Chapter 8
The Man in the Agora: The Life and Death of Socrates

St Paul in Athens

After the death of Jesus, leadership of his adherents devolved not only upon Peter and the apostles but also upon James, 'the brother of the Lord', a man noted for his probity and a great frequenter of the Temple. It was a conservative group of leaders living by the Torah and focused on the narrower aspects of Jesus' teaching rather than its wider potentiality. But all this was to change in a most unexpected way.

The killing of Jesus had not put an end to the hostility of the priestly establishment. A young man known to us by the Greek name Stephen was preaching and wonderworking in Jesus' name. He was arrested and stoned to death outside Jerusalem. Among the witnesses to the deed was a young man named Saul, from Tarsus in Asia Minor. Later we find him taking a more active part against Jesus' followers, going from house to house and dragging men and women off to prison. So great was his zeal against them that he went to the High Priest seeking authority to go to Damascus and continue his work there. He gave it and Saul set off with a band of ruffians. But when he got there he was a different man. On the road he had the famous experience that left him blind for three days and changed for ever. Now, his name changed to Paul, he set himself the task of bringing the message of Jesus, as he interpreted it, to the Gentiles, the vast portion of the Roman Empire that was not Jewish. In the end he came to Rome where, according to tradition, he died a martyr's death under Nero.

In the course of his wanderings he visited Athens. Jews had settled there as in so many other cities of the empire, and as usual Paul went to the synagogue and preached to them. He never denied his Jewish roots. But his primary mission being to the Gentiles, he went and spoke every day in the agora, one of those great squares which throughout the Greek world were the centre of civic life. His hearers were intrigued and adherents of the Stoic and Epicurean Schools of philosophy came and met him. (Stoicism took its name

from a hall in Athens called the Stoa. It was a thoroughly coherent system, in which logic was believed to reflect a universally pervasive Reason. A life in harmony with Reason and Nature was the Stoic ideal. The goal of Epicureanism was peace of mind, to be achieved by the fullest possible elimination of pain through the reduction and simplification of desires. Epicurean communities provided an alternative to ordinary society. They were based upon friendship, a most important element in the system, and characterized by a caring attitude.) It is perhaps curious that only Stoics and Epicureans are mentioned, for the Academy, founded by Plato more than three hundred years before, was still producing teachers and students. From whatever source, it is likely that Paul learned something about the life and death of Socrates, Plato's teacher. Ironically, one of the charges against Socrates alleged that he was subverting belief in the gods; but Paul, whose visit marked the beginning of the end for their cult, as it did for the philosophical schools, was treated as a celebrity.

Pre-Socratic Thinkers

So strongly is Greek philosophy associated with Athens that it is easy to forget it originated far from there, in Asia Minor, the part of the world in which Paul's native city Tarsus was situated. Away off to the north-west was the ancient city of Miletus, now a ruin on the Turkish coast facing the Dodecanese. Like Ephesus and so many other places, it was one of the settlements founded by Greek colonists all over the Mediterranean lands. Its people seem to have been unusual in that they looked to observation and not mythology for making sense of the world about them. The honor of being the first western philosopher falls to a remarkable man of theirs named Thales, a contemporary of the Buddha. His name is reminiscent of '*thalassa*', the Greek word for the sea, and this has a certain appropriateness, for he believed that the sea formed the support which kept the earth in its place, and that water was the element from which all life arises. How the earth maintained itself in space was a major problem for early thinkers, and mythology seemed to supply the only answer: that some gigantic creature held it up. Thales would have none of this. He looked to nature itself for the answer, and found it in the element of water.

There is an interesting parallel here with the Buddha's thinking, albeit on a different plane. In dialogues and discourses attributed to him, water is by far the greatest source of imagery. It is used to illustrate, among much else, the stages of the life of a spiritual seeker; and when the Buddha wants an image for the Doctrine he says that as the sea has but one savor, that of salt, so his teaching has one savor, that of freedom. But he does not descend from the imaginative to the natural-philosophical level and offer a view of the world, any more than he descends to the level of baptismal ritual when he uses the metaphor of stream-entry for a moment in the holy life.

