as it was in the nature-worship common to the Indo-German peoples,²² originally possessed few of the elements indispensable to religion. Gradually, however, as anthropomorphism progressed, man’s ethical qualities came to be associated more and more intimately with the objects of worship. No doubt, in comparatively early stages, when the animistic phase was ended, and when the new-found humanity of the gods was coalescing with the other accessories of naturalism, the maxim that what is natural is not wonderful acquired surprising importance. The varied peccadilloes of the Pantheon only proved that its members were very near to their devotees. The freedom of a joyous light-hearted existence was characteristic of the gods as of men. The purely pagan sentiment, which finds no place for spirit save in body, never received illustration so perfect as in the days of the heroes before Agamemnon, and in the epic of the Trojan war. Certainly, in one aspect, Hellenic religion is the religion of the beautiful. But just where this is most true is it also least true. The more of the beautiful, the less of religion; the deeper

really religious life, the more marked the departure from the artistically conceived deities. Originally it was not an ethical, but an imaginative faith that Phidias and the rest served. "The national games, the religious pageants, the theatrical shows, and the gymnastic exercises of the Greeks were sculpturesque. The conditions of their speculative thought in the first dawn of civilised self-consciousness, when spiritual energy was still conceived as incarnate only in a form of flesh, and the soul was inseparable from the body except by an unfamiliar process of analysis, harmonised with the art which interprets the mind in all its movements by the features and the limbs."²³ It is true, further, that the Greeks ever remained the children of their own deeds. For, although Zeus and Apollo, Athene and Aphrodite, stood at the last outside of religious life, the aesthetic sense, in answer to which they were of old embodied in perfect plastic forms, was not dulled. The art of the tragedians, and no less the skill of the Platonic dialogue—witness the 'Apology' itself—the Aristotelian theory of virtue, nay, even the far-off "harmony with self" of the later Roman Stoics, owe dignity and repose to that antique lore, happy in its innocence of reflection, which found heaven enough in contemplating the perfection of bodily grace or strength.

A mythology like the Greek, lacking conspicuously the internals of religion, and, at the same time, so intimately connected with human life, must at some period be either thoroughly modified or cast aside altogether. Man's ethical nature is fated to develop in spite of every obstruction. The Greeks, as has been hinted, were not a religious people, in the usual acceptation of the term, but their affinity for things moral amounted to genius. The strange division between religion, as delineated say in Homer, and the deeper tendencies of life, as expressed by the dramatists, by Xenophanes, and by Socrates, precipitated a crisis disastrous enough for Greece, but of the last importance to the world at large. The moment at which the Hellenic mythology became anthropomorphic was the hour of its strength and weakness alike. For, as Aristotle declares, the Greeks made the gods in their own image. To equal the perfection of this humanised form has been the despair of later artists. Nevertheless, the men who made the gods

thus, were as yet unconscious of their own real nature. The holiness of beauty is no sufficient creed for one who has had a glimpse of the beauty of holiness. The individual is not enriched by appearance, but by character. But great poets, artists, and men of action so consecrated this holiness of beauty by their shining words, choice works, and high deeds,²⁴ that it became an integral portion of the national mind. As civilisation advanced and morality grew more definite, the ancient religion of external form was less and less able to express current ideas of the spiritual. The mythology, which is sometimes taken to be the whole of Hellenic religion, remained; nay, long after literary and philosophical activity had ended, sacrifice and adoration were rendered to the old gods. But it remained stationary. The reflective side of Greek life, disguise it as one may, was the more truly religious. It came into existence beside, and, in a sense, away from, the older belief. Finding no place for an ever-deepening ethical consciousness even in the gratification of a strongly marked aesthetic sympathy, the dramatists and philosophers turned from the material to the spiritual. Aeschylus and Sophocles, Socrates and Plato were, in their day, the true representatives of what was essential in Greek religion. It no longer suffices to picture the gods sipping ambrosia on Olympus under the presidency of Zeus, but the god is found within—Socrates knows that he has a Daemon. As everywhere, so in Greece, mythology may serve the purpose of religion. But when man begins to realise that the earth is not his sole possession, he is done with mythology. It remains maybe, as it did in Greece, shrined in “a magnificent ritualistic system, and a cycle of poetical conceptions,”²⁵ but it no longer plays the part of religion. The glory of Greek art, in its relation to this mythology, is that it was adequate to what it expressed. Yet this very adequacy caused its office in religion to be fleeting. Art can no more completely represent Sophocles’ Nemesis, Socrates’ Daemon, Plato’s Idea of the Good, or even the Stoic wise man, than it can sum in picture or *pieta* the agonised “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”

