

Who was Nietzsche?

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A Brief Introduction to the Genius of Nietzsche

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SCENE 1: WHO WAS NIETZSCHE?

Nietzsche was the great questioner. He was an experimenter with the art of calling into question all our cherished assumptions and presuppositions. He immersed himself in philosophical problems and he tried to examine the limits of the sayable and thinkable. Heidegger (1979) claims,

The confrontation with Nietzsche has not yet begun nor have the prerequisites for it been established. For a long time Nietzsche has been either celebrated and imitated or reviled and exploited. Nietzsche's thought and speech are still too contemporary for us. He and we have not yet been sufficiently separated in history; we lack the distance necessary for a sound appreciation of the thinker's strength (p. 4).

Heidegger goes on to say: "Confrontation is genuine criticism" and this is the supreme way—the only way—to the true estimation of a thinker. In this confrontation, undertake to reflect on his thinking and to trace it in its effective force, not in its weaknesses, as Heidegger suggests, "in order that through the confrontation we ourselves may become free for the supreme exertion of thinking."

Nietzsche the man presents himself as a person who wears many masks. Nietzsche's assumption of masks is no accident; in the Greek tragedies the actors deliberately always wore masks. One must contend with the Nietzsche who is ambivalent toward Socrates and keeps changing his mind about him, Nietzsche the syphilitic or possible syphilitic, Nietzsche the educator, Nietzsche the great prose writer, Nietzsche the poet, Nietzsche the metaphysician, Nietzsche the psychologist, Nietzsche the helpless tool of his Nazi sister, Nietzsche the scientist and positivist, Nietzsche the humanist and drama critic, Nietzsche the philologist, Nietzsche the European citizen, Nietzsche the philosopher who tried to reorient philosophy, Nietzsche the musician, and Nietzsche the shrill megalomaniac. *All* of these are masks that one will encounter as one studies and reads Nietzsche; I urge the reader to try a sympathetic approach and to recognize that his ultimate insanity was a great loss and a tragedy to the intellectual history of the world.

Thomas Mann's famous novel *Doctor Faustus* is modeled on Nietzsche's life. In it, Nietzsche's view of philosophy is expressed as follows: Philosophy surveys the sciences, it combines them intellectually, it orders and refines the issues of all fields of research into a universal picture, it makes an overriding

decisive synthesis attempting to comprehend the meaning of life, and it offers a scrutinizing determination of man's place in the cosmos.

Nietzsche's motto might be taken from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*: separate from others I think my own thoughts. Nietzsche has been called *ἀνίγμαι δούλον*—an enigma that is hard to solve. Nietzsche himself compares the life of an academic scholar who is adjusted to society with the life of a lonely ignored outsider. He is the embodiment of Dostoevsky's underground man and he lived out a self-imposed existentialist alienation.

Among the masks of Nietzsche is also Nietzsche the clown, the clown who experiments with various belief systems. He says, "People do not know where my center is" (Morgan 1965). At the other extreme there is the Nietzsche who is starved for human—especially female—love, and he defends his shrill style by saying, "How can a starving animal attack its prey gracefully?" He was constantly called "eccentric," "pathological," and "psychiatric," and yet he was convinced that he was the greatest German writer. Some argue that the clown is a final mask—a mask of self-control hiding a profoundly serious philosophy, a form of overcoming for a philosopher.

The essential point is that Nietzsche thought *all* truths are adaptive conventions. There is no such, thing as absolute truth but all so-called truths that human beings develop in their philosophies and their sciences are nothing but inventions, inventions made for the purpose of adaptation. Thus the clown presents a parody of world history, an idiocy, a mockery parallel to Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds*, where he cruelly mocks the so-called transcendental heights of the philosopher. Remember that Nietzsche was by profession a philologist, and so deeply immersed in Greek classical literature.

Keeping in mind these masks or foregrounds will make it easier to read Nietzsche. Remember that many of his statements are meant to be jokes on the reader and deliberately meant to stir him up; they don't necessarily represent what he means, and often are contradicted by other of his statements. These show his denial of the absolute unity of the personality and of the eternal or transcendental "soul" or "I." Nietzsche did not believe that anybody was ultimately any one thing. This is where Jaspers (1954) found his famous notion that man is always more than we can know.

Nietzsche's *perspectivism* means there is a fundamental logical paradox in Nietzsche's thought,

because if all thought is only an instrument to adaptation and power then also Nietzsche's thought is only an instrument to adaptation and power and is similarly nothing but a mythology. It is in such paradoxes, antinomies, and ironies that Nietzsche abounds; some of it is lost in translation from the German. Nietzsche is considered one of the great German prose writers; perhaps the greatest since Goethe. But Nietzsche could not bear to be caricatured or misunderstood, so he wrote deliberately to make fools out of unworthy readers; he tries to get even with you for misunderstanding him before you even read him.