Of Thales' theological ideas we know little more than a phrase attributed to him by Aristotle, that 'all things are full of gods', one which reminds us of William Blake's dictum, 'everything that lives is holy', and the Mahayanin belief that there are bodhisattvas in every leaf and every grain of sand.

There is more evidence of the beliefs held by Thales' friend Anaximander, the second of the great Milesians, although his own works have been lost and we have to go to other writers to find something of what he thought. The idea with which he is associated is the *Apeiron*, the Boundless, the Infinite in respect of space and time. The word refers not to a condition of limitless repose but to an active principle, which moves the world in the regular and largely predictable way known already to observers of the skies and the seasons. It is the idea which runs through much of western thought and poetry, and finds its ultimate expression in Dante as the love which moves the sun and the other stars: '*L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle'.*

It is thought that the Milesians may have been the first to apply the word '*kosmos*' to the world. They seem to have believed that there was a great number of *kosmoi* in the *Apeiron.* '*Kosmos'* means 'beauty' and its use for the world is a profound affirmation of the value of the world. The Greeks did not limit the idea of beauty to the aesthetic sphere. They made no final distinction between aesthetic and ethical values, so that the idea of *kosmos* means not only beautiful but orderly. From observation of regularity arises the idea of order; it is the outward expression of law, which to the Greeks became – as already it was to the Indians – the most important thing of all.

Anaximander also introduced an idea well known among the Indians, that of 'the pairs of opposites', though with him they were physical forces at work in the kosmos: hot and cold, wet and dry, etc. Each element is in strife with its opposite, and perhaps this is a reflex of Zoroastrian thinking, in which light and darkness, Ormuzd and Ahriman, are forever at war. The *Apeiron*, it would seem, acts as a sort of arbitrator, seeing to it that in the long run balance is maintained. He found physical causes for the formation of heavenly bodies, their distances from the earth, why eclipses occur, and for the weather, earthquakes, the annual flooding of the Nile, and the origins of man and animals. These are only some of the questions to which he offered answers having no relation to mythology.

The third of the great Milesians, Anaximenes, held that the air was the divine element, and he made an analogy between the individual psyche, whose departure signified death, and the divine air of the kosmos. In Genesis we find the *ruach,* or air of God, mentioned at the beginning of creation, and the dust of Adam is brought to life by Yahweh's breath. In Christianity the divine air

becomes the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Blessed Trinity, and God in its own right.

The Milesian philosophers, or proto-scientists, are vague figures at the beginning of the western intellectual adventure. Not so another of the Buddha's contemporaries, Heraclitus, a native of Ephesus, the city where St Paul would have so much trouble with the devotees of the goddess Diana. Almost a hundred fragments of Heraclitus' writings have been preserved in the works of others, allowing glimpses of an original and provocative mind. The fragments are some of them so perfect as to entitle him to be called the first aphorist, first of the line that includes Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Blake and Nietzsche. The most famous of his aphorisms has a very buddhistic sound: you cannot step into the same river twice. A Buddhist would be inclined to modify it a little: The same person cannot step into the same river twice. But that change may be comprised in another of his aphorisms, one of the briefest ever uttered: *panta rhei*, all things are flowing – including oneself.

It would be wrong however to push the similarity too far. Although Heraclitus was critical of the Milesians, it seems that like them he believed theology and physics to be one. He was a monist, believing that God is day and night, winter and summer, surfeit and famine. This is certainly reminiscent of Indian thinking, but it is also typical of Greek philosophy in general. Buddhism separates theology and physics. Each has its own path to clear, and if the paths converge well and good, but let it be from their inner impulsion and not by prescription set down by one or the other.

For Heraclitus, God – a God of change – is everywhere. He is not, however, as one might expect from the most famous aphorism, associated with water, but with fire, as the soul too is. Fire would actually seem to be greater than God in Heraclitus' thought, for although God is everywhere and in all changes, he is not the creator of the kosmos, which partakes of the ever-living nature of fire. This would be a more extreme position than that of Zoroastrianism, which Heraclitus as an Ephesian must have been well acquainted with, and for which fire was the symbol of divinity, though no more than a symbol.