While the Greek religion thus passed through a perfectly natural development, the coexistence of the early mythology with the later ethical religion of the poets and philosophers rendered it

peculiarly interesting. When Socrates began his exhortations, the inevitable rupture between old and new had already taken place. Not, certainly, that the people as a whole had lost touch with the Homeric gods. Their attitude towards Aeschylus, Euripides, Anaxagoras, and Socrates, tells another tale. Yet, in what proved to be of moment to the advance of civilisation, a transformation had occurred. The now full-grown drama opened up the sphere of the moral consciousness, and gave the first articulate expression to ideas which the plastic arts could not embody. "Tragedy is better suited than any other kind of poetry to arouse ethical reflection, to portray the moral consciousness of a people, and to express the highest sentiments of which an age, or at least individual prominent spirits in an age, are capable. Every deeper tragic plot rests on the conflicting calls of duty and interest."²⁶ Man, struggling with himself, could find no sort of satisfaction in the external representations of deity. The individual is free, yet he finds himself overcome by the stress of outer necessity. Some power, impersonal and changeless, rules men and gods alike. The semi-monotheism of Aeschylus and Sophocles points to a supreme being, but a being whose very supremacy precludes the definite revelation inseparable from personality. Nemesis is not a subject, but rather a principle everywhere visible yet nowhere accessible. It is sublime in both the Kantian senses. For, while the imagination can form no definite representation of it, Greek heroism, in pride of hopelessness, accepts it as a fact. The dramatists thus grafted one species of poetry on to another, as Schlegel remarks. They rose superior to the physical godhead of the popular mythology, but their ideal of deity was largely abstract. Advance in ethical life had become a necessity; the direction in which to seek the commentary on human nature incident to that advance was not yet clear. Socrates was the first to realise this defect, and to indicate how it might be made good. Aeschylus and Sophocles could no more cast away the past, than they could add one cubit to their stature by going beyond their set task. Even if they would not, the poetry of ancestral nature-worship held them ever in its spell. With them, no less than with all the Greeks, "beauty was the tongue on the balance of expression." It was reserved for

Socrates not only to furnish the first intelligent utterance, but also to speak the truth.

Greek philosophy, in its initial period, was a semi-scientific counterpart of that satisfaction with the world which the old mythology evidenced. As a race the Greeks were long preoccupied with things seen and temporal. Eminently at home in their lovely surroundings, they found the attraction of visible nature irresistible. Accordingly, the early thinkers concern themselves to discover the origins and properties of matter. They, more than any pre-Christian philosophers, warrant the common generalisation that ancient speculation, as contrasted with modern, addresses itself to the problem of being rather than of knowing. No theory of self-consciousness was necessary, for the fact of self-consciousness had been little, if at all, realised. The universe of mind was as yet outside the range of philosophical experiment. Man, the thinker, and his immediate knowledge of the objects about which he thinks, were taken for granted. Investigation confined its efforts to the explanation of the material world. The tendency of pre-Socratic speculation is thus entirely in consonance with the character of Hellenic naturalism. Slightly as poetry and science seem to be connected, they were even thus early intimately related. The freedom from dogmatic restraint which enabled the Greeks to deify all nature, was also the essential condition of the fearless inquiries conducted by the first physicists. "This objectivity was no doubt far more easily attainable for Greek philosophy than for our own; thought, having then before it neither a previous scientific development nor a fixed religious system, could grapple with scientific problems from their very commencement with complete freedom. Such objectivity, furthermore, constitutes not only the strength, but also the weakness of this philosophy; for it is essentially conditional on man's not having yet become mistrustful of his thought, on his being but partially conscious of the subjective activity through which his presentations are formed, and therefore of the share which this activity has in their content; in a word, on his not having arrived at self-criticism."²⁷ . . . "The intuition of nature is thus the starting-point of the earliest philosophy, and even when immaterial principles are admitted, it is