Nietzsche started out his academic career by an attack on professional philologists. He was appalled by their indifference to the true and urgent problems of life. He claimed, "No entirely radical truth is possible in a university" (Stern 1979). There is a curious back and forth movement in Nietzsche between the intimately personal and the significantly philosophical which makes him impossible to classify. Thinking for Nietzsche is a series of experiments which he himself lived. He was a man of tremendous intellectual energy; he keeps starting over; he experienced the world as fragmented and in his writing he conveys it to us as fragmented. He tried to unmask all metaphysical systems, all descriptions of being and "transcendence," as myths.

He argued there is no purpose and no progress in Hegel's sense, to history, *except to provide occasions for the emergence of individual great men*. Here we are back with one of his favorites, the Greek poet Pindar, who stated that the goal of history is the improvement of man, but "improvement" in the sense of producing supermen, aristocratic men, the glory of the species.

Nietzsche described himself as "searching into myself and other men." In this sense he displays the spirit of Socrates in his writings. Indeed, much of his writing is talking to himself; writing for him as he jotted notes on his walks was a compulsion, a form of self-overcoming of his innumerable physical ailments.

He has been misinterpreted, misunderstood, and attacked by innumerable authors. For instance, a typical *ad hominem* interpretation of Nietzsche is given by Windelband (1958), in one of the most popular histories of philosophy written around the turn of this century. Windelband said flatly that Nietzsche's Dionysus is power and his Apollo is knowing. For Nietzsche, claimed Windelband, the only two

enjoyments were power and knowing. He insisted Nietzsche could never participate in sensual enjoyment; indeed, his lack of sensual enjoyment and his lack of participation with women are reasons many have argued that it seems very questionable he could have contracted syphilis. Windelband (1958) concluded,

His is a case of a nervous professor who would fain be a wild tyrant, and who is tossed back and forth between the quiet enjoyment of the goods of the highest culture on the one hand, and that mysterious burning demand for a life of passion on the other (p. 677).

This is a typical example of how Nietzsche was and still is mocked and scorned by academic philosophers.

Others stress the artistic expression of a nature which is rent and torn. Nietzsche was a philosophic poet; yet he was a gentle professor, a regular simple man. He had unfrenzied habits; he was not a wild man, and even when he suffered his ultimate mental collapse in 1888 it manifested itself when he threw himself over a horse which was being beaten by a cruel coachman. He is taken seriously today largely because above all his contemporaries he is the philosopher who anticipated the world wars and the collapse and destruction of the value systems of the past in the twentieth century.

A British analytic philosopher of great repute, C. D. Broad, described Nietzsche simply as a "crackpot" or a mad philosopher, and it is very instructive to compare Nietzsche's philosophizing with that of C. D. Broad. Broad's basic approach is described by R. Brown in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Edwards 1967) as follows:

Broad had no "philosophy" in the sense of a deeply original way of interpreting and dealing with the issues of his field. He was a scientist manqué who took up philosophical problems much as he found them, leaving them classified and more manageable but not transformed. His impressive ability to understand and recast the most difficult arguments, the elegance of his writing, and his unrivaled thoroughness and lucidity, were placed at the service of other people's questions rather than his own (Vol. 1, p. 399).

One may easily see how a philosopher who approaches philosophy that way would consider Nietzsche a crackpot. This is again the debate between edifying philosophers and systematic philosophers (Rorty 1979) who often not only do not understand each other, but do not read each other, and do not respect each other. Rorty has identified a *very* important contemporary issue in philosophy.

Nietzsche objected to *all* philosophizing up to his time. He thought philosophy was not objective but rather each philosopher was imposing a "world structure" on the world that was nothing but a projection of the tacit moral prejudices of the philosopher. Because he used a poetic vocabulary and a difficult style he was taken up by many causes. Actually he made important philosophical and psychological advances buried in all this flamboyance. One encounters a startling mental powerhouse under Nietzsche's writing, just as he (1968a) in turn said of Socrates,

Anyone who, through the Platonic writings, has experienced even a breath of the divine naiveté and sureness of the Socratic way of life, will also feel how the enormous driving-wheel of logical Socratism is in motion, as it were, behind Socrates, and that it must be viewed through Socrates as through a shadow (pp. 88-89).

It is important to view his attack on morals not as the work of a moral philosopher at all, but as a special case of his attack on both worlds of the so-called two-world philosophies. For Nietzsche *both* worlds are nothing but inventions; even the world of our everyday experience is constructed by us not in terms of the truth or in terms of reality, but simply as a way of achieving the maximum of power. We experience reality in whatever way is the most useful to help us to adapt to and control nature and other people around us.

Nietzsche's focus was not on morality at all, although he is constantly ranting and raving about the subject, but rather on the man who achieves self-perfection. Under this category at various times he puts the saint, the artist, and the philosopher. The point of the self-perfected man is that such a man has no thought of tomorrow and wants *the eternal recurrence of the present moment*. This is one of Nietzsche's most important philosophical tenets. The self-perfected man, the man who overcomes himself, has what Nietzsche called *amor fati*. Such a person embraces everything in his life—good and bad—with a feeling of exaltation and power rather than either with Schopenhauer's pessimism, or waiting for a reward in heaven—the other of the two worlds man has invented.