Socrates and His City

Socrates did not associate any of the great elements with God. Neither did he speculate on the physical nature of the universe. Such thinking had an attraction for him in his early days but as he grew older he concentrated ever more on human nature, behavior and thought-processes, paying particular attention to the meaning and use of words.

Like the Buddha before him and Jesus after, Socrates himself wrote nothing. But just as there is one Buddha in the Theravada and another in the Mahayana, and one Jesus in the Synoptics and another in St John, so there are two Socrates in the literature, one in Xenophon, the other in Plato.

The first of these very different writers was a member of the Greek contingent which fought in the Persian civil war, and after the death of their candidate had to make the long journey home through a dangerous land. They chose the young Xenophon to be their leader, and he told their story in his *Anabasis*, with its famous culmination in the cry 'The sea, the sea!' as they reached the edge of the Asian landmass. Later he lived the life of a country gentleman, and wrote about hunting and the care of dogs and horses. But he also became a friend of Socrates and after his trial and execution put down a defense of him in the form of reminiscences. In addition, he made him the central figure of a book called the *Economicus*, in which the sage dispenses advice on estate-management and related subjects. Socrates seems to have been one of those figures who can be fictionalized by their admirers and made the mouthpiece of ideas not necessarily their own.

In Xenophon he occupies a respectable though modest place in the intellectual history of the Greeks. In Plato he ascends some distance above the bright uplands of classical thought in general. How far he makes the ascent himself and how far Plato carries him on his broad shoulders – Plato is a nickname referring to the man's build – is one of the great questions in the history of philosophy. (Plato's real name was Aristocles. Like all young Greek men he cultivated physical fitness and his sturdy form gave rise to the nickname which has totally eclipsed the other. He was of the aristocratic party in Athens and his political ideas were of an elitist, conservative kind. From him comes the idea of the philosopher-king, which has inspired enlightened rulers down the centuries; but other Platonic ideas have had a more Orwellian lineage. His place in intellectual history is indicated by the famous statement that all western philosophy is but 'a series of footnotes to Plato'.)

Another question, less frequently asked, is how comfortable Socrates would have been with some of the things that Plato has him say. If Socrates died for freedom of thought, then Plato would seem to take liberties with his memory here and there in the dialogues.

In the years before Socrates was born, Greece, a small, disunited country, had to fight off two invasions from the vast Persian Empire. In the second, Athens had to be abandoned and was destroyed by the invaders. Eventually the Persians were driven out and Greece recovered, the Athenians going on to achievements in the arts, especially drama and architecture, which have never been surpassed, while at the same time establishing a small empire of their own based on supremacy at sea. Socrates was the son of a stonemason

and is believed to have followed his father's profession. He would likely have had little formal education, but we know that he studied his predecessors in philosophy, and took a great interest in the Sophists, the teachers who travelled all over the Greek world from Sicily to Asia Minor. In the popular mind he was identified with them, as Aristophanes' play *The Clouds* demonstrates. The Sophists have had a bad press down the ages as a result of their unsympathetic treatment in some of Plato's dialogues. This may reflect the attitude of the snobbish aristocrat to the professional, since the Sophists charged for the lessons they gave, which Plato, having private means, found distasteful. But the best of the Sophists were men of formidable qualities, and it is ironically to one of them, Protagoras, that we owe the most striking motto of the golden age of Greece: 'Man is the measure of all things'. Protagoras has the distinction, too, of being the first thinker we know of to have his writings publicly burnt. The Athenian authorities, not being happy with his criticism, gave his books to the flames and he thought it wise to leave. He was not an Athenian and felt under no obligation to put his life in danger. Socrates was, and when in the course of time he fell foul of the authorities he chose to stay in his city.

