

Socrates' Mission

Daniel W. Graham

Socrates is the quintessential watershed of ancient thought. He is known as the thinker who turned philosophy away from cosmological speculation to ethics and value theory. In his own time, he was hailed by Apollo's Oracle at Delphi as the man who was wiser than all others, and he was lampooned by Aristophanes on the comic stage as a quack, a sophist, and a fraud. His followers included two of the greatest traitors Athens produced, Alcibiades and Critias, and two of the greatest thinkers and moralists, Plato and Xenophon. In the end, he was tried on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth and was condemned to death. His enemies saw him as a heretic, while his friends saw him as a paragon of piety and righteousness. Who was Socrates and what was he up to that he should polarize his city?¹ I will argue, with his friends, that Socrates was a man of God who, in his own idiosyncratic way, brought about a philosophical and religious revolution.

Recent scholarship has helped to rehabilitate Socrates as a major philosopher,² and my own research on his life and thought have

1. There is no authoritative biography of Socrates. But see W. K. C. Guthrie, *Socrates*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); see also W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 3, pt. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 14–26.

2. See especially Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991). I will follow this author in taking the early dialogues of Plato as evidence of views of the historical Socrates. (In the middle and late dialogues of Plato, Socrates arguably becomes a mouthpiece for Plato's views.)

Daniel W. Graham

In the summer of 1981, I had the privilege of studying the philosophy of Socrates with Gregory Vlastos, the world's foremost scholar of Socrates. I came to appreciate the paradoxes of the Athenian philosopher, who does not lecture or expound doctrines but asks questions and more questions of anyone he met. Usually, however, Socrates did not talk about himself but about the ideas of his companions.

The one place we can learn something about what motivated Socrates is Plato's *Apology*, in which Plato, the follower of Socrates, records his master's speech at Socrates' trial. Here Socrates tells the jury that he was inspired by an oracle to realize he had a mission to the people of Athens.

The notion of Socrates having a mission is often taken with a grain of salt by scholars. But it may offer us the only chance of understanding the philosopher's motivation in a statement that comes from his own mouth. Whereas many scholars are puzzled or dismissive of Socrates' religious tendencies, I find them to be sincere and heartfelt. His sense of mission seems to drive him to go to his fellow citizens, one by one, to encourage them to take care of their souls rather than their wealth and reputation. He maintained that the one way mortals can honor the gods is to live upright moral lives. In the process, he fairly invented philosophical ethics.

Socrates was put on trial, condemned, and executed for alleged crimes against the state. He became a martyr to his followers. In the early Christian era, Christian thinkers came to see him as a fellow seeker of truth and a martyr in the cause of righteousness, a kind of proto-Christian disciple. In my research, I was surprised to find that the day of his death coincided with what was in effect the Athenian Day of Atonement. He was, in his historical setting, a type of Christ. This, then, is the story of the mission, death, and triumph of Socrates of Athens.



convinced me that there is method in his madness: It makes sense to think of Socrates both as a thinker and as a man, both as a creature of his time and as a man for all seasons. To study Socrates is to confront the so-called Socratic paradoxes. Socrates found his truth in unexpected places. He found wisdom in ignorance, truth in opinions, virtue in knowledge, and piety in human affairs. In solving his own puzzles Socrates was, as I shall attempt to show, the first thinker to turn philosophy to a study of human good, to a study of man as an autonomous individual, or, as he was wont to say, to the care of one's soul. And in the process, he carried out what he regarded as a religious mission, one that redefined the place of both God and man in the cosmos.

A New Kind of Education

Socrates grew up in the glory days of Athens. After her defeat of an Asian superpower (the Persian Empire), Athens pioneered a radical democracy and built an empire of her own. Democracy required widespread literacy, and Socrates was a beneficiary. Socrates learned his ABCs quietly in a small school in which he was taught reading and writing, music, and physical education for about seven years.³ Like his peers, he was expected to memorize long passages of Homer's epic poems to recite. He was also expected to absorb the heroic ideals of the poems, peopled by anthropomorphic gods and goddesses who ruled the world from Olympus but often mingled with mortals, and their religious background.

As the son of a stonemason, Socrates also learned the rudiments of the craftsman's trade, a *technē* or applied science of the sort that was making great advances. The magnificent architecture of classical Athens, the lifelike but idealistic statuary, the brilliant red-figure pottery, the swift war galleys, all were products of human crafts that came into their own in the fifth century B.C.

3. John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), *Crito* 50d–e, 51c; compare Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.6.14. Aristoxenus, the first biographer of Socrates, claims he was poorly educated and barely literate; see Plutarch, *The Malice of Herodotus* sec. 9; Plutarch, *Moralia* 856c–d; Aristoxenus fr. 55 Wehrli. But this is not the view of those who knew him best. See also Plato, *Phaedo* 97b–c, 98b; compare Plato, *Apology* 26d–e; and Plato, *Protogoras* 339a–347a, in which Socrates holds his own in a discussion of a poem of Simonides. All quotes in this paper that come from the Greek texts are my own translations, except as otherwise noted.

