

CHAPTER 1

SOCRATES THE SORCERER

(469–399 BCE)

There is a curious drawing, made in the thirteenth century, of Socrates with a funny hat on, seated at a lectern, with a feather quill in one hand. Behind him is a short, bossy Plato, prodding his master impatiently. We know it is them as there are little labels pointing to each saying “Socrates” and “Plato.” Otherwise . . . the picture is a mystery.

When the twentieth-century philosopher Jacques Derrida came across it during a visit to the Bodleian Library in Oxford, England, in 1978, he was shocked. Derrida wrote in one of his long, pompous books (of which more later) that after he “stumbled across it” he “stopped dead, with a feeling of hallucination . . . and of revelation at the same time, an apocalyptic revelation.”

It seems as if Plato is dictating to his teacher, Socrates, who is reduced to child-like obedience (hence the funny hat). Derrida says the picture symbolizes a kind of Freudian patricide, and makes several rather vulgar references to the picture (and Plato’s finger) to prove his point. Yet there is nothing in the image to prove that Socrates is being humiliated rather than helped. It is rather the staid hierarchy of Western Philosophy that may have been being pushed and prodded. Perhaps that is why Derrida, a distinguished French philosopher, was so shocked!

For certainly, if you read conventional histories of philosophy, you would think Socrates rather a dull fellow. Little is known about him, it seems, apart from the fact that he was born in Athens in the year 469 BCE, and that his father was a sculptor and his mother a midwife. There remain only a few other fragments of writing to throw a little more light on the man himself. Let one such historian, Professor Hugh Tredennick, take up the story:

Portraits and descriptions make it clear that he had a heavy, rather ugly, face, with a snub nose, prominent eyes beneath shaggy eyebrows, and a large full mouth. He was bearded and (in his later years at any rate) bald. His thickset body had great powers of endurance. He strutted as he walked, always went barefoot, and would often stand in a trance for hours. . . . On the other hand his mind, though not creative, was exceptionally clear,

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critical and eager. It tolerated no pretence; and since his will was as strong as his convictions, his conduct was as logical as his thinking. In a sceptical age he believed firmly in moral goodness as the one thing that matters; and he identified it with knowledge, because to his straightforward nature it seemed inconceivable that anyone would see what is right without doing it.

This is reassuring stuff. Yet none of this fits that funny, thirteenth-century picture . . .

The Philosophical Tale

Yet, if there is little enough that is agreed about Socrates, there is perhaps one thing. And that is that he is the most influential philosopher of them all. This despite the fact that no one is quite sure what he said – let alone thought. There are scraps enough to be sure, but the real Socrates remains an elusive figure. His footprints are everywhere, yet the man himself, like Macavity the mystery cat,* is nowhere to be found.

There are stories: of the dogmatic Socrates instructing a young and naive Plato to destroy his youthful attempts at poetry; of the fanatical Socrates standing for a day and a night rooted to the spot (wrestling with



FIGURE 1 He stood till dawn came and the Sun rose, then walked away, after offering a prayer to the Sun.

* In T. S. Eliot's poem of the same name.

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a thought), while others brought up mattresses to watch and take bets on how long he'd stay there, and of course there is that "famous-last-words" scene (described so eloquently in the *Phaedo*) shortly before he sips his last drink of hemlock.

For let me tell you, Gentlemen, that to be afraid of death is only another form of thinking that one is wise when one is not. It is to think that one knows what one does not know.

Historians consider Diogenes Laertius to be the most, indeed the only, reliable source about the 'historical Socrates'. Otherwise, all the accounts of this miasmatic figure say more about their author's preferences than they do about Socrates. Xenophon, the devious soldier-of-fortune, draws a picture of a dull, practical Socrates, holding forth in a harmless but insignificant way. Hegel, the philosopher of 'historical determinism' and of the dialectic, sees Socrates as a pivotal figure in the tide of world history, a Janus God with two faces, one surveying the past and the other facing the future.¹ And Nietzsche, writing in the *Gay Science*, describes Socrates as a "mocking and enamoured monster," a kind of philosophical "pied piper of Athens."

Yet overshadowing them all, it is the Platonic picture that has created the Socrates we know. Plato, the idealist, offers an idol, a master-figure for philosophy. A saint, a prophet of "the Sun-God," a teacher condemned for his teachings as a heretic. It is he who tells the most eloquent Socratic story. In the dialogue the *Symposium*, for instance, Plato writes:

Immersed in some problem at dawn, he stood in the same spot considering it, and when he found it a tough problem, he would not give it up but stood there trying to understand it. Time drew on until midday, and the men began to notice him, saying to one another in wonder: "Socrates has been standing there in contemplation, since dawn!" The result was that in the evening, after they had eaten their suppers, this being summer, some of the Ionians brought out their rugs and mattresses and took their sleep in the cool: thus they waited to see if Socrates would go on standing all night too. He stood till dawn came and the sun rose, then walked away, after offering a prayer to the Sun.

Elsewhere in the same dialogue, the good and bad twins, Aristodemus and Alcibiades, offer two more, opposing, views, which Plato uses to paint a picture of Socrates as 'Eros', the God of sexuality, and a figure beyond everyday categories. Socrates here is neither ignorant nor wise,

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neither tragic nor comic, male nor female – but outside all such distinctions. He can walk barefoot on ice during winter, drink wine without becoming drunk. Even his supposed ugliness now becomes an advantage, for having eyes set towards the sides of his head enables him to perceive a wider field of vision, just as having a flat distorted nose allows him to receive scents from all directions. And those disproportionately thick lips, can of course, now be seen as able to receive all the more kisses.

*But is any of this the ‘real Socrates’ – or just the one we
want to believe in?*

In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates appears, as one contemporary writer, Sarah Kofman, has put it very nicely, as something of a “seductive sorcerer,” party to some mystical insight that he never is to reveal.

Like an uncanny double, he seems to appear and disappear at will, immobilising himself, mesmerising himself and others through some magic trick, like a sorcerer with more power to charm than the finest flute player or the most eloquent narrator. He is more powerful than Gorgias, and his rhetoric more powerful than Agathon’s, who hurls his Gorgon-like speeches at listeners to frighten them and to hide the vacuity of his own thought.

Socrates is a good philosopher to launch the project of deconstructing philosophy with: is he the “sculptor’s son” who frittered away his inheritance, or the midwife’s boy who brought philosophy as critical dialogue screaming into the world? Socrates’ ugliness, his demonic voice, his ability to stay immobile for several days on end all contribute to the myth. Or is it a legend? Out of them all, Socrates is the hardest to deconstruct . . . Indeed, he may just be indeconstructible.

Pompous Footnote

- 1 The same concept lives on in the name of the month of January, the month that faces both the old year and the new one.