The Nietzsche legend began in 1889 with his insanity, and it was basically fashioned by his demonic sister. When Nietzsche became insane he was taken care of first by his mother and then his sister. He was completely helpless and his manuscripts ultimately became the property of his sister. Much of his work was unpublished. He himself, at the time he was still sane, had characterized his sister as "an anti-Semitic goose." She married a virulent Nazi and actually tried to found a Nazi colony in Paraguay,

which failed. She was a great admirer of Hitler and finally induced Hitler to visit the Nazi "Nietzsche shrine" which she had established.

Nietzsche's doctrine is clearly nonpolitical, nonracist, and non-nationalistic, in spite of what Nietzsche's sister tried to make of it, but Nietzsche is partly to blame for the distortion of his doctrines. He is deliberately ambiguous, he is deliberately self-contradictory, and he writes in "aphorisms." Much of his later writing is simple declaration; that is, he does not give reasons or arguments. He wrote in aphorisms because, as mentioned before, he claimed that he was a teacher of slow reading. He wanted to torture the reader who was in a hurry! Each aphorism is a thought experiment or a sequence of thought experiments, and therefore, some of them contradict each other. One will not find orderly presentation of philosophy in Nietzsche.

Nietzsche was a great intuitive psychologist. He emphasized not the sexual but the aggressive and self-destructive drives in man. He was the one who first emphasized—by attacking—the term ego, later used so much by Freud. Sublimation, repression, and the turning of the instincts on one's self—famous conceptions of Freud—were all first described by Nietzsche. His focus was on the crisis in human affairs at the start of the twentieth century, and he felt that this crisis arose primarily from Darwin's theory of evolution, which implied that man evolved naturally from animals so therefore the appearance of man has no particular meaning in the universe. Man in this view is just another species evolved accidentally. Freud also recognized what a catastrophic blow this was to the narcissism of man (Chessick 1980).

Nietzsche is often characterized as an existentialist and his very life style, as Jaspers (1966) points out, is a form of philosophical communication—a primal kind of self-analysis with a series of phases through which he lived, and masks which were searches for his authentic self. The idea of this was to seek a purpose to life and a foundation for values without God and without religion. The basic question he asked was, can man ground his values out of his own life or does he have to seek God; does he have to ground it on the supernatural? Some have argued that he was actually desperately seeking God himself, and others have argued that much of Nietzsche's work and his concentration on self-overcoming was an attempt to ward off his intuitive knowledge of his own mental collapse. It is all this that makes Nietzsche a matter of tremendous interest to psychologists, philosophers, poets, artists, and German language scholars, as well as indispensable reading for anyone interested in western culture and civilization.

SCENE 2: PHASES OF NIETZSCHE'S LIFE

The first phase of Nietzsche's life, as a child and a student, was from 1844 to about 1868. He was born in Prussia in a very nationalistic pro-German area. His father was a 31 year old strict musically talented Lutheran minister. His mother was the daughter of another Lutheran minister; she was only 18 years old and he was their first child. When he was 2 years old his sister, Elizabeth, was born. When he was about 5 years old his mother lost her youngest son (who had been born the year before), and his father died of madness, definitely due to syphilis.

This is generally believed to be the crucial event in the life of Nietzsche, and after that he became in a sense, as he described it, essentially a homeless wanderer. His early household from the age of five consisted of his mother, his sister, his father's mother, and two maiden aunts; living in this extremely female atmosphere is sometimes blamed for his subsequent disparaging remarks about women. However, there is a method and a reason for *some* of Nietzsche's disparaging and hostile comments about women which have nothing to do with sexism, as I shall explain later.

Nietzsche was at a total loss for what to do about the company of women. He never had girl friends or any known intimate relationships with women as a student, but he was considered very gentle and considerate in his behavior toward women—the very opposite of his philosophical rhetoric and sexist statements—often to the surprise of new acquaintances.

The onset of puberty for Nietzsche at the age of 12 was heralded by migraine headaches and terrific eyestrain, and from the time he was pubescent he was always sick and constantly complaining of various illnesses. As a young student he already wrote an essay on Hölderlin, who subsequently has been recognized as probably the greatest German poet since Goethe, but who at that time was unrecognized and unappreciated.

Nietzsche was an incredibly brilliant student. When he was 24 he was given his Ph.D. without thesis or examination on the basis of his obvious genius, and he was appointed at that age as an associate professor at the University of Basel in Switzerland. At the age of 30 in 1870 he was made a full professor of philology (the study of classical language and literature). During that period, between ages 24 and 30, he had some military service and this is when he may have contracted syphilis, but there is no good

evidence for it.

The most important event that happened to him in this phase as a student, as it came to an end between ages 24 and 30, is that he met Richard Wagner; he became a wild enthusiast of Wagner. All the while he was suffering from hypochondriasis, sinus trouble, gastrointestinal complaints, bad eyes, headaches and morbid introspection.

At the time he was infatuated with Wagner he was also infatuated with the philosophy of Schopenhauer; the philosophy of blind Will. Schopenhauer argued that no God, or heaven or "other world" exists; there is only blind Will behind the phenomena of life, driving meaninglessly onward. The consequences of this doctrine were argued as a justification of Schopenhauer's famous pessimism.