When he was a young man, Socrates left his father's workshop to study with a philosopher, Archelaus, who was a student of Anaxagoras and a practitioner of scientific philosophy.⁴ This philosophy consisted of a cosmological theory about how the world arose out of chaos and came to embody an orderly cosmos. In this context, human beings were seen as a part of natural history, arising out of the primeval mud and advancing to develop communities, language, and crafts.

When Socrates was a young man, a new kind of educator appeared in the Sophists. Sophists were itinerant teachers who traveled from city to city teaching short courses for money. They were good at advertising themselves and at teaching subjects that young men wanted to study. In fact, they were a by-product of the new democratic governments that were appearing all over the Greek world, inspired and encouraged by the Athenian democracy. What the Sophists offered for the most part was an education in the arts of government: public speaking, political science, and financial management, all of which would allow the have-nots to participate effectively in government alongside the haves. What the young men lacked in experience and family connections they could make up by learning at the feet of an expert in political science and public speaking.

As a bright young thinker, Socrates could choose among several paths to knowledge.

A Mission from God

In the end, Socrates confronted the educational programs of his day—traditional religion, craft technology, scientific philosophy, and political studies—and found them all wanting. In particular, each seemed to lack an account of human goodness. Traditional Greek religion taught that one should not try to be too good. Euripides tells the tale of Hippolytus, who lives a life of perfect chastity and honors the goddess of chastity, Artemis. At the beginning of his play, the goddess Aphrodite vows to destroy Hippolytus because he slighted her, the goddess of lust. If mortals are too chaste, they will offend the goddess of lust; if mortals are too sober, they will offend the god of wine and strong drink; if they are too just, they will dishonor the god of deceit.⁵

4. Diogenes Laertius 2.23; see also Andreas Patzer, "Sokrates und Archelaos: Historische und fiktionale Texte über den jungen Sokrates," in *Sokrates im Gang der Zeiten*, ed. Wolfgang von der Weppen and Bernhard Zimmermann (Tübingen: Attempo, 2006), 9–56; Daniel W. Graham, "Socrates on Samos," *Classical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2008): 308–13.

5. Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1–22.

Technē, human technology, is all about applying knowledge to make things or bring about better states of affairs. Of itself it has no morality. It aims to satisfy the needs of patrons who pay for buildings or health or ships. As for scientific philosophy, it holds that morality arises with the invention of culture by human beings. Morality is a mere convention or custom, *nomos*, designed to keep order; indeed, perhaps even the gods are a human invention. And sophists are more than happy to take the anthropology of the scientific philosophers as an excuse to dismiss morality as a mere artifact of a given culture that can be accepted or rejected at will. Thus technology, scientific philosophy, and sophistic rhetoric seem to offer no clues to the important questions of what is right and wrong, good and evil. And the *theologoi*, the religious writers, imply that human goodness is utterly impossible, possessed securely only by the gods and at best intermittently by humans as a divine gift.

Socrates went around asking questions about the virtues: justice, piety, moderation, wisdom, courage. He sought for definitions of the virtues and an understanding of what they were and how to acquire them. How far Socrates progressed in his search for goodness is unclear. He evidently gained a reputation as a wise man and won a following among young men of the city. At some point, his good friend and age-mate, Chaerephon, took it into his head to make a pilgrimage to the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi. He asked the oracle if anyone was wiser than Socrates and received the answer: no.⁶ This confirmed Chaerephon's faith in his friend. He reported the oracle's answer to Socrates as a vindication of the philosopher's project.

But Socrates was deeply disturbed by the answer. How could he be outstanding in wisdom when he had no special knowledge? Socrates was sure that something was wrong. He set out to find someone who was clearly wiser than himself so that he could bring this knowledge to the oracle and point out that there must be some misunderstanding.⁷

Socrates relates in his trial speech how he interviewed several politicians who were renowned for their wisdom and found them to be ignorant. He then went to the poets and discovered that while they were gifted in their writings, they could not explain their works intelligently to others. Finally, he went to the craftsmen and discovered that, though they had great skill at their crafts, their success led them to think they were experts in everything, and hence they showed their own folly. In the end, Socrates came to recognize that he had one small advantage

6. Plato, *Apology* 20e8–21a7.

7. Plato, *Apology* 21b1–c2.

over these reputed wise people: he knew his own limitations. He did not deceive himself into believing he had knowledge that he did not have.⁸

“What is likely, gentlemen,” Socrates explains to his jury, “is that only the god is really wise, and in his oracle he means to say this, that human wisdom is of little or no value. And he seems to speak of this guy Socrates—using my name—in making me an example, as if to say, He is wisest among you, O men, who like Socrates knows that he is truly of no value in wisdom.”⁹ Unlike most people, Socrates knew what he knew and what he did not know. This modest discovery of Socrates would have a profound impact on his life. He began to see his lack of expert knowledge—his greatest weakness—as his greatest strength. Socrates came to see himself as having a mission from the god to share his wisdom—to show others the limitations of their understanding. Socrates was no longer seeking for his own enlightenment, but seeking to point out to others the limits of human knowledge.

