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1. The Socratic Question

Socrates versus Plato. The very title begs the Socratic Question. Most of our knowledge of Socrates comes from Plato's dialogues; yet Plato used Socrates as the mouthpiece for his own views. So how can we disentangle the historical Socrates from the amalgam of Socrates and Plato we find in the texts?

Answers to the Socratic Question cover a wide spectrum. At one extreme, Plato's representation of Socrates is taken more or less at face value: by the end of his life, Socrates had evolved the essentials of the Platonic philosophy (perhaps under influence from Plato himself), and Plato merely cast the Socratic/Platonic philosophy in a more developed and dogmatic form. At the other extreme, Socrates was always a questioning sceptic, and it was only after Socrates's death that Plato developed an entirely new philosophical system, which he put into the mouth of Socrates out of piety to his master.

However, we are not here concerned with philosophical doctrine, but with method; and there can be no doubt that the Socratic approach to philosophical enquiry was very different from the Platonic approach. The popular contrast between the 'Socratic method' and an 'academic' approach (after the Academy, which Plato founded) is soundly based in historical fact. The account I shall give of the main differences between the two approaches will involve a certain amount of exaggeration and caricature; but it will help to clarify the contrast between two extreme positions, both of which have had their adherents through educational history. But first some background to Socrates and Plato.

2. The Sophists and the Pre-Socratics

When Socrates arrived on the scene, the only providers of post-elementary education were called 'sophists' - meaning wise or knowledgeable persons. They worked for a fee, and would give lessons on any subject for which there was a demand, and for which they considered themselves qualified. But the main demand was for training in law and public speaking. In the Athenian democracy, citizens had to speak for themselves in assemblies, and there was relatively little distinction between legislative and judicial meetings. The Athenians were a litigious people, and both prosecution and defence were conducted by private individuals without the aid of solicitors or barristers. This meant that anyone who wished to achieve prominence in civic life had to acquire the linguistic and rhetorical skills necessary to persuade a mass audience of the rightness of their case.
Much of what we know about the sophists derives from Plato’s writings, and he gave them a very bad press. Plato wanted to draw a sharp contrast between the true philosopher, who loves wisdom and virtue for their own sakes, and the mere sophist, who uses, and trains others to use ‘sophistry’ in pursuit of power and wealth. But this sharp distinction was confined to Plato and his followers. In ordinary language, the terms ‘sophist’ and ‘philosopher’ were more or less interchangeable, and both Socrates and Plato were themselves sometimes described as ‘sophists’. In fact there was a broad range of attitudes and approaches. At one end there were unprincipled teachers of rhetoric, who charged high fees for training ordinary citizens in rhetorical techniques for ‘making the weaker case appear the stronger’. At the other end there were dedicated educators, whose prime concern was with the discovery and transmission of truth on any matter open to the human intellect (not just philosophy in the narrow, modern sense).

Historians of philosophy have tended to go along with the Platonic contrast, and to portray Socrates and Plato as heirs to a very different tradition, namely that of the so-called ‘pre-Socratic philosophers’. Indeed, the very term ‘pre-Socratic philosophers’ implies that they were ‘philosophers’ in broadly the same sense as Socrates and Plato were, with the added suggestion that they were somehow preparing the ground for a Socratic revolution. There is some truth to this. There is a standard list of pre-Socratics, including such figures as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Melissus, Zeno of Elea, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Leucippus. Although the list is a disparate one of largely independent thinkers, widely scattered in place and time, there is a central core of philosophical issues they were concerned with - the nature of reality in contrast to how it appears, the scope of rational knowledge, the problem of the one and the many, the role of God, causation, and so on. There is no doubt that on these issues Plato, at any rate, was profoundly influenced by Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides and Anaxagoras in particular, and that he produced radically new solutions to the old problems. Whether the same is true of Socrates depends on one's stance on the Socratic Question. If, as is the majority view, Socrates was mainly interested in questions of ethics, politics, and language, then he has far more in common with the sophists than with the pre-Socratic philosophers. But whatever the correct answer to the Socratic Question may be, it is undoubtedly the case that, as far as the methodology of philosophy is concerned, Plato carried on in the tradition of the pre-Socratics, whereas Socrates was closer to the sophists (apart from his disdain for money).