The second phase of Nietzsche's life began around 1870 when, as mentioned above, he was appointed a full professor of philology at Basel. He battled with increasingly ill health during this period. He was adopted in the Wagner household as a son but ended this phase by a break with Wagner, a break with Schopenhauer's philosophy, a liberation and becoming of himself in developing his own philosophy.

This second phase of his life was as a university professor for a decade, the 10 years from about 1869 to 1879. In 1872 he wrote *The Birth of Tragedy*— his first original book—and from 1873 to 1876 he wrote the *Untimely Meditations* (or *Untimely Reflections*) . During this decade of phase two, the crucial word to keep in mind is the word *veneration*. Indeed, Jaspers (1966) calls it "the veneration phase," during which time Nietzsche had faith in genius and faith in culture, and he correspondingly venerated Wagner and Schopenhauer. This phase can be thought of as ending in 1878 or 1879 with both the break from Wagner and Schopenhauer and his resignation from the University.

In the next or third phase, he spent a decade from 1879 to 1889 as an isolated philosopher and literally a homeless wanderer. I have arbitrarily divided that decade into three parts, although one may divide it or subdivide it in any way one wishes. Of the three parts, the first is that of his early philosophy, from 1879 to 1882. This is often called the "positivistic phase" of Nietzsche's thought. During that time he believed that science would be the answer to all man's problems and questions. The important works of that period were *Human All Too Human*, a series of five aphoristic books written from 1879 to 1881,

and *The Gay Science (The Joyful Wisdom)*, published in 1882. All these publications were entirely ignored.

Shortly after this came his one and only love affair, following which he wrote in a frenzy in 1883 the first three sections of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, making the second part of this third phase—from 1883 to 1887—the time of his original philosophy. The two books published immediately after he finished *Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil* in 1886 and the *Genealogy of Morals* in 1887, are essentially an attempt to explain *Zarathustra*, which is very symbolic and poetic and without philosophical argument.

He was then poised in 1888, at the age of 44, to write out his own mature philosophy, to develop it at length like a good philosopher should. But for reasons that are very interesting to speculate about, he suddenly shifted and spent his last sane year, 1888, in writing six short shrill books. Of the group of six, *Ecce Homo* is considered by some his greatest masterpiece and by others a work of insanity. Those who are religious will find these short books exceedingly offensive: they are vigorously anti-Christian and apparently anti-Christ, and parts of them seem overtly insane. This output in 1888 represents the third and final part of the third phase of Nietzsche's life.

One might identify a fourth phase, from the point where he broke down in January 1889 at 45 until he died in 1900. This is a period of 11 years, during which he was essentially a vegetable, and his sister made a good deal of money fostering the Nietzsche legend. Also during that time she "edited" a number of his works, especially his posthumous work, *Will to Power*, which consists of a his anticipatory unpublished notes for his mature philosophy. These are *very* important towards understanding Nietzsche as a metaphysician and Nietzsche as an evolving thinker.

SCENE 3: SOCRATES

One cannot understand Nietzsche without *considerable* knowledge of Socrates, with whom he carried on a lifetime of running debate. What follows here is to provide the reader with essential background knowledge of Socrates, absolutely indispensable to reading Nietzsche. I have also discussed Socrates in previous publications (Chessick 1977, 1982). Dannhauser (1974) devotes an entire book to the subject of Nietzsche's view of Socrates, illustrating how every phase of Nietzsche's thought can only

be understood against the background image of Socrates that Nietzsche has constantly in mind. A careful examination of Socrates runs throughout Nietzsche's writing.

For the Greeks themselves, Socrates formed a turning point in the history of philosophy. "He turned men's eyes from the speculations about the nature of the physical world which had been characteristic of the pre-Socratic period, and concentrated attention on the problems of human life" (Guthrie 1975), to understand what it meant to be a human being and to examine for what purpose one was in the world. He alone brought philosophy into human life, in order to discover what was the right way to live. In Plato's *Gorgias* (Hamilton and Cairns 1973) Socrates asks, "What ought the character of a man be, and what his pursuits, and how far is he to go, both in maturer years and in youth?"

The great historical difficulty in distinguishing between Socrates and Plato has obscured the fact that they really were quite unlike and played entirely different roles in the intellectual history of mankind. We have four main sources (Guthrie 1975) of knowledge about Socrates (469-399 B.C.). The first of these is Xenophon, a contemporary of Plato, who is relatively pedestrian and unimaginative in his reports. Second, we have a brutal and completely wrongheaded caricature of Socrates at about forty-seven (423 B.C.) in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, which is still useful because it does lend some historical verification to the description of others. Aristotle, who is the only one of the four who personally did not know Socrates, makes some scattered dry technical comments about his contribution to philosophy. Finally, there are two schools of thought (Guthrie 1975) about the Socrates who is described by Plato. Authorities such as Burnet and Taylor insist that Socrates held all the views that Plato says he did, whereas most other scholars see a very different Socrates especially from the "Socrates" who emerges and changes as the dialogues of Plato progress in their composition over Plato's long life.