In his trial speech, Socrates goes on to explain the substance of his mission:

Men of Athens, I appreciate and love you, but I will obey the god rather than you, and as long as I draw breath and have the ability, I will not stop philosophizing and exhorting you and appealing to any one of you I happen to meet, saying what I always say, “Good sir, since you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city and the one most renowned for wisdom and power, aren’t you ashamed of yourself for devoting yourself to maximizing your wealth, your reputation, and your rank, while you show no interest at all in how to improve your wisdom, your honesty, and the state of your soul?”

And if any of you protests and says he does care about these things, I won’t just quit and go away, but I will ask questions, examine, and cross-examine him. And if I find he has not acquired virtue, but only claims he has, I will accuse him of valuing the most important things the least and the least important things the most. I will do this to anyone I meet, young or old, foreigner or citizen, but especially to you citizens, since you are my kindred. Know well that this is what the god commands, and I believe that *no greater good has ever come to this city than my mission [hupēresia] for the god*. For I spend all my time doing nothing else but urging you, both young and old, not to worry about your bodies or your possessions in preference to or as much as your soul, how it may be as good as possible, declaring, *Goodness does not come from wealth*,

8. Plato, *Apology* 21c3–22e6.

9. Plato, *Apology* 23a5–b4.

but from goodness comes wealth and every good thing that men possess, whether in private or public life.¹⁰

Socrates' message is that virtue or moral goodness is more important than any other object in life. Moral character outweighed all the other advantages that might be accumulated. If that is right, Socrates' mission was to be a moral reformer to Athens—to teach the Athenians that something was more important than the material and social advantages they all pursued.

The Method in His Madness

Yet there is a problem here. What actually occurs in Plato's Socratic dialogues is not Socrates' exhortations to Athenians to care about their souls. Rather, Socrates seeks for definitions of various virtues, which his interlocutors duly offer, only to have Socrates refute them. The inquiries never seem to bear fruit, and Socrates never seems to improve anyone. Listening in as Plato's audience, the audience can well sympathize with the sophist Thrasymachus, when he interrupts a typical Socratic conversation after Socrates has refuted several definitions:

What hogwash this is, Socrates! Why are you people carrying on like nitwits, bowing and scraping to each other? If you really want to know what justice is, don't just ask questions and refute what someone answers to show off, knowing as you do that it's much easier to ask questions than to answer them. No, answer for yourself and tell us what *you* say justice is!¹¹

Socrates seems to have no answers, but only to ask questions that neither he nor any of his associates can answer. Socrates can point out the inconsistencies of other people's conceptions, but he can't provide his own answers, much less defend them. How, then, can he be what he claims to be at his trial, which is the gods' gift to Athens? How can Socrates, the refuter of definitions, be Socrates the moral reformer?¹²

10. Plato, *Apology* 29d2–30b4. See John Burnet, *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), *ad* 30b3, which makes *agatha* in b4 the predicate; however, this requires changing the syntax of the second clause in the middle of a parallel construction.

11. Plato, *Republic* 1.336b–d.

12. For a recent helpful discussion of this question, see Roslyn Weiss, "Socrates: Seeker or Preacher?" in *A Companion to Socrates*, ed. Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 243–53.

This problem perhaps lies at the heart of the Socratic paradoxes. For want of an answer to the question, most scholars view Socrates as a brilliant social critic but a philosophical failure. He asks penetrating questions of his peers, but because he cannot answer his own questions, he must leave his work to someone like Plato, who can found philosophical ethics on the rock of metaphysics and epistemology. This is, of course, what Plato would have liked readers to think.

But there is a way to rehabilitate Socrates' program. The evidence is in Plato's *Apology*, hiding in plain sight. Socrates says he has only one small advantage over his peers, namely his awareness of what he knows and what he does not know—the limits of his own knowledge. He points out that he has never shirked his duty, either on the battlefield or in the forum. If he had done so, he could indeed be said not to believe in the gods because he feared death.