evident that they have been attained through reflection on the data furnished by the senses, not through observation of spiritual life.”²⁸ Moreover, this philosophy was a genuine outgrowth of the mind of a specially gifted people, as the circumstances of its wide diffusion yet invariable Hellenic origin prove. Thales, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Zeno, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras were all, with one doubtful exception,²⁹ sprung from the Greek stock scattered among the widespread colonies of Hellas. The subtle intensiveness of philosophy, due to the contact of mind with mind, may account to some extent for the gathering of later and more subjective thinkers into one city. This question, though full of interest, is beyond our present inquiry. Whatever be the explanation, certain it is that, to the fifth century B.C., Greek philosophy, from Agrigentum in the West to Colophon in the East, confined itself to theories respecting the constitution of the physical world. The Ionians, the Pythagoreans, and the Eleatics alike investigate the origin of material things. For Thales “water is the one original substance;” Pythagoras systematises the universe by means of number; Xenophanes, in a tone of polemic, and Parmenides, with some regard for detail, formulate a doctrine not without analogy to the theory of the conservation of energy. For, according to the Eleatics, change is an illusion, the permanent sum-total of Being is the only reality. These, then, were all so-called “positive” thinkers in the strictest sense of the term.

But, as Greek religion had undergone a change ere the time of Socrates, so the philosophy of external phenomena began to present new features. Pythagoreanism was less concrete than the Ionian physics, and the Eleatic metaphysic was in turn more abstract than either. Finally, with the appearance of Heracleitus reflection entered upon a new stage. The customary classification of Parmenides with Xenophanes and the Eleatics is so far unfortunate that it obscures or leaves out of account his relation to Heracleitus. Whether these thinkers were thoroughly conscious of the antagonism or not, there can be no question that “the clearly marked opposition between the Ionic and the Eleatic views of nature, as shown in Heracleitus and Parmenides, had a powerful influence on the subsequent course of philosophy.”³⁰ Previously

the schools had been content to assume the facts of Being and change; but the conflict between Parmenides and Heracleitus rendered the explanation of these terms necessary. Thus philosophy was diverted from the investigation of external phenomena to the discussion of universal principles.³¹ In this respect the antagonism brought about a twofold result. On the one hand, both thinkers denied the ordinary conception of phenomena, yet the theories substituted by them were mutually contradictory. And when doctors differ, who shall decide? In this difficulty the Sophists appeared teaching philosophical despair, and advising every individual to consider his own prejudices paramount. On the other hand, the opposition between the doctrines of changeless Being and of ever-changing Becoming caused later philosophy to reconsider these concepts. This reconsideration was the work of a school which still flourished in the latest days of the pre-Christian world. While the physicists of the fifth century thus altered the direction of Greek speculation, it cannot be said that their influence was directly formative of Socrates. At the same time, the two radical changes which overtook philosophy before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war were largely due to them. Parmenides and Heracleitus, in short, determined Socrates through the medium of Anaxagoras and the Sophists.