The most extreme view of this problem of depicting the real Socrates is presented by the famous twentieth century philosopher and psychiatrist Jaspers (1962), who described Socrates as a sort of projection figure for men of each epoch. Albert Schweitzer once said that it is easier to get a historical picture of Jesus than of Socrates because the descriptions of Jesus were made by men of simple learning and were clear cut, whereas our sources about Socrates as mentioned above are educated and imaginative authors, each of whom adds his own twist to the description. Thus Jaspers feels that to get a true historical picture of Socrates is impossible; one gets only conflicting images. He (1962) writes:

After studying the tradition, each of us retains an image of Socrates Though our picture of him may lack scientific precision, he stands compellingly before our eyes with all the captivating power of his human personality. It is impossible not to form an image of the historic Socrates. What is more, some image of Socrates is indispensable to our philosophical thinking. Perhaps we may say that today no philosophical thought is possible unless Socrates is present, if only as a pale shadow. The way in which a man experiences Socrates is fundamental to his thinking (p. 30).

I disagree with Jaspers' pessimism about the possibility of getting a clear view of the historical Socrates and knowing what he believed. Jaeger (1960) in an outstanding essay on Socrates, points out that "He was really a doctor," a "doctor of the soul," and he held that, "The only important thing was the relation between the word and the living man to whom it was, at one particular moment, addressed." There is no one else in the whole history of Europe who has changed the direction of thought simply by what he was; "for Socrates's thought springs directly and inevitably in a very special way from the whole character and make-up of the man" (Armstrong 1959, p. 25).

The encounter with Socrates was what even Jaspers (1970) would call a "boundary situation"—an existential collision. He had charisma in spite of being ugly, pop-eyed, with a pot belly and a shrewish wife. His appearance, life style, and integrity—especially the consistency with which he followed his own conscience—combined with his deliberate questioning method, challenged *all* faith, authority, and values. Whoever met Socrates reacted to him, either with rage, like, or transfixed fascination. In this sense he did corrupt the youth and undermine the dogmas of the church and the state. Never underestimate the power of the personal encounter with Socrates, which could shake an individual to his foundations.

In spite of undermining all beliefs that formed the dogmas of state and religion, Socrates displayed religious-like faith in two areas. First, he believed in what he called his daimonion (δαίμόνιον) or divine sign, or voice—which in practice led him to his death and second, he believed that his maieutic method (from μαῖευσι, to serve as a midwife) could discover certain truths—which he never found. The nature of Socrates' daimonion—a power within himself—is a mystery that has never been clarified and remains a matter of considerable dispute. Arguments range all the way from Schopenhauer's insistence that the daimonion was a ghost, to Friedlander's (1964) more learned contention that the notion of daimonion or mysterious force in a personality was more generally accepted among the Greeks than it is today. This curious voice never told Socrates what to do—it told him what *not* to do. Something akin to it also came to him in a repetitive dream apparition which always said the same thing to him: "Socrates, practice music,"

which to the Greeks included poetry. Finally in prison he consented to do so; perhaps, as Nietzsche (1968a) says, this represented his misgivings about the limits of logic.

More important is Socrates' most treasured conviction that since human nature is constant, ethical values are also constant and timeless, and may be found if the proper method of investigation is used (Copleston 1946). Thus Socrates re-focused those who were influenced by him, away from practical affairs aimed at money, power, and amorous conquests, and toward one's inner vision and self-exploration. Considering himself to have a divine mission, he searched unceasingly for the unchanged and unchanging essences behind the chaotic world of appearances. Consequently he turned away in despair from natural sciences of the time such as physics and biology, which were stalemated due to the lack of any experimentation. The question "What is virtue?" assumes that there is an essence common to *all* the virtues; it is built into the nature of the question. Also built into Socrates' method is the postulate of an inner soul where the truth *can* be found.

This approach was developed to combat the skepticism and relativism of the sophists, especially with respect to morals. Their skepticism was an outgrowth of the impasse reached by natural sciences of the time (Cornford 1978, Taylor 1953). Men were asked to choose between monistic theories that violated common sense and atomic theories postulating invisible entities that seemed impossible to verify.

Socrates introduced the Pythagorean notion of the soul as a central concept. For Socrates a man's business is to take care of his soul; this represents the first clear notion of soul as the responsible agent in knowing and acting rightly or wrongly. The soul makes a man good, or bad, happy or unhappy, and the personalization of this soul is a turning point in Western thought. He separates the soul from Being for the first time. For example, for the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, soul was part of fire, and fire was Logos, and Logos was the principle of all Being. For Socrates the soul is personal but it must be made clear that his notion of soul is closer to Freud's notion of the ego than to the current religious idea of the soul; the latter is closer to Plato's subsequent mystical elaboration.