To fear death, gentlemen [he says,] is nothing but thinking you are wise when you are not; it is thinking you know what you don't know. No one in fact knows whether death may be the greatest of all goods, but men fear it as if they knew for sure that it was the greatest of all evils. And how is this not *the most reprehensible ignorance*, that of thinking you know what you don't know? For my part, gentlemen, perhaps I stand out from the majority of men in this one thing, and if I should claim to be wiser than anyone it would be precisely in this, that *inasmuch as I have no adequate knowledge about the afterlife, I recognize that I do not know.* But to do wrong and to disobey one's superior, whether god or man, that I *do* know to be evil and shameful. Consequently, in place of those evils which I know to be evils, I shall never fear or flee from events that, for all I know, might actually be goods.¹³

Cowardice results from fearing death. Fearing death amounts to thinking death is the greatest of all evils. But no one actually knows whether death may not be the greatest good. Hence, cowardice results from what Socrates calls "the most reprehensible ignorance." Now it appears that Socrates' courage results directly from his awareness of his own ignorance. He knows that he does not know that death is the greatest of all evils, and so he does not take death into consideration in his moral deliberations. If someone were to threaten Socrates with death (as at his trial), he would say that this issue was moot. What is really important is what is good and bad. Obedience to moral authority is good, and the god is a moral authority, so the philosopher will fulfill

13. Plato, *Apology* 28d–29c.

the godly mission without regard to the question of whether it leads to life or death.

By dismissing concerns about life and death from moral deliberation, Socrates focuses on the purely moral issues: is the proposed conduct right or wrong? If it is right, he does it; if it is wrong, he avoids it. So, by knowing what he knows (disobedience to authorities is wrong) and what he does not know (death is the greatest evil), Socrates is free to make a purely moral decision, untroubled by issues of his own personal welfare or even survival.

Consider what happens after the trial. In Plato's *Crito*, Socrates is sitting in prison awaiting execution. His rich friend Crito comes to visit him and offers more than comfort and companionship. He has hatched a plot to break Socrates out of prison, having bribed the guards and arranged for a getaway vehicle. He makes a series of arguments to persuade Socrates to cooperate with the plan so that Socrates can save himself, support his family, and continue his philosophical mission. "I, you see," says Socrates, "am not just now but always and forever committed to following none other of my ideas than the principle that seems to me to be most reasonable."¹⁴

Socrates asks his friend if he still holds that living well is more important than just living. He does. He further questions if living well means to live nobly and justly. Yes, it did. "Since the argument demands it, we for our part must take into account nothing but what we just now talked about: whether we shall be doing *right* in paying money and giving thanks to those who help me break out of here, and whether everybody will be doing *right* in making the escape—or whether in truth we shall be doing *wrong* in this action. And if it becomes clear that we are committing injustice, it will *not* be *right* to weigh in the balance whether we shall die if we stay and behave ourselves, or whether we shall suffer any other fate whatsoever, against the cost of committing injustice."¹⁵

Again, issues of moral rightness trump personal welfare. But up to that point, Socrates and Crito are talking only in generalities. What is right in the present situation? Socrates invokes a moral principle that he and Crito have often agreed upon: "one should never return harm for harm or do wrong to any man, no matter what one suffers from him."¹⁶ Socrates asks Crito if he still accepts the principle, and Crito reluctantly

14. Plato, *Crito* 46a–c.

15. Plato, *Crito* 47d–48d.

16. Plato, *Crito* 49c.

assents. This is a powerful principle, reminiscent of the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule. But what is the evidence for this moral precept? In the present dialogue, Socrates does not argue further for the precept—though he would have if Crito had abandoned the principle.

In the opening Socratic book of Plato's *Republic* is the argument for following through with the precept.¹⁷ When Polemarchus defines justice as doing good to friends and harm to enemies, Socrates challenges the second half of the definition. He leads Polemarchus to see that to harm someone is to make that person worse. To make someone worse—really worse—is to make that person less virtuous, and in this case, less just. But how, he asks, can it be the work of justice to make someone less just? There is a kind of practical contradiction in the course of action being recommended. Surely justice is not about promoting injustice. Thus it is never right to harm anyone.

Armed with this no-harm precept, Socrates goes on to show that if he should break out of prison, he would be doing his best to harm the city of Athens, which has provided him countless benefits. To do so—even if Athens has wronged him, which Socrates declares the city has not—would be to do harm to another. The principle of avoiding all harm prevents him from acting in the way that Crito recommends. Again he can say that he does not know that death is a great evil, but he does know that seeking to harm another is a great evil. He turns down Crito's offer and awaits his fate.

Thus, Socrates' actions are shaped by his awareness of his own ignorance. He makes moral decisions on the basis of moral principles, not on the basis of his own expected advantage or disadvantage. Far from being a hindrance, his ignorance and his knowledge of his own ignorance guarantee that he will act in an ethically appropriate way—that he will do what is right—despite pressure from his friends or community to act otherwise. Socrates is just, and he owes his justice to his knowledge. He knows what is and is not to be done. He must not inflict harm on anyone, not even on the Athenian state, and so he must obey its laws.