By this time Athens, triumphant at Marathon and beautified by the works of Ictinus, Phidias and Polygnotus, had known internal strife and military disaster. Her growing power had made other Greek cities uneasy, and under the leadership of Sparta they waged war against her for almost thirty years until at last she had to admit defeat, and lost her hegemony, and was reduced to a shadow of her former greatness. Unfortunately for Socrates, some of the talented young men associated with him had by that time earned the disfavor of their city. The most notable was the highly gifted Alcibiades. He was suspected of not believing in the gods – indeed of going so far as to commit sacrilege by defacing a number of sacred statues. And in the course of the war he abandoned Athens and went over to the Spartans and helped bring disaster on his homeland. When the war was over and the Athenians reflected on their humiliation, they could hardly fail to think bitterly of Alcibiades and doubtfully of his mentor. Even Socrates' bravery in the war may have acquired an ironic tinge, for it had been most conspicuously displayed when he saved the life of Alcibiades at the battle of Potidaea.

Only a few years after the end of the war three citizens brought the fatal charges of impiety and corrupting the young against him. Their leader was one Meletus, said to have been representing the city's poets. Why this group felt so strongly against Socrates is unclear. It may be that, as developed later in Plato's *Republic*, certain ideas about the supposed irreverence of the poets really were held by him. The other two accusers represented craftsmen, politicians and orators. So it would seem that in the course of his career Socrates had got on the wrong side of some important groups of people.

The Trial of Socrates

The trial took place before a jury of five hundred citizens who voted, according to the Athenian legal system, both on the verdict and the penalty. We have no record of the charges in the words of the accusers. All we have is Socrates' summary of the charges as given by Plato in his account of the trial, the *Apology*. Here Socrates says that he is less worried by the three accusers than by the influence of the people who have misunderstood and misrepresented him down the years as someone not deterred by traditional piety from prying into the mysteries of heaven and earth, and as being rather too clever for the common good. This would have prejudiced some members of the jury against him from their childhood. The most dangerous of these people, he says, is Aristophanes who, almost a quarter of a century before, had portrayed him falsely in *The Clouds*. But neither he nor other earlier misrepresenters can be called and cross-examined, so Socrates will have to limit himself to answering the charges brought by Meletus, Anytus and Lycon, though he may question these as his direct accusers. He denies in passing that he takes an interest in the natural sciences or in the sort of sophistical argumentation that makes the worse case defeat the better. He also denies that he is a professional teacher, not being an expert in any of the skills which the Sophists promised to impart.

If Socrates is to be described by any one word it would be 'questioner'. His dialectical approach to the truth is question-based. Now he tells how by questioning he fell foul of the groups represented by his accusers. It seems that an enthusiastic associate of his went to the great shrine of Apollo at Delphi and asked the oracle if there was anyone wiser than Socrates and was told no, an answer which, far from elating the one so honored, only filled him with perplexity, for he did not see himself in that way at all. Having given the matter much thought he decided to go and question individuals and groups who were believed to be intellectually a cut above the rest, the politicians, poets, craftsmen and orators. He was sorely disappointed. The one thing they seemed to have in common was the belief that expertise in their particular field made them experts in all others. Questions that cast doubt on this did not endear the questioner to them. So, before he came at length to his conclusion, Socrates had made a lot of enemies. And his conclusion reflected a new understanding of what the god had said through his oracle: that true wisdom is a divine property and the human form of it is of little value; and that the wisest of men are those who, like Socrates, realize how little wise they are. He went on asking questions right up to the time of the trial.

He explains to his audience that rich young men had taken him as their model and had gone about in their turn questioning all and sundry, and their victims' resentment has been directed not just at them but at their supposed

master, believing that as well as teaching about the earth's mysteries and promoting dubious methods of argumentation, he has also taught them to disbelieve in the gods. Socrates doubts if he will be able, in the short time allowed by the trial process, to change the minds of the jurymen if they hold such misconceptions.