It may therefore be maintained that, just as the dramatists denote the advance in religious and ethical ideas, of which Socrates was an heir, so Anaxagoras and the Sophists are the representatives of speculative progress. The Atomists, who in a manner attempted to unify the contradictions of Parmenides and Heracleitus, formulated a mechanical theory of the universe. Like Parmenides they held the unchangeableness of Being, like Heracleitus they taught the plurality of phenomena. They were thus at a disadvantage in their explanation of the world. For, on the supposition that atoms—the original Being of Parmenides—were fixed quantities alike as single units and as members of a universe, the whole question of phenomenal difference presented much difficulty. Plainly, one course alone was possible for the solution of this problem. The world could only be regarded as a series of conjoined particles, united so externally that the interconnection pro-

duced no alteration in their ultimate nature. This, the last of the purely physical philosophies, was so far identical with the earliest, that troubles occasioned by the separation between subjective and objective were unknown to it. Knowledge seemed to be taken as a fact, its processes and their conditions were still left unconsidered.

The first great change which pointed directly to the Socratic philosophy was effected by Anaxagoras. In some respects his importance for the history of Greek thought is apt to be underestimated. No doubt he may be classed with the other physicists, yet his distinctive contribution to the progress of philosophy entitles him to more pointed recognition. For he was the first to throw any light upon the absolute difference between spirit and matter. The intimate of Pericles and Aspasia, he also made philosophy the prominent social force which it afterwards remained. Moreover, if there be solid truth in the remark of Xenophon,³²—that Socrates sat at the feet of Aspasia as a learner in love—it may be inferred that the discussions at the house of Pericles, in which Anaxagoras figured prominently,³³ were among the earliest illustrations of the Socratic method. Anaxagoras is to be linked with Socrates in that his “reflection was directed to subjective processes and phenomena.”³⁴ Like the Atomists, Anaxagoras held that there were a number of original substances. But these differed from the atoms because they might be divided, they were not simple. Various qualities were supposed to pertain to each of the combining parts, and the character of the resultant whole was determined by the qualities of the predominating elements. Thus, whilst denying real qualitative change, Anaxagoras leaves room for apparent variation. This is the purely physical side of his philosophy, and it results in a chaos. For, obviously, a world composed of substances which are in turn compounded of fortuitous elements, is a mere aggregate in which no definite differentiation can be manifested. Therefore Reason, which is one in itself, and has no admixture of natures, must be the power which reduces this chaos to order. “All things were in chaos, Reason came and arranged them.” Spirit is thus at last distinguished from matter, and the dualism, of which all later philosophy is the history, re-

ceives half-conscious recognition. Anaxagoras is the true forerunner of Socrates because he introduced a new object of thought. Nature is no longer alone, but is controlled by a higher power, which must also be investigated. This, then, is the first conscious glimpse of that inner spirit which Socrates was to emphasise so strongly. But Anaxagoras, like many reformers, did not appreciate his discovery to the full. His conception of Reason was elementary, and was formulated almost entirely by means of physical analogies. Mind is not a presupposition of the world, the two are coeternal. Personality is not among its attributes. Indeed Anaxagoras' conception and use of Reason point rather to a principle of motion than to a spirit which arranges phenomena in rational order. Aristotle's criticism³⁵ is quite to the point, for mind is only employed because matter avails not. That is to say, it does what mechanism cannot do, but, as far as possible, it is kept down to the mechanical level. Reason is set by itself, and made the cause of motion, but how it performs the characteristic functions of spirit Anaxagoras does not explain.³⁶ It remained for Socrates to show the nature of knowledge, although the direction in which the explanation was to be sought had been indicated. Like the Nemesis of the dramatists, the *Nous* of Anaxagoras was something more than the old Greek mythology had thought of—men were now desirous of seeing beyond the material world to its conditions.

If, then, it may be fairly held that the speculations of Anaxagoras gave direction to Socrates' investigations, the immediate cause of his activity must now be sought.