17. Plato's *Republic* develops Plato's own theories, but the first of the ten books in the dialogue gives a typically Socratic treatment of justice that makes no reference to Platonic theories. Some scholars think it was originally composed as a free-standing dialogue, but then incorporated into the *Republic* as an introduction.

Morality and Religion

The dominant reaction by scholars to Socrates' philosophical project is disappointment. Socrates seeks for moral knowledge. He fails to find it. He repeatedly fails to improve any of the interlocutors he questions in the dialogues. He has a wonderful objective, but he cannot carry it to fruition. Given his objective, "nothing that Socrates can truly claim to know would count as making him possess that which is most precious: moral wisdom."¹⁸ He is on this account a quixotic figure. Yet this pessimistic interpretation cannot be right. There is at least one individual in the Socratic dialogues who is a spectacular success in his moral life: Socrates himself. Scholars accuse Socrates of failing to establish any theoretical basis for his own actions because he fails to correct others. But Socrates provides a compelling vindication of his own actions in his defense speech. And he shows in his conversation with Crito that he recognizes moral principles that he can defend logically, and he demonstrates further that he abides by those principles without deviating, even when he is face to face with his own execution. Crito blinks, but Socrates does not.

At the conclusion of his dialogue *Phaedo*, Plato has his narrator, Phaedo, say of Socrates, "This . . . was the death of our companion, the man, we would declare, who was of those of his generation whom we knew the noblest, the wisest, and the most just."¹⁹ Another illustrious disciple of Socrates, Xenophon concurs in the judgment.²⁰

Socrates had a profound effect on the people who followed him, and through them he had a far-reaching effect on intellectual and cultural history. Before him there was no moral theory worth the name. Socrates invented moral theory, the study of ethics. Socrates concentrated on questions of right and wrong, good and evil, and he turned his followers' attention to them. But he did more: he came to see his apparently negative method of refutation as a positive way of improving character. By his own lights, his every refutation was an act of moral regeneration.

Socrates came to see the individual—the soul, as he put it—as the sum of all the person's opinions. When Socrates' questions led the interlocutor to contradict himself, they revealed an inconsistency in that person's beliefs. Logically speaking, this is right: contradiction in the conclusion of an argument results from an inconsistency in the premises.

18. Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72.

19. Plato, *Phaedo* 116c–118a; quotation from 118a15–17.

20. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.8.11; Plato, *Apology* 34a–e.

To get rid of the contradiction in the conclusions, eliminate the premise that is incompatible with the others. Socrates allowed his interlocutors to advance as premises only opinions they personally held, and with good reason: he designed his questions to test the answerer's *beliefs*.

To get rid of contradictory beliefs, people must identify and eliminate the false belief that clashes with their true beliefs. To hold that belief is to think they are wise when they are not, to think they know what they do not know. Once they have purged themselves of all false beliefs about what is right and wrong, good and evil, they will naturally use their true beliefs to make correct moral judgments. Socrates will not have *taught* them anything, but he will have removed the roadblocks to correct reasoning, and hence he will have helped them to recognize the appropriate action.

“What kind of person am I?” Socrates asks in the *Gorgias*. “I am one who would gladly be refuted if I say something false, and who would gladly refute (*elenchein*) another if he says something false; but I would just as soon be refuted as to refute. For I consider it to be a greater good to be refuted inasmuch as it is a greater good for one to be freed from the greatest evil than to free another. For I believe that *there is no greater evil for a person than to have a false opinion about the subjects we are now discussing*.²¹ (Those subjects are what is right and wrong.)

Socrates' study is perhaps significant in *not* purporting to be a science or a craft comprising expert knowledge. Rather, it purports to be a very human type of wisdom based on a kind of self-knowledge and awareness of one's limitations. Having tested the sophists' essays in *politikē technē*, political or social science, and found them wanting, he does not try to invent his own social science, but rather retreats to a project of nonscientific, nonexpert understanding. He envisages a self-reflective, self-correcting discipline, a critique of other kinds of knowledge. It is this study alone that demonstrates what is really important and points people in the direction of the good life. He pursues a critical, nonexpert kind of wisdom—a kind of humanism, one might say.

What then is the good life? A life of morality, pure and simple. Morality is achieved by testing one's moral beliefs every day, preferably in the company of others. As for power, money, and reputation, these are all unimportant in relation to the true values. What then should philosophy teach? It should teach how to examine the soul to determine what is truly important. What is the most important study of all? Moral

21. Plato, *Gorgias* 458a–b.

philosophy, which teaches how to live the good life. As for science and technology, these studies are well and good, but until people come to know what makes life worth living, these studies are at best a distraction and often a seduction. Socrates invented the study of ethics and he was, arguably, the first ethical man—the first individual to live his life by a logical system of moral rules and to make those rules the foundation of all his actions. There were many before Socrates who lived highly moral lives, but no one before Socrates had essayed to live *ethically* by the application of rigorous moral reasoning.