Then he cross-examines his chief accuser, Meletus. He affirms his belief in the gods and gets Meletus to concede its genuineness. He also shows up the absurdity of Meletus' assertion that he, Socrates, alone of all Athenians has a corrupting effect on the young. Even if he has had a bad effect on them, it has been unintentional and the way to deal with this is by private admonition and instruction ('a word to the wise'), not to put the culprit on trial for his life. However, this is the situation in which he finds himself, and perhaps someone will be inclined to ask him if he has any misgivings about the way of life which has brought him to this pass. If so, his answer will be no: it would be unworthy of a man to be swayed by such a consideration; the only question in performing any action is whether it is just or unjust, good or bad. Here, perhaps to the surprise of Meletus as representative of the poets, he invokes the greatest of them, Homer, and his hero Achilles, who is told that if he kills the Trojan leader, Hector, he seals his own doom; but he dismisses the warning, for he fears the prospect of an ignoble life more than an early death. Socrates says that in his own time as a soldier it did not occur to him to abandon his post once put there by his commanders, and now he will not abandon the post appointed for him by a higher power, that post being the philosophic life. To the soldier and the philosopher alike the fear of death should be as naught. What after all is the fear of death? Nothing but another form of ignorance – to believe one knows what lies ahead when one does not. People think of death as the greatest evil, whereas, for all they know, it may be the greatest good. Socrates does not know what may or may not be there after death, and freely confesses his ignorance. But he has no fear of death or its aftermath. What he fears is the dishonor of doing wrong and thereby disobeying the power that is over his life. What if the jury were to propose acquitting him on condition that he give up the pursuit of wisdom, adding that if he backslides he will then certainly be put to death? No way will he agree to such a course, even if he has to die a hundred deaths. To seek to bring about a man's death unjustly, he says, is a much worse thing than to die.

At this point Socrates' humor comes through. He says that he has really been divinely appointed to be a nuisance to the complacent city of Athens, which he likens to a large thoroughbred horse which lazes around until stung by the gadfly. If the people get rid of him they may relapse into their old ways unless another human gadfly takes his place. But whether seen as a nuisance or public benefactor, he could not be accused by anyone of having profited from his activities. His poverty is a sure witness of this.

He goes on to tell of the inner voice, his *daimon*, that has spoken to him at certain times throughout his life. He has heard it since early childhood, and it is always negative, dissuading him from some course of action, never urging him towards one. Were it not for this voice he might have played a larger part in politics, and paid for it with his life, that being the likely consequence to anyone standing up for justice against the sort of unscrupulous interests that won to power in Athens. The only safe course for the lover of justice was to confine himself as much as possible to private life, keeping well out of politics. He gives two instances of the danger in which his integrity put him when, simply on account of his Athenian citizenship, he was called to office. The council had decided to put some naval commanders on trial for a breach of duty. They were to be dealt with as a group, and this was illegal. Socrates was the only member of the executive who opposed the decision, incurring the risk of prison or even death. This happened under a democratic regime; and when the democrats were ousted and the oligarchy ruled, the situation in Athens was even worse. Wishing to implicate as many citizens as possible in their crimes, the oligarchs told Socrates and four others to go and arrest a certain man and bring him in for execution. He alone refused, and would almost certainly have paid for it with his life had not the tyranny been overthrown soon after. Now the democrats were back in power and he was in trouble again.

This time however it was final. The jurymen found him guilty by a narrow margin, and after a second vote they sentenced him to death. His last words to them as given by Plato were characterized by high spirits and good humor, but they also contained some hard remarks on the moral stature of his condemners: they would do better to improve their ways of living and thereby put an end to the need for criticism rather than put their critics to death. Then he offered consolation to those who had voted for acquittal. It may well be that what has happened to him is a blessing. If death is nothing – a sort of dreamless sleep – it cannot be seen as a bad thing. If on the other hand it leads to the companionship of the great and good people who have died before, it must be a good thing – especially if he can go about doing exactly as he did on earth, questioning them and getting to know their minds. What happiness, he says, especially as he need have no anxiety about being put to death again for doing so!

Most likely, he continues, the time has come when death is the best thing that could happen to him and this must be why his *daimon* has not intervened. He says that he bears no grudge against his condemners or accusers. He has however a favor to ask of them. If his three sons grow up to value anything before goodness or if they give themselves airs in any way, let his listeners deal with them as their father dealt with his contemporaries, firmly putting them in their place and telling them what's what. In that way he will have had justice at last, and his children too. 'And now', he ends, 'we must go

our separate ways, I to die and you to live. But God alone knows which is the better course.'