I shall now look in greater detail at the Socratic approach and its debt to the sophists, and then contrast it with that of Plato and his predecessors.

3. The Socratic Method

(a) Philosophy as an Activity

Philosophy is primarily something you do, rather than a set of philosophical truths to be learned. In order to become a good philosopher, you have to acquire philosophical skills. And, as with most skills, you acquire them through practice in the presence of someone more skilful than yourself.

For Socrates, the core philosophical skill was that of dialogue or dialectic - the art of progressing towards the truth through question-and-answer discussion. Nowadays we tend to think of a dialogue as a non-confrontational discussion, in which two or more parties try to achieve a compromise. But Socrates’s method was far from non-confrontational, and the object was not compromise. He used his questioning to test to destruction the accounts put forward by different protagonists, and the process could prove emotionally painful and humiliating. The closest analogy to the Socratic procedure would be a cross-examination in a court of law - and it was the sophists who offered training in legal reasoning.

What Socrates did was to adapt the forensic model to the pursuit of truth. Plato was motivated to distance Socrates from the sophists because of their reputation for perverting the truth for the sake of winning the argument. But Socrates believed that the method was sound, provided that all participants co-operated in having the truth as their objective. - winning the argument would then be the same as arriving at the truth.
In the earlier dialogues, Socrates sometimes described the progress of the discussion by means of analogies with the martial arts. The comparison is appropriate. In order to learn the art, the novice spars with the master. At first the master will win easily, with moves like fool's mate in chess. But gradually the novice learns how to respond, and causes increasing difficulties for the master. The process of training is complete when the pupil has become an equal match. Similarly with philosophical dialectic: a dialogue in which Socrates is the only expert and the other participants are novices is as much a training session as a search for truth; and this is one of the reasons why it doesn't matter if the search is inconclusive. But in others Socrates is represented as having met his match, and he too has the benefit of making philosophical progress.

(b) Philosophy as Questioning

One of Socrates's most quoted sayings is that 'The unexamined life is not fit to be lived by a human being' (Apology, 38a). What he seems to have meant by this is that the capacity to reflect on what you do is a peculiarly human characteristic, and in so far as you act unreflectively, you are failing to operate at a genuinely human level. Animals have their pleasures, but only humans can be conscious of what their well-being consists in. More generally, humans have a wide range of abilities which animals lack - to make things with tools, to construct civilised communities, to communicate in speech, to frame abstract concepts, to form arguments, and so on. But if they simply do these things without being critically aware of what they are doing, they are only half-way to being fully human. Like so many philosophers after him, Socrates believed that he had achieved a level of awareness which set him apart from other members of the human species at its current stage of development, and that it was his mission in life to bring the rest up to the same level.

But how was this to be done? The term 'reflection' as a synonym for 'self-consciousness' is a fruitful metaphor. When we are fully absorbed in what we are doing, our self-consciousness normally recedes into the background; but it can be abruptly brought back into the fore if we catch sight of ourselves reflected in a mirror. The intellectual equivalent of being confronted by your own image is to be questioned about something you have just said: instead of proceeding smoothly onwards under its own momentum, the flow of thought is turned back on itself. Depending on what question has been asked, your are forced to reflect on the meanings of the words you have used, on the concepts you have applied, on whether the reasons you have given actually support your conclusion, on underlying assumptions, on alternative ways of approaching the problem, and so forth.

In short, the Socratic position is that to think philosophically is to think questioningly and reflectively; and that this level of thinking most completely manifests what it is to be human.