Even Socrates' relationship to deity seems to be governed by ethics. While Socrates expresses reverence for the gods and admits to being inspired by a divine voice, he does not study religion or theology. Yet he seems to have strong views about certain religious topics. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates explores the meaning of the virtue of piety, or reverence with the gods, with Euthyphro, who professes to be a religious expert and accepts the traditional Greek myths, including those recounting wars among the gods. “This is the very reason,” Socrates confides, “that I am brought to trial. For when someone says these kinds of things about the gods, I find it hard to accept his views. For this reason, apparently, people will say I am wicked.”²²

Though he claims no expertise in religion, Socrates feels uncomfortable with a view of the gods as fighting among themselves and acting immorally. Socrates asks Euthyphro to define the virtue of piety. It is what the gods love, replies Euthyphro. But Socrates reminds him that his gods quarrel among themselves, so they may disagree on such things. (He may have had in mind something like the conflict between Artemis, goddess of chastity, and Aphrodite, goddess of lust.) Well, then, piety must be what *all* the gods love, Euthyphro replies. But is something pious because the gods love it, or do the gods love it because it is pious? To Socrates, it is the latter. Then there must be some further reason that it is pious. Perhaps piety is that part of justice having to do with how mortals act toward the gods. But the gods are self-sufficient without mortals; so what do gods need from them? Euthyphro lapses back into saying things are pious because the gods love them. The two inquirers arrive at no solution.

There are strong hints, however, that Socrates has an answer to the puzzle. The gods do not need anything for their own welfare. But what they require is that humans treat their fellow humans with justice. That

22. Plato, *Euthyphro* 6a.

is precisely why Socrates can claim to be the best thing that has ever happened to Athens: his questions lead his hearers to recognize their responsibility to act justly and morally towards others. Wealth, power, and reputation do not produce virtue, but virtue produces all other good things. Whatever else is true of the gods, they are moral beings who delight in the moral behavior of humans. To be pious requires mortals to serve and help other mortals; that is what the gods want, and so by serving others, mortals act piously and please the gods. In the end, then, moral behavior and piety are inseparable: the gods, if they truly are worthy of worship, are moral beings, who want humans to emulate them in behaving justly to one another.²³ As one scholar puts it, for Socrates “*piety is doing god’s work to benefit human beings.*”²⁴

Socrates has strong religious convictions that operate in the background of his philosophical activities. Students of Socrates recognize that he participates in the religious practices of his community, that he sees himself as a servant of the gods, and, most remarkably, that he receives inspiration from divine sources.²⁵ Socrates comes to view himself as receiving a calling from the god through the oracle at Delphi. But even apart from this experience, he professes to receive promptings from his *daimonion*, “a sort of divine voice,” explains Socrates, “which, starting from childhood, comes to me, whenever it comes, always to turn me away from what I am about to do but never to tell me what to do.”²⁶ He always obeys the prompting, though he is left to determine for himself why it came to him. Further, he feels himself called to do one thing, to carry on his philosophical inquiries. “To do this,” he affirms, “I have been commanded by the god, through oracles, dreams, and every way that a

23. Plato, *Republic* 1.379a–b; 10.613a–b.

24. Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 176, emphasis in original.

25. See especially Mark L. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); with further studies in Nicholas D. Smith and Paul B. Woodruff, eds., *Reason and Religion in Socratic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Pierre Destrée and Nicholas D. Smith, eds., *Socrates’ Divine Sign: Religion, Practice, and Value in Socratic Philosophy* (Kelowna, B.C.: Academic Printing and Publishing, 2005); *Apeiron* 38, no. 2; Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 157–78. On following the religious practices of the community, see Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.3.1, 4.3.16, 1.1.2, 1.2.64.

26. Plato, *Apology* 31d2–4.

divine mandate has ever directed a man to act.”²⁷ There are examples of prophetic and instructive dreams Socrates had near the end of his life.²⁸

As to oracles and other forms of divination, Socrates holds that one should not bother the gods about things that one can know for oneself, but about important questions that cannot be answered by reason—such as the outcome of a future event—one should consult the gods.²⁹ He advises Xenophon to consult the oracle at Delphi before setting out to join Cyrus’s military expedition, allegedly to subdue some rebels (but in reality to overthrow the Persian government), for Socrates recognizes the action might be seen as hostile to the aims of the Athenian government. Xenophon consults the oracle, but instead of asking whether he should go, he asks what gods he should sacrifice to in order to prosper in his project. Socrates is displeased that his follower had avoided the real question, but advises him to go, since he had in effect already made that commitment to the god.³⁰

For all his belief—faith, one might say—in the gods, Socrates has no systematic theology to teach. He professes no knowledge about an afterlife, and it is dubious whether he believes in a creation account and divine providence.³¹ He firmly believes that the gods are moral and beneficent to humans, that they need nothing from humans, but that humans can and should serve the gods by doing good to their fellow men. He seems committed to a belief in a thoroughgoing moral order in the world, but beyond that he has no interest in cosmology or scientific inquiry. It is enough for humans to know that it is rational to be moral and irrational to be immoral, and similarly it is pious to be moral and impious to be immoral.

