

socrates



Statue in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, made 3500 BCE in the Cyclades Islands. Photograph taken by author. The statue, arms over chest, is in the position of a dead body in burial, suggesting a body without a soul. There are other remarkable features: the statue is feminine (as souls are in Greek language), with an elongated neck, oversized and mis-shaped head, and absent eyes in a face that by its posture nonetheless seems to be looking at something. All these features make the statue less a representation of a body than of *that which is perceptive when dissociated from the body*, namely, a soul viewing the transcendent. As I interpret Socrates, it was the nature of his soul, most distinctively, to see the transcendent in human life. In this way the image, though predating Socrates by 2000 years, gives us a picture of his very soul.

blackwell great minds

socrates

George H. Rudebusch

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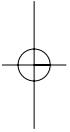
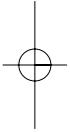
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*To
Hope*



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translations used

Unattributed translations are mine, except for Bible translations, which are from the New American Standard. The line references I use are standard and should give the reader little trouble.

introduction

Goals of This Book

Plato's dialogues tell a story about Socrates' life, focusing on conversations about human excellence. This book follows that life from age 36 to age 70, from mastery over the "wisest man" Protagoras to death by poison. In those conversations, the conclusions Socrates reaches – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly – are wild:

- No human being knows how to live.
- Bravery, benevolence, righteousness, reverence, the best sort of luck – even the ability to interpret the most divine poetry – are all one and the same thing: expertise at human well-being.
- Such expertise by itself would requite the needy love of any human being, rule the psyche (or soul, as I shall call it) without inner conflict, and ensure happiness and freedom.
- Lacking that expertise, we are guilty of the worst sort of negligence if we do not spend our lives trying to discover it – better not to live at all!

Socrates' arguments eliciting these results are open to obvious objections. Readers who take the objections to be successful have two interpretive options. One is to suppose that Socrates spent his life fascinated by what we easily see to be poor arguments. The second option is to suppose that Socrates did not intend such arguments seriously, but was being playful for some reason or other.

I propose a third option. Finding convincing replies to the obvious objections, I take Socrates' results seriously and endorse the interpretation Alcibiades gives in Plato's *Symposium*. Alcibiades compares Socrates' arguments to "those statues of Silenus that open down the middle" (221d8–e1). This Silenus was a satyr, a mythical creature having a distorted human face and upper body, with the lower body of a goat. Silenus was ridiculous as a lusting drunkard, ever driven by sexual desire and incapable of sober thought – yet these very acts were his worship of

the god Dionysus. Hidden inside the grotesque hollow statue was a beautiful *agalma*, that is, a holy image of the god, carved as an act of worship. The *agalma* would delight the lucky person who found it inside. Just so, Alcibiades says,

Socrates' arguments seem ridiculous the first time you listen . . . but if you see them taken apart and get inside of them, you will find them to be the only arguments that are reasonable, arguments that are the most godlike, arguments holding inside a wealth of *agalmata* of divine excellence, arguments that are largely – no, *completely* – intent on everything proper for becoming a noble and good man.

221e1–222a4

I follow Alcibiades, seeing in Socrates' arguments the power to bring joy and propriety to human lives.

I emphasize that there are alternatives to my interpretation. While some commentators prefer the first two options I mention above, others prefer a fourth option, which is to take Socrates' arguments seriously, but to give tame interpretations of his conclusions. For example, some have interpreted the wild idea that *expertise ensures happiness* as the tame conventional wisdom that *good people make the best of their circumstances*. The wild idea that any life that does not consist of philosophical examination is *not worth living* becomes the tame advice that an examined life is *the only hope for improving ourselves*. Such taming has advantages: it both judges Socrates' arguments to be good and at the same time leaves conventional moral wisdom unthreatened. Nonetheless, I urge that we recognize the possibility of a deeper and truer moral sensibility than conventional wisdom. Rather than construe Socrates' *view* in the manner most *plausible* by our lights, my goal is to find what in Socratic *argument* will *compel* our assent, even if it turns human life upside down.

Thus 14 chapters that follow aim to show how Socrates gives compelling arguments for wild conclusions. Upon hearing Socrates in the *Gorgias*, Callicles appropriately replied: "If what you say turns out to be true, aren't we human beings living our lives upside down and doing everything quite the opposite of what we ought?" (481c2–5). I agree with Callicles that everything important in human life hangs on the question whether Socrates' views are true.

Socrates speaks to us in ordinary language as human beings, not as academic specialists. It is not rocket science, but it is a philosophical project. Socrates' *method* – beginning from premises accepted by his conversation partner and arguing step by step in ordinary language – to a large degree created the academic discipline of philosophy in European history. Plato and Aristotle took up many of the topics investigated by

Socrates, and those topics have remained essential in the academic tradition of western philosophy. People to this day who have had only one philosophy course are more likely to have read a Socratic dialogue than anything else.

In my opinion the philosophical tradition has not given Socrates' *results* the attention they deserve. His results are as surprising today as they were in his day. Yet it would be difficult to overstate how much my project depends upon a half-century of scholarship that uses the tools of analytic philosophy to interpret and evaluate the premises, inferences, and conclusions of Socratic arguments.

In addition to my goal of providing to readers a conversation with a philosophically astute Socrates, I have another goal. This is to recognize Socrates the Philosopher as one of the great religious inspirations of world history, comparable to such others as Confucius the Master, Krishna the Lord, Siddhartha the Buddha, Jesus the Christ, and Mohammad the Prophet – as they are called by their devotees. These cultural fountainheads make different and sometimes incompatible statements about supernatural beings and the institution of religion in society. But they share the theme that *single-minded devotion to righteousness, done as a holy sacrament, is ideal life*. In chapters 15 and 16 I propose a life of Socratic philosophy not as an alternative to the life of religious devotion but as itself the heavenly way for human beings to live, through the sacrament of cross-examination about human excellence.

To a far greater extent than other religious teachers, we possess in Plato's dialogues step-by-step arguments aimed at demonstrating the truth of their shared theme. It is by considering objections and replies to these arguments that I propose to help readers decide its truth. To put it grandly, my goal is to lead philosophers to religion, to lead the religious to philosophy, and to lead those who are neither to both.

Who Was Socrates?

The Confucius, Siddhartha, and Jesus who have shaped world history are the characters preserved in classic texts. It is a matter of doubt to what degree those texts accurately present historical persons. Likewise the Socrates who has greatly influenced the course of history is the character we find in Plato's dialogues. This Socrates in some ways (but not others) is similar to the Socrates presented in other ancient texts, most extensively in Aristophanes and Xenophon.

Readers want to know to what degree Plato's Socrates is fictional and whether in important ways he *is* the historical figure. I save that question for the epilogue. It is appropriate to put that question last, not first,

in this book. The important question for this book – like the important question for us as human beings – is not the *particular flesh and blood* who uttered these words but the *great mind* in the text for us to understand, whether that mind is a literary creation or a historically accurate account.

I sometimes (such as in chapter 5) contrast views of Socrates as he appears in different dialogues written by Plato. It is confusing to speak of Socrates and “another Socrates.” Following Aristotle, I refer to the *other Socrates* as Plato, even when the *other Socrates* speaks in the same dialogue with Socrates (as in chapter 16)! In the epilogue I defend the use of Aristotle’s distinction as a working hypothesis. But none of the book’s goals requires that the distinction between Socrates and the *other Socrates* be more than a convenience for talking about different threads of discussion found in Plato’s dialogues.