The emphasis on questioning is closely bound up with Socratic scepticism. But the term 'sceptic' is ambiguous. In one sense it means someone who claims that no-one can know anything. Socrates has only himself to blame if he is taken as being a sceptic in this sense, since he said that, when the Delphic Oracle pronounced that Socrates was the wisest man on Earth, it was because he was the only person who knew that he knew nothing. But Socrates was clearly being ironical when he said this, because he would have been perfectly aware of the paradox of scepticism, that by saying you know you know nothing, you are claiming to know at least one thing. Moreover, unless the answer to the Socratic Question is that Socrates and Plato were at opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum, Socrates had some deep philosophical convictions tending in the direction of Platonism, so that it would be highly misleading to describe him as a sceptic in this sense. He certainly didn't elevate the denial of knowledge into a philosophical system, as did Pyrrho or Arcesilaus.

However, in its original sense a 'sceptic' simply means one who is thoughtful or reflective. In this sense Socrates clearly was a sceptic, in that the essence of his view of philosophy was the need to subject any assertion or concept to reflection and critical scrutiny. He didn't maintain that knowledge was in principle unobtainable, nor that we shouldn't commit ourselves to beliefs we don't absolutely know to be true. What he did maintain was that all our beliefs and concepts should be provisional and subject to revision. To be a philosopher is to be ready to give an account and justification of them, and to expect the same of others, however unpopular it may make you.
Aristotle (Metaphysics M, 1078 b 17-19) saw as one of the principal characteristics of the Socratic method that he used 'inductive' arguments. That is to say, rather than starting out from general principles and deducing particular conclusions from them, he started from particular cases in order to arrive at general concepts or truths. This account is broadly consistent with the picture Plato gives us of Socrates in the early dialogues; but in focussing on the logical dimension of Socrates’s procedure, Aristotle overlooks the full significance of what he was doing.

It is not so much that Socrates started out from particular cases, but that he started out from what other people said, whether what they said was a particular observation or a general principle. Depending on the circumstances, Socrates might try to tease a generalisation out of a particular observation, or he might offer a particular observation as a counter-example to a proposed generalisation. Aristotle was treating Socrates simply as a philosopher searching for the truth, and not as at the same time a teacher striving to make others more philosophical in their thinking.

Socrates compared himself to a midwife. A midwife was herself supposed to be sterile, but her virtue consisted in helping others to give birth, and in judging whether or not the offspring were fit to survive. Again, Socrates was being ironic: he knew perfectly well that he was more capable than most other people of producing original ideas. And one of these ideas was the analogy with midwifery itself, which was perhaps the most radical idea in the history of philosophical education. People will learn to become philosophers, not by being instructed in philosophical facts or in facts about what other philosophers have asserted, but by being drawn from their initial pre-philosophical state into a reflective and questioning awareness of their concepts and beliefs. This means starting from where they are at. It also fits perfectly with the view of philosophy as an active skill: in order to learn, the pupil must make some initial moves, and in philosophy the moves consist in expressing philosophical opinions or arguments.

This feature of the Socratic method is linked with his scepticism (in so far as he was a true sceptic). As mentioned above, sceptics cannot consistently say that they know nothing. One way of avoiding the paradox (which was later taken up explicitly by the Pyrrhonist school of scepticism) is to treat the sceptical principle, not as a known truth, but as a declaration of intent. In other words, sceptics announce that they are not themselves going to put anything forward as true; but if others do so, they are resolved to find arguments counting against the truth claim, whatever it may be. So, for example, sceptics will express no opinion on the question of whether or not God exists. If someone claims that God exists, they will adduce arguments against; and if someone claims that God does not exist, they will adduce arguments in favour. And even in the case of the sceptical principle itself, if a ‘dogmatic’ sceptic claims that there is no knowledge, they will provide arguments that we do know things.

If training in philosophy is analogous to training in the martial arts, the closest analogy for the sceptical philosopher is judo, where the skill consists, not in the application of brute force, but in deflecting the force of the opponent against themselves. Even if Socrates was not a proto-Pyrhonist, it is nevertheless remarkable how close his technique was to a sort of philosophical judo.