27. Plato, *Apology* 33c4–7.

28. Plato, *Crito* 44a–b; Plato, *Phaedo* 60c–61b.

29. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.6–9.

30. Xenophon, *Anabasis*, ed. Maurice W. Mather and Joseph William Hewitt (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 3.1.5–7.

31. On the afterlife, see Plato, *Apology* 40c–41c. Plato’s *Phaedo* provides multiple arguments for the immortality of the soul, but this work seems to express Plato’s psychology and theology rather than Socrates’. On Plato’s religious theory, see Michael Morgan, *Platonic Piety: Philosophy and Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Xenophon has Socrates teach an account of the gods as creators and nurturers of humans, offering a teleological proof for the existence of the gods; see Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.4.1–19, 4.3.1–18. McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 272–91, defends this as a Socratic view, but here Xenophon’s Socrates seems to become too didactic and theoretical.

Revolutionary Implications

With these convictions, Socrates passionately pursues his mission of turning people to the care of their souls and the recognition of moral imperatives. His mission brings him into conflict with powerful individuals who think he is trying to subvert the state. Socrates uses his trial as a forum to promote his mission, with predictably bad results. He is put to death as a malefactor, and there, one might have expected, is the end of his program of reform.

Yet it was not. Socrates' disciples met together in the nearby city of Megara, hosted by Euclides, and planned a response.³² Soon afterward several Socratics began publishing dialogues re-creating the conversations of Socrates, and at the same time inventing a new genre of literature. They showed Socrates seeking for definitions of virtues, asking questions, refuting, inquiring. The power of the written word carried Socrates' arguments far beyond the confines of Athens. Soon almost everyone in Athens, and many abroad, came to know Socrates in a way few had known him in his lifetime. Antisthenes, Aeschines, Euclides, Aristippus, Phaedo, Plato, and Xenophon portrayed Socrates plying his trade on the streets of Athens. Most of these Socratic dialogues are lost, but there are fragments of the "lesser" Socratics' works and the complete Socratic works of Plato and Xenophon. Socrates' disciples waged a propaganda war for the memory of Socrates, and, by the middle of the fourth century, they won. Socrates became a culture hero, a martyr and saint to philosophy.

And the philosophy that the hero presided over was not the philosophy he grew up with. Gone were the cosmological speculations and the sophistical refutations. Philosophy became imbued with morality. Ethics was now the centerpiece and the proof of any theory. To be a philosopher was to be committed to the moral life. Logic, epistemology, metaphysics, psychology, and political theory emerged or reemerged as handmaids to ethics. A theory that did not make people better was not philosophy but sophistry (which then became a pejorative term). Philosophy became an honorific title to be associated with thoughtful and virtuous people. And Athens, for the first time, became known as the mother-city of philosophy.

32. Diogenes Laertius 3.6.

When, in the second and third centuries AD, learned Christians looked about for some common ground they could share with pagans, they found philosophy, and particularly Socratic philosophy, to be especially attractive. Justin Martyr observed, “Socrates, who was more zealous in [philosophy] than all of [the other Greeks], was accused of the very same crimes as ourselves. For they said that he was introducing new divinities, and did not consider those to be gods whom the state recognised.”³³ Justin saw Socrates as a martyr to the truth, who was persecuted because of his piety in accepting what he understood of the true religion. Clement of Alexandria, head of the first Christian institution of higher education, the Catechetical School of Alexandria, Egypt, also saw Socrates as a pre-Christian martyr, quoting his words from the *Apology* in defense of Christian martyrs.³⁴ Clement claimed that by looking forward to death, Socrates pursued the true philosophy.³⁵ Indeed, Clement argued that as the Law of Moses was a guide or schoolmaster to bring the Jews to Christ, so philosophy (and he had in mind Socratic-Platonic philosophy) was a schoolmaster to bring the Greeks to Christ.³⁶ Socrates was, the early Church Fathers saw, a type of Christian living, of Christian sacrifice, and of Christ himself.