Knowledge for Socrates is a real personal conviction, a direct and compelling inner vision of the good (Taylor 1953). Thus the function of the teacher is to persuade the pupil by discussion and example

so as to turn the pupil himself to his own personal inner vision of objective universal unchanging good. This for Socrates is how excellence or virtue is taught. The assumption is that every human soul possesses the necessary power of immediate insight or perception of good and evil. A man is perfect in self-knowledge if he can see his own vision but he cannot see another's vision of good and evil (Cornford 1978); this notion again clearly undermines authority, "corrupts" the youth, and encourages questioning, personal identity, and autonomy. It would be just as much out of place in today's society as it was in the Athens that executed Socrates, and just as misunderstood.

The "soul" of Socrates, resembling Freud's "ego," functions to know good and evil *and* to direct a man's acts so they lead to a good life; thus the soul does not just know but also directs and motivates a person.

To understand Socrates it is important first to understand the Greek notion of *arête* (ἀρετή) which is sometimes translated as "virtue". However, virtue, as we use it today, implies more what society approves of; what the Greeks meant by *arête* is the art of good living, the supreme craft, the development of excellence in the craft of doing what is most appropriate to human beings (Guthrie 1960).

To talk about unqualified virtue or excellence as a function most characteristic of a man one must know first what the function of a man is. This is because in the Greek notion virtue involved both what was a man's characteristic activity and what was the *aim* of this activity; that is to say, Greek philosophy was teleological, a quasi-religious faith that there is an appropriate and natural end for all movement and endeavor. So one cannot achieve excellence until one has the proper understanding of the end that must be achieved, a knowledge of what one is setting out to do.

The extraordinary step forward taken by Socrates is evident if one examines the notion of the soul in Homer (Armstrong 1959). For Homer the soul was a ghost or breath of life not even related to the mental life of man. The mental life for Homer resided in the heart or the diaphragm; thus, for Homer, the body is the crux of human identity, and the soul (ψῦχή) is simply a breath which animates the body with life and leaves at death, but has no basic importance. Socrates turned this around. For him, scholars agree (Taylor 1953), the soul was the equivalent of what we might with Cornford (1978) call the true self, the living individual man of intelligence and in command. Thus the Socratic mandate that a man's main

business is to care for or tend his soul focusses for the first time on the notion that human happiness and a good life are the function of a well-cared for soul or true self in charge of a man's body. For Socrates the body is the tool of the soul, and spiritual or self-perfection is man's highest and proper concern; it is a responsibility no one can escape (Cornford 1978) .

The notion of excellence in human living as a function of the well cared for and strong commanding true self of the individual lays Socrates open to the same complaint that psychoanalytic psychotherapists endure today; that such an approach emphasizes autonomy and individuality at the expense of obedience to the state and following social convention, and it separates man from other-worldly religion and the mystic flow of Being—which was Heidegger's (Steiner 1979) complaint. *It makes each individual autonomous human self something precious and special.*

Socrates equated knowledge with goodness, allowing no room for conflict or compromise. The notion that one would act contrary to what he knows is best to Socrates was a contradiction in terms. This is because "knows" for Socrates means real personal conviction, which only comes from one's own efforts. In the strength of Socrates' character lies the weakness of his philosophy. For Socrates' deepest conviction was that virtue is knowledge and vice is ignorance and no one does wrong willingly.

This conviction of Socrates leads to what is known as the Socratic paradox (Vlastos 1971) . If wickedness is due to ignorance it is therefore involuntary—the person would behave better if he knew better. But Socrates repeatedly emphasized self-control and he repeatedly attacked what the Greeks called *akrasia* (ἀκρασία)—the lack of mastery over one's passions or lower nature, an incontinent yielding to the temptations of sensuality, greed, and ambition—as the greatest obstacle to wisdom. If however, one never does wrong willingly but only out of ignorance there is no such thing as *akrasia*, but only ignorance.

In a further paradox, Socrates is constantly insisting that he is ignorant and he knows nothing. By his own philosophy then he cannot be good and he cannot be sure even that his own method of achieving knowledge is good; at the same time, as I have already mentioned, he had a religious-like fervor, believing in himself, his daimonion, and his approach to finding timeless and eternal values. As a matter of fact the personal bravery of Socrates was one of the outstanding characteristics that has made

him engaging over the centuries, even to philosophers who had a deeply ambivalent and very personal attitude toward him, *especially* Nietzsche.

One of the ways that Socrates is so engaging is through encountering the Socratic paradox, and one of the ways that he shakes an individual to his foundations is through this curious double message that he presents in which, on the one hand, he insists that he knows nothing and, on the other, he insists that he knows how to find the truth and he shows by his model that he indeed has found what most humans would consider to be virtue and wisdom.

This Socratic paradox fades away, I have suggested (Chessick 1982), if we recognize that we are often in the presence of the famous Socratic irony, introducing another issue of even greater interest to psychotherapists. Note that in the fifth century the term "irony" had a much more nasty and abusive connotation than it does today (Guthrie 1975). Clearly, the irony of Socrates is a very important aspect of his approach to people; all commentators have mentioned it along with their impression of his personal bravery and virtue. In fact, it was an integral part of his method, which must be described before examining this irony.