(d) Philosophy as Linguistic

The other principal characteristic Aristotle saw in Socrates's approach was his search for universal definitions. This puts him very much in the camp of the sophists, who, as professors of rhetoric, were the first to bring questions about language into the centre of philosophical debate. On the whole, the sophists espoused highly relativistic and even nihilistic views on the nature of language and of arguments expressed in language. This is hardly surprising, in so far as they earned their bread and butter by teaching people how to manipulate the meanings of words and forms of argument in their own favour. Socrates differed in that he believed that there was a crucial difference between persuasive arguments and valid arguments; and that words have objective meanings, so that definitions are not merely prescriptive or descriptive of actual usage, but can be true or false. But although, as Aristotle implies, he stood half-way between the relativism of the sophists and Plato's belief in the separate existence of universal 'ideas' or 'forms', he was closer to the sophists in seeing the whole of philosophy played out at the level of language. In short,
there is no distinction between a word and an abstract concept, and to have a perfect understanding of the true meaning of a word is to be able to give a correct definition of it - even though the definition is itself a string of words.

If we find ourselves uncomfortable with Socrates's concentration on language, this is largely due to developments in philosophical thought set in motion by Plato and Aristotle (when I say 'developments', I am trying to remain neutral as to whether they constitute progress or not). In particular, Plato promoted a new distinction between language and reason, even though the distinction was difficult to articulate in Greek. Liddell and Scott's Greek Lexicon puts it beautifully (though from a wholly anachronistic perspective), when it defines **logos** as:

- **the word** or *outward form by which the inward thought is expressed*; and,
- **the inward thought itself**; - so that **logos** comprehends both **ratio** and **oratio**.

And within 'reason', one can distinguish between the capacity to think logically, and the possession of a rational soul which has the capacity to grasp truths which transcend sense-experience. When Aristotle famously defined 'man' as 'a rational animal', he may well have had one or both of the latter in mind. But the word he used was **logikos**, and taken out of context it could equally well mean that man is a talking animal, or a logical animal, or an animal with a rational soul. Socrates could easily have accepted the Aristotelian definition, but the emphasis would have been on the **talking** - what makes us human is the power of speech; and we are all the more human if we develop the capacity to reflect on what we say by using further words (Socrates himself uses the word **logos** for an account or definition of a word). It is an open question whether or not Socrates was right to stick with the unitary concept of **logos**. Many subsequent philosophers have rejected the Platonic distinction between the inward thought and its outer clothing, and have tried to recapture the primal innocence of the Socratic concept.

(e) Philosophy as Open

Even by the standards of his day, Socrates carried out his philosophical activities in a remarkably open way. Unlike others, he didn't reserve his wisdom for a select school of disciples, or for those who sought him out and were willing to pay a fee. Instead, he talked in public - in the market place, outside the gymnasium, at parties, or wherever he happened to be. Moreover, he would talk philosophy with virtually anyone - fellow philosophers or sophists, public figures, playwrights, rich people or poor people, adults or children, and even slaves (the only glaring exception seems to be women - but who knows what may have happened when Plato wasn't playing Boswell to his Johnson?). The only power relationship between Socrates and his hearers was his greater dialectical skill, and the purpose of the exercise was to reduce the differential.

Although he wasn't **politically** a democrat (his opposition to the Athenian democratic system cost him his life), he was certainly a **philosophical** democrat. He believed that philosophical skills could be developed in anyone who had the power of speech, and it was his life project to spread these skills as widely as possible. But these positions are not in conflict. The reason why he opposed democracy was precisely because leaders and voters lacked the necessary understanding of political philosophy and expertise in the art of government to be fit to rule. If everyone were a philosopher, there would be no need for an autocratic philosopher-king.

(f) Philosophy as Applicable

There always has been, and no doubt always will be, a tension between those who see philosophy as an esoteric discipline of benefit only to the few who are capable of practising it, and those who see it as a good which everyone should have. Perhaps Socrates's greatest claim to fame is that he saw philosophy as of benefit to **everyone**. Even a little philosophy is better than none at all; and philosophical reflection helps you do your job better, as well as making you a better person.