The philosophy of Socrates was developed in opposition to the teaching of the Sophists. These often maligned men were characteristic products of their age. The success which they achieved, whether merited or not, corresponded to the need which they supplied. Three main circumstances, none of them without influence on Socrates also, may be said to have brought forth Protagoras, Gorgias, and the host of their less known fellows. Two of these have already received some attention. First, the break between the old religion and the recent drama had become very marked. If Aeschylus and Sophocles went beyond the traditional conception

of the gods, they never gave rein to any undue irreverence. But the inevitable trend of “the dialectic of moral relations and duties” could not fail to result in a more pronounced scepticism. Discounting entirely the influence of the Sophists, Euripides was, from the nature of the case, the exponent of defection from the ancient faith in its less pleasing aspects. His attitude in this matter exhibits most clearly the state of the religious atmosphere in which Socrates moved. Secondly, in spite of Anaxagoras’ affirmative tendency, he, in common with Parmenides and Heracleitus, had administered a rude shock to the complacency of ordinary opinion. Parmenides had asserted that the customary conviction of the senses with regard to the endless differentiation of phenomena was unjustifiable. Heracleitus, on the contrary, had as confidently declared that the senses deceive themselves when they attribute permanence and stability to material things. And now Anaxagoras denied that the ordinary perceptions of sense were able to furnish any adequate knowledge of the real in phenomenal nature. This universal doubt concerning matters of which doubt is usually thought impossible was, in a way, the starting-point of the Sophistic dialectic. But, in addition to the failing strength of traditional religion, and the growing boldness of philosophical speculation, a third and most important influence was at work. Athens, from being a city among cities, had suddenly become the first power of the civilised world. Like a victorious leader in a momentous struggle, she had reaped a reward out of all proportion to that bestowed on the rank and file who fought with her. Her citizens, as partakers in the new-found dignity, came to regard themselves with peculiar satisfaction. The sovereign people acquired unexpected importance, and those who could sway the democracy by art or by ability were assured of surpassing success in life. Till Socrates taught a more excellent way, it was altogether forgotten that “where rhetorical skill is regarded as paramount, the higher ends of education are apt to be overlooked, for readiness and fluency of speech may proceed out of emptiness, no less than out of fullness, of mind.”³⁷ In response to some such combination of influences the Sophists appeared. Many of them were, no doubt, sincere and able men. But for others, and those were

perhaps the majority, it was as certainly true that skill to prove the worse the better reason stood in place of higher wisdom. The delightful contrast between Gorgias' theory and his practice may serve to illustrate their general *morale*. He was able to show metaphysically "that nothing could exist, that what did exist could not be known by us, and that what was known could not be imparted"³⁸ to any one. Yet we are aware that he amassed wealth, and was held in much repute as a teacher. Surely the apotheosis of eristic—to teach that teaching is impossible! The inevitable result was, that "to expose fallacy or inconsistency was found to be both an easier process, and a more appreciable display of ingenuity, than the discovery and establishment of truth in such a manner as to command assent."³⁹ Cultivated criticism, secured from defeat by a recognised dogmatic appeal to self, took the place of the older positive philosophy. Matter and mind, no less than physics and ethics, were forgotten for the moment amid the parade of a wisdom which recommended itself by a certain ease of attainment. Opinion celebrated its triumph in obliteration of the distinction between right and wrong, or in convenient disregard of the evidence of sense-perception.

Socrates thus appeared at a turning-point in the history of Greek thought. Religion could not be expanded so as to include man's growing ethical consciousness within its purely mythological and naturalistic conceptions. Philosophy, while discrediting the objectivity of truth, had failed to furnish any homogeneous account of the world or of human life. The subordination of the individual to the state had resulted in such splendid achievement, that each citizen now sought his own share of the general good, *plus* as much more as superior education or cunning enabled him to filch. Disregard for customs once venerated, degradation if not despair of philosophy, and belief only in self were not a little characteristic of the Athenians towards the close of the Periclean era. But the crisis was not merely subjective. When Socrates began to teach, it was aggravated by certain objective relationships. After Pericles' death the glory slowly departed from Athens. The exhausting and disastrous course of the Peloponnesian war was but the prelude to a continuous and almost unparalleled decline. Socrates did his