There is an even more striking parallel between the life and mission of Socrates and the life and mission of Jesus Christ that the Church Fathers were unaware of, as, I think, are most scholars of ancient philosophy. The Greeks organized their years using lunar months, starting the civil year after the summer solstice. The eleventh month of the Athenian year was called Thargelion, roughly May to June, getting its name from the festival of Thargelia, which occurred in the eleventh

33. Justin Martyr, “Second Apology,” 10.5, trans. M. Dods, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, *Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1950). Christian thinkers were, however, sometimes ambivalent about Socrates; see Michael Frede, “The Early Christian Reception of Socrates,” in *Remembering Socrates: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Lindsay Judson and Vassilis Karasmanis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 188–202.

34. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4.11.80.

35. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5.11.67.

36. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.5.28, alluding to Galatians 3:24; in the image, obscured by the KJV translation, the law is a servant (*paidagōgos*, a “child-leader” or chaperone) conducting the pupil to the teacher, Christ. See Edgar Früchtel, “Eine Bemerkungen zum Sokratesbild bei Clemens Alexandrinus,” in Weppen and Zimmermann, *Sokrates im Gang der Zeiten*, 57–76.

month. On the sixth day of Thargelion, two elderly men were paraded through the streets, each wearing a necklace of figs representing the sins of the community. At the end of the day, the two men were driven out of the city as scapegoats, pelted by vegetables in a playful ceremony. (In earlier times in some cities a criminal was chosen as the scapegoat and was first fêted and then executed.)³⁷ This was, in effect, the Athenian Day of Atonement, reminiscent of the ritual of the Israelites in which two goats were chosen, one to be sacrificed and the other, the scapegoat, to be driven out of the camp into the wilderness, carrying the sins of the community.³⁸ Socrates was condemned to death about a month before Thargelion, on the seventh of Munychion. He should have been executed soon after. But on the day of his trial, a sacred boat sailed to the island of Delos for an annual festival. No one could be put to death until it returned. Because of adverse winds the boat took thirty days to return home. Consequently Socrates died, not by design but by chance, or perhaps by divine allotment, on the sixth day of Thargelion.³⁹ He was, then, the Athenian scapegoat, the old man who bore the sins of his city. In later years, Socrates' life was celebrated in Plato's Academy on the sixth day of Thargelion, in a hero cult that saw him as the patron saint of philosophy and a martyr to philosophy and the truth. It seems especially appropriate, then, that the early Church Fathers should see him as a type of the Savior.

In the end, Socrates was not an enemy of religion, of science, of technology, or of moral order, as his critics claimed. But he saw the most important knowledge of humans as human goodness and morality, and he saw himself as having a divine mission to promote human goodness. The proof of piety toward the gods was justice toward men. Science and technology existed for the good they could do for humans. People should not look to some scientific anthropology to tell them where values came from, but should search their own souls. As Cicero

37. On the scapegoat ceremony, see Ludwig Deubner, *Attische Feste*, ed. Bruno Doer, 2d ed. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966 [1932]), 179–98; Jan Bremmer, “Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 87 (1983): 299–320.

38. Leviticus 16. A similar ceremony was practiced by the Hittites with a ram: Bremmer, “Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece,” 305–6.

39. See Stephen A. White, “Socrates at Colonos,” in *Reason and Religion in Socratic Philosophy*, ed. Nicholas D. Smith and Paul B. Woodruff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 151–75.

famously put it, “Socrates for the first time called philosophy down from the heavens, set her in cities, introduced her into homes, and taught her to inquire into life and morals, good and evil.”⁴⁰ Socrates for the first time made philosophy human and made human affairs the proper study of man—and the welfare of man the concern of deity.⁴¹

Daniel W. Graham is A. O. Smoot Professor of Philosophy at Brigham Young University, where he has served as department chair. He has an AB in philosophy from Davidson College in North Carolina, an MA in classics from BYU, and a PhD in philosophy from the University of Texas at Austin. He also spent a year studying classical archaeology at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. He does research in the history of philosophy and the history of science, and has written, translated, or edited seven books on ancient philosophy and one book on early Greek science. He has also published numerous scholarly articles on Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, the Presocratic philosophers, and ancient astronomy. He is currently working on a biography of Socrates. He is president of the International Association for Presocratic Studies and also president of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology. He has taught at Grinnell College and Rice University and been a visiting fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge, and a visiting professor at Yale University. He has been awarded two NEH fellowships. He and his wife, Diana Summerhays Graham, met in a Greek class at BYU. They have two children.

40. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5.4.10.

41. This paper grew out of a lecture, Daniel Graham, “The Barefoot Humanist: Socrates and the Science of Man,” P. A. Christensen Lecture, College of Humanities, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, February 26, 2015; see also Daniel Graham, “Socrates’ Mission,” lecture, Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, October 9, 2015. I received valuable comments on both occasions.