(g) Philosophy as Oral
Socrates didn't publish. Why not? Towards the end of the *Phaedrus*, Plato presents Socrates as explaining why the spoken word is superior to the written word. Since by writing and publishing the dialogue Plato was going against the words and practice of his master, it seems likely that Plato was reporting a genuine Socratic position. The substance of the argument is that the spoken word is alive, and the written word dead and frozen. Now there is a point of view from which this argument seems merely silly: words are words, and it makes no difference if they are instantiated in the form of sound-waves in the air or ink marks on paper. This was presumably Plato's own attitude, since almost all of his literary output consisted of written transcripts of actual or imaginary Socratic dialogues.

However, if we see Socrates as primarily interested in the question of how to teach philosophy, the position is very different. The experience of reading a Socratic dialogue can never be the same as the experience of participating in one, since the reader is excluded. If the reader had been present, they would have made interventions which would have altered the course of the discussion. There is a crucial pedagogical point here: if a written text departs too far from the train of thought of the reader, the reader will simply lose interest. But the same is true of a lecture delivered by word of mouth. So the contrast is not really between oral and written delivery, but between interactive and one-way modes of communication. In ancient Athens, the written word was slow and expensive to produce, and as a consequence it had a lapidary significance. If Socrates had been in a position to conduct his dialogues over an EMail network, he might have been less impressed by the distinction between words you hear and words you see.

### 4. The Platonic/Academic Approach

(a) Philosophy as Passive

For Plato, as for the pre-Socratic philosophers, philosophy consisted in a body of truths, which had to be learned and understood. Although some activity might be necessary to discover or learn these truths, what is ultimately required is that the mind should be receptive, and therefore passive. In teaching philosophy, the master requires teaching skills, but these are not specifically philosophical skills. Whereas for Socrates there is no distinction between being a good philosopher and being a good teacher of philosophy, Plato drives a wedge between the two. What distinguishes master from novice is superior knowledge and understanding, so that the educative process consists in the master providing the student with knowledge. The master is active, and the student is passive.

(b) Philosophy as Dogmatic

Along with most of the pre-Socratics, Plato believed that philosophical truth was objective and obtainable. The essential difference between humans and animals was the capacity to acquire universal concepts and knowledge, as contrasted with the particular and deceptive beliefs acquired from sense experience. The supreme manifestation of such knowledge was that obtained by the philosopher - the philosopher who had succeeded in turning completely away from the distractions of sense experience in favour of the contemplation of the most abstract and universal concepts of all. Once this state had been reached, the soul of the philosopher was privileged to escape from the cycle of rebirth, and remain eternally in the realm of abstract forms.

Although it is right to question pre-philosophical assumptions and inadequate concepts, there comes a point when questioning has to stop. Once the pupil has acquired a correct understanding of a concept or truth, it would undermine the educative process to encourage them to treat it as merely provisional, or revisable if looked at from an alternative point of view. The purpose is to provide the pupil with a firm bedrock of objective knowledge, as a basis for the understanding of more advanced and abstract truths.

(c) Philosophy as Deductive

Plato saw the body of philosophical truths as forming a system, in which more specific truths depended logically on more general and abstract ones. Although there might be occasions when it is appropriate to start the educative process by examining beliefs already held by pupils, the ideal is to present them with a self-contained deductive
(d) Philosophy as Conceptual

Aristotle observed that one of the main differences between Socrates and Plato was that Plato made universals or definitions exist apart, and called them 'ideas'. This is indeed a crucial difference, since it enabled Plato to deflect philosophical enquiry away from the search for correct definitions of words to the discovery (or in his case the rediscovery) of concepts or ideas themselves. Although he does not say so explicitly, Plato seems to have concluded that the Socratic method led to a dead end, since any definition uses words which themselves require definition, and so on ad infinitum. Perhaps this is one reason why the early, genuinely Socratic dialogues were generally inconclusive.

Plato believed that the soul had a previous existence in which it was in direct contact with the forms themselves. Since 'like is known by like', he saw no problem over how the immaterial soul could know immaterial realities. On being joined with a physical body, the soul forgets its knowledge of the forms, and is overwhelmed by the immediate presence of sense images. However, sense images bear some resemblance to the eternal forms, and they remind the soul of its previous knowledge. The task of philosophy is to enable the soul to escape the dominance of sense imagery, and to recapture the original intuition of the pure forms. But the original intuition was not mediated by language, and it cannot be expressed in words. So language is not the vehicle of thought, but an encumbrance to thought necessitated by the human condition.