Socrates invented a method in which he attempted to find eternal values. The Socratic conversation gives hope, attempts to approach the truth through better and better definitions, and shows how everything is related to the soul's knowledge of good and evil (Guthrie 1975). It moves from less adequate to more adequate definitions, aiming at universal definitions. It attempts to discover the truth in the form of these definitions, which then could serve to answer the question of how to live. This maieutic method of Socrates is certainly the first practice of individual intensive psychotherapy (Chessick 1977, 1982); Socrates encounters and engages an individual in an attempt to make the individual look into himself.

Aristotle (Copleston 1946) credits Socrates for inventing or at least using "inductive arguments and general definitions." This involved collecting instances and sifting out their essential common quality, which gives the definition—a "leading-on" of the mind from individual instances, assembled and regarded collectively, to a comprehension of their common definition (Guthrie 1960). This method of the soul to reach knowledge, the maieutic or hatching method, is a common principle of epistemology and

ethics for Socrates. The notion of general definition assumes that a man does not fully know what a thing is until he gives an adequate definition. Sometimes a definition is used by Socrates as a distinguishing mark, but sometimes it seems to be thought of as revealing the essence of a thing (Huby 1964). If one follows the latter approach then the finding of a general definition of a thing at the same time gives us new knowledge of a thing. Remember that for the Greeks knowledge of a thing included understanding the purpose of function of that thing.

There is however a discrepancy between this Aristotelean philosophical description and what Socrates actually did in the marketplace (ἀγορά). His actual procedure is usually labelled (Vlastos 1971) the Socratic *elenchus*; cross-examination and refutation. This is from ἔλεγχος, a test or trial. In the *Apology* (Hamilton and Cairns 1973) he calls it ἔλεγον τοῦ βίου, an examination of men's lives. The net effect of an encounter with Socrates in which everything one said was cross-examined and refuted, along with being exposed to the Socratic irony, was frequently to make a bitter enemy for Socrates. People complained that his conversation had the numbing effect of an electric shock from a sting-ray (Guthrie 1960) , and a sense of no way out. Even Plato recognized this fact and his recognition represents the turning point between Socrates and Plato.

The purpose of the philosophy of Plato is twofold and is *sharply different* than the purpose of the philosophy of Socrates. Plato recognized that Socrates did not find a communicable answer for his vision of an inner knowledge of good and evil. Plato went on to ask, what is the real nature of goodness and of the soul which by knowing goodness makes a man good (Armstrong 1959, Taylor 1953). So Plato attempts to actually develop the premises of Socrates into a full-blown philosophical system, and as such it is fair to say that Plato is the first major systematizing philosopher.

In Plato there seemingly are three Socrates's (Hamilton and Cairns 1973)—with the early Platonic Socrates as in the *Apology* the closest to the real man. In the middle dialogues such as the *Meno* or *Phaedo*, Socrates becomes Plato's spokesman, and in the late dialogues he recedes into the background or drops out altogether; philosophy becomes ontology. When we see the effect of this shift we see the difference between Socrates and Plato. What happens as the humiliating irony and intensely personal nature of the cross examination and refutation drop away in Plato is a far less personal philosophy, a far more poetic and beautiful system infused with hope of divine bliss, but a loss of immediate moral fervor of the

encounter. This fact is sometimes obscured by the magnificence of Plato's writing style. Plato was not a psychotherapist, he was a poet and a visionary; we can appreciate the beauty and the rhapsody of Plato's myths and philosophy but we are not likely to be shaken to our inner foundations by it. Nietzsche in his style followed Socrates and opposed Plato.

Socrates, the "hard plain thinker" (Jaeger 1960) said: look inside yourself, admit your ignorance, take a good shaking-up from me, and reform your life here and now! By this emphasis on the immediate encounter and the demand for the immediate application of the discovery of one's ignorance into changes in behavior, Socrates brought down on himself much inevitable personal animosity which resulted in his execution. It is this moral fervor for immediate personal reform that marks Socrates almost more as a religious figure than a philosopher (Jaspers 1962). Socrates' invention of the crucial notion of the soul and his attempted refutation of the widespread cynicism of the sophists makes him an extremely important figure in the history of philosophy (of course in addition to his role as catalyst to the philosophical genius of Plato).

Why was it necessary for Socrates to humiliate his opponents by the use of his rapier-like intellect? One answer might be what psychotherapists call countertransference. My impression is that it arose from his frustration (Chessick 1982). In spite of his best efforts Socrates was a witness to the decline of Greece from its golden times to the total disaster of the Peloponnesian War, which broke out when he was about forty years old and already famous, in 430 B.C. It became increasingly clear that his fellow citizens were not hearing his message and indeed some of his most devoted followers such as Alcibiades were a total discredit to the Socratic notions of virtue, temperance, and courage.