A Patriot for the Truth

Just before Socrates took the poison he was visited in prison by his wife and sons, two apparently quite young. Plato says that he talked to them and gave instructions about what to do after his death, then sent them away. His detachment at this moment is reminiscent of what we read of the Buddha's and Jesus' attitude to their families and indicates that for Socrates, as for them, it was the lone individual and not the family that held the highest value. There is nothing to suggest that Socrates' family ever put any pressure on him to change his ways, but we may be sure that if so he would have resisted. He does not ask anyone to give up family on his account, but he will not give up his way of life for his family. In a certain sense he cannot, for his *daimon* is too strong and to that extent Socrates is not a free agent. He is privileged to be under direct guidance by a divine power; by the same token, however, some responsibility is lifted from his shoulders.

But Socrates does not die simply for himself. He dies for the right to speak the truth in his city and thus he dies not only for the truth but for the city; which was just about as much as a Greek of that time could do, personal life being bounded by the life of the *polis*. The exceptions were the Sophists, who travelled all over the Greek world and helped broaden the city-bound outlook of their pupils. Their contribution, in this and other ways, to the development of western culture is easily undervalued, since their works – the *Truth* of Protagoras, the *Orations* of Gorgias, the *Hours* of Prodicus for example – have not survived. Yet Socrates' contribution can hardly be overvalued, not only because of his philosophical input or because Plato made him his spokesman, but because he brought the question of individual freedom into the very centre of western concerns. It is one which every generation has to deal with. The difference at this time is that we are entering an age of control, an age of surveillance, an age of manipulation, such as the world has not seen before in recorded history, and western technology has led the way to it.

Control means conformity, a quality highly valued by social engineers, or as we may have to call them one day, social designers. Plato himself was among the first of them, and his *Republic* is in parts a very ominous book. The great statesman, Pericles, called Athens 'the school of Greece' but some Athenians looked to the ultra-conservative city of Sparta for lessons in statecraft, and there is a Spartan grimness in some of Plato's pages, where he idealizes a society founded on control and conformity. As said above, he makes Socrates his spokesman. But although Socrates was interested in the Spartan

system, he was Athenian through and through, and fought against Sparta in defense of Athens, which, so far as we know, Plato did not although he was of military age in the later years of the war.

But for all that, we have to thank Plato, and to a lesser extent Xenophon, for the figure who has come to symbolize freedom of mind in the western tradition, just as we have to thank the Evangelists and St Paul for the figure of Jesus, and the compilers of the Pali Canon for that of the Buddha. There may be contradictions in the records and even things we might wish away, but the living value of these three figures is not limited by the aims and talents of those who commemorated them.

As I see it, the particular value of Socrates lies in the simplicity of his case. By which I mean that when he says 'I will die rather than be deflected from what I believe to be my true path' he is speaking only for himself. He does not go on to say 'Do ye in like manner.' He is not prescribing his way as a way for all. And this puts his decision to die into a peculiar and solitary relief. It is made in an assembly of plain men who are trying to do their best in the interests of the community. He puts his case and the majority find it unconvincing. It is as banal as that: no heroics, no dramatics, just five hundred men of Athens deciding by 280 votes to 220 that one of their fellow-citizens is in the wrong. Banality is a good backdrop for the great act, which in this case is the assertion unto death that the individual has rights which the state must not infringe – not even when the state, through its laws, is esteemed the citizen's true parents, as Socrates, in the *Crito*, is said to have put it. Although he speaks only for himself, what he says becomes, in the old Homeric phrase, 'winged words', which fly out beyond the confines of Athens and its Golden Age right down to our very different time and to a future which will be more different still.

We are all fascinated by the extraordinary progress of the genetic revolution, and concerned about its ethical implications and the unprecedented dangers it poses for nature and society. But there is another danger which also threatens; one which is not really new at all but, augmented by the cybernetic revolution, *virtually* new in its potential for invasiveness and control. It is worth remembering that the word 'cybernetic' comes from the Greek *kybernetes*, guide, ruler, the one who knows best. The Socratic message is that there are times when the individual and he or she alone knows best.