(e) Philosophy as Closed

Like Pythagoras and other pre-Socratics, Plato founded a school (the Academy), which was a legal entity with a constitution, a budget and so on. As such it excluded non-members - or it least it excluded non-members from the esoteric philosophy available only to initiates, and others had to be content with an exoteric version, which merely hinted at the deeper insights.

It is highly unlikely that what actually happened in the Academy corresponded at all closely to the educational programme outlined in the Republic; but it must have incorporated at least the main tenets of Plato's educational philosophy. In particular, Plato held that only a small intellectual élite (the gold of society, as contrasted with the silver and bronze) is capable of attaining philosophical wisdom - and Plato is vulnerable to the accusation that he tended to equate intellectual ability with social class. Moreover, even this intellectual elite is not ready for philosophical enlightenment until the age of 50. No philosophy for children in Plato's world.

(f) Philosophy as Ivory Tower

In one sense, Plato was as convinced as anyone of the applicability of philosophy: 'There will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed of humanity itself, until philosophers become kings' (Republic, 473d). However, the philosophers he portrays will be reluctant to become involved in everyday affairs, since their goal in life is withdrawal from the world, and the contemplation of abstract truth. Their community closely resembles a monastic order, the members of which have their basic physical needs taken care of, so that they can concentrate on their own moral and intellectual development. They are a small élite, who condescend to sort out other people's lives only out of the kindness of their hearts.

(g) Philosophy as Written

Plato recognised that oral discussion and exposition had a role to play in philosophical education, but he didn't share Socrates's qualms about freezing speech on paper. His own style was didactic rather than interactive. We know that he gave lectures to his followers (for example the famous, but lost, Lecture on the Good), and the later dialogues are so full of lengthy monologues that one wonders why he continued with the dialogue form at all.
One motive may have been to disguise the increasing divergence between the Socratic philosophy and his own. But perhaps the simpler explanation is that the very concept of expressing abstract ideas in written prose was in its infancy. Writing was expensive, and reserved for special occasions: public inscriptions, religious plays, poems, and so on. Most of the pre-Socratic philosophers expressed themselves in verse, and Plato himself started life as a poet. The earliest prose writings were modelled on oral forms of discourse: the chronicler telling a story, or a transcript of a set speech or debate. It is significant that an early prose historian such as Thucydides normally put any commentary on the events he was chronicling into the mouths of the actors - Pericles's funeral oration, or the Melian dialogue. In the context, it is not surprising that the first philosophical prose should be idealised versions of discussions or talks. The written academic lecture was transitional to the later introduction of the written treatise, which no longer mimics spoken forms, but has its own literary style and language. Among the biggest changes set in motion by Plato's academy was a shift in emphasis from discussions to lectures, and from oracy to literacy.

5. Subsequent History

Since the main purpose of this essay is to chart the origins of the contrast between Socratic and academic thinking, I shall mention only a few subsequent developments which are relevant to the situation as it is at present.

The modern university has gradually evolved out of the medieval university system, and it still bears traces of its origins. In many respects the medieval university achieved rather a good balance between the Socratic and the Academic approaches:

- professorial lectures (reading and commenting on texts, necessitated by the scarcity of books) were complemented by more informal, interactive sessions with junior teachers;
- memorising of facts and theories was balanced by training in the skills of dialectical disputation;
- despite a certain reverence for the written text, assessment was based on oral performance;
- university education was modelled on training in a craft: the undergraduate was an apprentice; the bachelor was a journeyman, qualified to practice the craft but not to take on apprentices (and not ready to settle down to married life); and the master had sufficient experience to be entitled to teach the craft, after payment of a fee to the guild;
- in some cases (especially in Italy and Scotland), the universities were the property of the students, and the professors were their employees.