One also wonders about the personal life of Socrates. Some scholars (Copleston 1946) have attempted to gallantly defend Xanthippe, but the overwhelming mass of evidence seems to point to the fact that she was a very unpleasant and shrewish wife (Guthrie 1975). Xenophon (Strauss 1972) reports Socrates as saying that if he can bear living with her he can stand anybody. Even her crying behavior in the *Crito*, when Socrates drinks the hemlock, is generally accepted to be a social form that was expected of all Greek wives and to have nothing to do with any real feelings for Socrates, whom she clearly despised. In the eyes of the world as well as his wife Socrates was a failure and an eccentric, an unpleasant person who engaged you in a conversation, shook you up, made you angry, and implicitly

challenged the authority of the state and the established religion. His main attraction was that of a spectacle; one went to watch him engage in cross-examination and refutation much as one went to a wrestling or boxing match. This is not what Socrates was hoping to achieve and I think the famous Socratic irony is the only instance we have of this man—who otherwise showed remarkable self-control—manifesting his true deep disappointment.

The impact of Socrates on generations of youths and thinkers who have followed has been one of the most astounding and inspiring phenomena of human history. It is also a tribute to the magnificent writing of Plato, especially in the dialogues portraying the trial and last days of Socrates. This impact seems to be most powerful on youths who are studying philosophy in their earlier years, and often leads to a lasting personal interaction with Socrates throughout one's lifetime. The most famous example of this is Nietzsche's (1968a, Chessick 1977) incredible running debate and intense pathological ambivalence with the figure of Socrates.

Nietzsche, in sharp contrast to his contemporaries, adopts Socrates' notion of "philosophize," which is to exhort and teach through discussion rather than to engage in abstract thought and produce a metaphysical system. At the same time he hated Socrates for bringing about a victory for reason, distorting the Apollonian element in the Greek mind, and thus destroying an essential harmony in the Athenian soul. This disruption, he believed, led eventually to the rigid intellectual academic philosophy of German Idealism, and to unnatural excessive rationalization and repression in modern life. Yet even in Socrates, "the typical *non-mystic*" as Nietzsche (1968a) calls him, one encounters a powerful feeling that Nietzsche labels "the enormous driving-wheel of logical Socratism" which "is in motion, as it were, *behind* Socrates." So much for the nineteenth century notion of Socrates as a dried-up theoretical man!

Socrates crops up everywhere in the writings of philosophers even in recent years. I believe this is true because no other thinker has so clearly pointed out the utter foolishness of typical materialistic human existence; a lifestyle that has produced the monstrous contemporary aberrations of Lee Harvey Oswald, John Hinkley, Jr., and others. In that sense the encounter with Socrates has a similar boundary function (Jaspers 1970) as the encounter with death. Ordinary human preoccupation with money, power, and material goods shrinks into insignificance when one feels the cold whisper of death; nowhere has this been more magnificently portrayed as in Tolstoy's (1951) story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

Once the encounter with Socrates has taken place and he gets a grip on one's soul, he does indeed function as the gadfly of a lifetime—just as he said he was—forming an inner voice perhaps similar to his own that never allows the individual complete comfort with dogma, convention, or sensual pleasures. Even his most narcissistic followers such as Alcibiades felt uncomfortable and ashamed in the presence of Socrates and experienced intense ambivalence toward him, as so dramatically displayed by Plato in the *Symposium*.

Socrates might have agreed with Bertrand Russell's (1964) argument that, although we may not reach permanent answers, since these answers are the most important determinants of human activity, seeking them should be a central intellectual preoccupation and can be a major source of goodness and happiness in a person's life. As Jaspers (1954) puts it,

The essence of philosophy is not the possession of truth but the search for truth Philosophy means to be on the way. Its questions are more essential than its answers, and every answer becomes a new question (p. 12).

For Socrates, philosophy was supreme, and it was carried out not in academia but in gymnasias, the centers of leisure (Chessick 1971) and health in Athens.

What has become clear over the centuries however, is that only a small percentage of humanity can be gripped by Socrates and that most people now as then run away from him as fast as they can go. This is because he overemphasized the capacity of human reason to direct and control human activity; the great weakness of Socratic philosophy rests, as mentioned earlier, on his assumption that other people have the same strength of character that he did. He assumed that if he could persuade someone intellectually of what is right they would immediately do it—and this greatly overemphasized the strength of reason and underestimated the power of human emotions in conflict. He preached a gospel of the self-mastery and self-sufficiency of moral character, more like Nietzsche than like Christ.

One wonders how Socrates, if he had lived today, utilizing our far better understanding of human conflict and the unconscious forces that determine our behavior, would have approached humanity and the pressing problems of how to live—questions that are equally as important and unresolved in our era. Surely he would have started with an ironic repetition of a famous phrase from his modern philosophical opponent, Heidegger (1968); "Most thought-provoking in our thought-provoking time is

that we are still not thinking." He would have continued by stopping our young people wherever he could find them, just as he did centuries ago, and subjecting them to his elenchus with therapeutic intent whenever they would let him because, as human nature is constant, so he believed ethical values are constant. For this was his basic belief, as Guthrie (1975) paraphrased it from Plato's presentation in the *Republic* (518b-d): "The eye of the mind is not blind, but in most people it is looking the wrong way. To educate is to convert it or turn it around, so that it looks in the right direction" (p. 488).