best work during the years of this war. While Athens and Lacedaemon were ruining Greece by their bootless rivalry, he was providing his countrymen with a more lasting kingdom than that built up at the expense of Xerxes. The city-state, for which every one had hitherto been spent, was already in process of passing away. Yet the individual, at least so far as concerned his moral and spiritual value, was scarcely discovered. For Socrates the years had reserved the appreciation of this new factor in philosophy and in life. His it was to react on his conditions, to transform them, and so to render them organic factors in the development not only of Greek, but also of all civilisation. He was “an exceptional person” who came to deliver man from an exceptional difficulty, and, as a consequence, the interaction between his personality and the circumstances of the time was unusually intense. To this attention must now be given.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MISSION AND PHILOSOPHY OF SOCRATES

AT the outset it is to be remembered that Socrates is known to us only as an elderly man. The period of his life with which we are directly acquainted does not begin before his forty-fifth year, and the principal records relate to the last decade of his life. In short, the historical Socrates is neither a youth suffering the pangs of *weltschmerz*, nor a young man striving, like Goetz von Berlichingen, to subdue the world by force. He has cast away the illusions and hopes of early life, and has consciously set himself to realise more serious aims. What, then, was his peculiar work, and how came it to be forced upon him?

Socrates is, in a sense, the first of the Greeks who was not entirely Greek. "The Grecian state," Emerson said, "is the era of the bodily nature, the perfection of the senses—of the spiritual nature unfolded in strict unity with the body."⁴⁰ In Socrates this characteristic unconsciousness passed away never to be regained. The personal nature of man, with its implications of intellectual and practical activity, asserted itself. Great questions regarding knowledge and conduct were now for the first time consciously put. Metaphysical difficulties vaguely indicated by Socrates still, engage thinkers, while his ethical problem, with which, as we shall see, no Greek could be fully acquainted, was to find solution not in any theory, but in a unique life.

It is a commonplace to say that the atmosphere in which Socrates found himself was eminently favourable to the decisive

change which he was to inaugurate. The serious events which marked the struggle for the hegemony of Greece could not fail to turn some away from the barren irreflective scepticism of the Sophists and the educated class. If knowledge were valueless save to the individual in possession of it, if religious belief existed only to draw down insult, and if, after all sacrifices, the greatness of his city were not eternally assured, what resource had the Athenian but in his own human nature? As strong manhood ripened into vigorous age, Socrates appears to have appreciated more and more the necessity of his time. It is easy to contrast his lack of customary philosophical formalism with the importance assigned to him in the progress of Greek thought,⁴¹ and to cavil at "his excellent qualities, which, yet, are not such as fit a man to play a brilliant part in history." But this has about as much integral bearing on the state of the case as has Heine's typical comment—"that Xanthippe's husband should have become so great a philosopher, is remarkable. Amid all the scolding, to be able to think! But he could not write; that was impossible." The very fact that Socrates revealed a theory through the medium of his common life and conversation is the cause of his remarkable influence. When scepticism is rife, fine words avail little, if unaccompanied by fine works, which prove that the spoken gospel has a real and applicable meaning. The merest glance at the 'Memorabilia' brings home an irresistible conviction that Socrates was an "epoch-making" thinker more because he was a living person than because he discovered an abstract principle. No doubt there was such a principle present in his life, yet it appealed to Xenophon, Plato, and the others, not as an abstraction, but as the pervading secret of the moral power which prevailed in the deeds of Socrates the man. Was his admonition to Aristippus,⁴² concerning the necessity of temperance as a statesman's virtue, a bare dogma founded on some preconceived Greek idea of a ruler? Certainly not. "He disciplined his mind and body by such a course of life," Xenophon tells us,⁴³ "that he who should adopt a similar one would, if no supernatural influence prevented, live in good spirits and uninterrupted health; nor would he ever be in want of the necessary expenses for it. So frugal was he, that I do not know whether any one could earn so