Many of these traditions still survive or have only recently disappeared: we still give lectures, despite the invention of the printing press; we still assess students on their ability to recall information provided in lectures; in a number of European countries the BA degree is awarded solely on the basis of a viva voce examination; at Oxford and Cambridge the MA is awarded on payment of a fee after a suitable lapse of time; the rectors of Scottish universities are appointed by the students; and it is only during this century that fees for attending particular courses have been commuted to staff salaries.

In British universities, the most significant changes in educational practice since the mediæval period have been the following:

- the almost total replacement of oracy by literacy (students write notes on lectures, they read books and handouts and write notes on them, they write essays and receive written comments on them, and they are assessed almost entirely on the basis of written examinations and coursework);
- a shift in emphasis from the development of skills to the reproduction of factual information which can be assessed on the basis of written examinations;
- a concentration on the results of individual effort (the one-to-one tutorial, and the private writing of essays
under examination conditions) and the related emphasis on originality, at the expense of co-operative activity and the development of generally achievable competencies;

- a change in the relationship between teacher and student from that of provider of a service, to that of a state employee given control over another pensioner of the state.

These changes can be explained in terms of socio-economic factors such as the reduction in the price of paper; the need to replace patronage and bribery with a meritocratic system for controlling entry into the growing professional classes; the re-modelling of the educational system on the basis of scientific and technological values as contrasted with those of the humanities; and the incursion of the public sector into previously free-market relationships.

In eighteenth-century England (though not in Scotland), philosophy virtually disappeared from the university curriculum. It gradually reappeared in the latter part of the nineteenth century - on the back of Classics at Oxford, as an adjunct to science at Cambridge, and in various other guises at the technical colleges which were acquiring university status elsewhere.

It is far from evident that the academic environment in which philosophy was reborn was sympathetic to its traditional mix of values. In order to attain academic credibility it had to conform to a stereotype dominated by science and technology conceived in a Victorian mould. This stereotype was overwhelmingly academic rather than Socratic in character.

6. The Present Situation

I shall leave it to other contributors to describe current initiatives for promoting Socratic education, and I shall confine myself to some brief remarks on ways in which the educational climate has recently shifted in favour of more Socratic approaches.

Firstly, the climate of educational opinion has moved away from the theory that children are born with a fixed intellectual capacity, which needs only to be filled with information. Intellectual ability is now seen as a range of skills which can be developed through training. No doubt some children can be trained more easily than others, but the purpose of education is to maximise the potential of each child.

Secondly, society has become less polarised between ordinary people on the one hand, and experts and figures of authority on the other hand. In education, it has become increasingly acceptable for children or young adults to question what they are told, and teachers are expected to act as facilitators of learning, in which the learner plays a more active and equal role.

Thirdly, the educational system, along with so many other institutions, has been called upon to justify its contribution to the general good. It is not enough for the success of a school to be measured in terms of the number of pupils it sends to university, nor for that of a university to be measured in terms of the number of graduates who go on to an academic career. This attitude condemns the large majority to relative or absolute failure. Educational establishments are increasingly expected to justify themselves in terms of the extent to which they prepare people for life and work.

The present government has not entirely ignored the duty of schools to prepare children for life; but it has tended to focus rather narrowly on religious education as providing the panacea for social ills, at the expense of a more philosophical approach to the problem of turning children into morally and politically aware citizens. Instead, it has concentrated on preparation for the world of work. Many in education have been disturbed by the commercial language that has been used (pupils as ‘product’, and employers as ‘clients’), and by the way in which the Employment Department seems to have taken over from the Department for Education as the driving force behind educational change. But in many respects the changes the Employment Department has been promoting constitute not so much an abandonment of all traditional educational values, but the restoration of a better balance between the
Socratic and the academic approaches.

Both industry and society as a whole need as many people as possible who are not merely knowledgeable in a wider or narrower range of academic and technical disciplines, but who are reflective and critical about what they know, and can continue to learn autonomously outside formal education; who can apply their knowledge to practical situations; who are articulate in speech as well as in writing; who can co-operate with others in solving problems; who can see things from different perspectives, and are willing to revise their own concepts, beliefs and attitudes; and who take a responsible and moral attitude to all that they do.

As an educational programme, this could hardly be more Socratic.

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