Socrates the Activist
by Bob Stone

Socrates is one of my great heroes, along with Rick in *Casablanca*, and my aim is to show how he embodies, both for the ancient Greeks and for us, the point – or at least one point – of philosophy.

After a short introduction about the evidence for Socrates's views and the philosophical climate in which he lived, I'm going to use Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro* as an example of Socrates's general practice; then I'll pick out certain features of it as central to the man and show how they are described by Socrates himself in Plato's version of his defence speech, the *Apology*. After discussing how Socrates's technical arguments are relevant to ordinary life, I'll argue that his philosophy was meant for the people of Athens in general, and conclude with the claim that Socrates can and should inspire us today.

Evidence for Socrates

First a warning. The Socrates I'm talking about is, like Rick, a fictional character. That's not to say he didn't exist. We know he was born in about 469 BC, lived in Athens, and was executed after a trial in 399. But he wrote nothing, as far as we know. It's not that, like so many Greek authors, his works have been lost over time; he simply didn't write any. But shortly after his death, various members of his fan club began to write fictional dialogues, in which Socrates was the leading character; these became a literary genre known as 'Socratic dialogues'. Only those of Plato and Xenophon survive, but we can take it that each writer used the literary form to push his own attitudes and theories, just as Plato and Xenophon do. The Socrates I'm talking about is the character who takes the lead in what are thought to be the earlier dialogues written by Plato, that is the dialogues in which Socrates questions other people about their views rather than those, like the *Republic*, in which he expounds views of his own – which are fairly obviously Plato's own theories. These early works include the *Apology*, which is the Greek for 'defence speech' rather than 'apology'; Plato wrote this as if it was delivered by Socrates at his trial, and what Socrates says about himself is entirely consistent with his character as described in those early dialogues.

Philosophical background

Before I get on to Socrates himself, I'm going to keep you in suspense for another minute or two by filling you in with the state of things, philosophically, when Socrates hit the scene in Athens in the middle of the 5th century BC.

A crude account of traditional Greek beliefs might go something like this: the gods are responsible for just about everything, both the physical world and the moral and legal codes by which we live. Morality, in particular, was based on the concept of virtue (*arete*), which means something not so much like our virtue but more excellence, including a large element of worldly success as well as moral scruples. There were usually five specific virtues mentioned in any discussion: justice, piety, courage, self-control and wisdom.

But since about 600 BC various philosophers had been proposing theories about the physical state of the world which did not assume a divine rôle; so in that area the gods were being marginalised in intellectual circles. Then during the 5th century some philosophers, such as Protagoras, floated sceptical ideas in the area of morals and politics too; it was suggested that the moral laws had actually been invented by men rather than gods. Around the time of Socrates's adulthood there were several such intellectuals, known as Sophists, who came from various Greek cities but often visited Athens, and who taught young men (who were prepared to pay) various academic subjects, including public speaking and philosophy. There was a general perception that these Sophists had rather radical views, sceptical of traditional ideas of the gods and morality; that made them suspect in the eyes of traditionalists, especially the fathers of sons who were taught by them. For example, as we read in the first part of Plato's *Republic*, the whole structure of moral rules was regarded by some as designed by the ruling class to serve the interests of the ruling class, and by others as a contract between us, whereby we forgo our natural desire to injure each other in exchange for the right not to be injured *by* each other; in neither case is morality regarded as something natural or absolute, or even particularly moral, but as a way in which we – or some of us – contrive to obtain the best advantage for ourselves.

The *Euthyphro*

Now at last to Socrates himself. I'll give you a flavour of his methods by summarising Plato's dialogue, *Euthyphro*. Socrates and Euthyphro meet by chance outside a magistrate's office, and Euthyphro explains that he's about to prosecute his own father for manslaughter. One of the father's workers had got drunk and murdered a slave, the father had him tied up and thrown into a ditch, and the murderer had died of exposure while the father was away getting legal advice on what to do. Euthyphro is now prosecuting his father, because that is the 'pious' thing to do, and Euthyphro is one of Athens's acknowledged experts on piety.

That prompts Socrates to ask Euthyphro what exactly he thinks piety is. Euthyphro gives an example – what I'm doing now. Socrates explains that he doesn't want an example of piety, but a definition which includes all possible examples. Euthyphro responds with "Piety is what is agreeable to the gods" (6e). When he's reminded that, a few moments before, he (Euthyphro) had said that the gods disagree with each other on all sorts of things, including what's right and wrong, Euthyphro amends his definition to "Piety is what all the gods love" (9e).

Now Socrates asks the question that has become known as the 'Euthyphro Dilemma': do the gods love what is pious because it is pious, or is it pious because the gods love it? Euthyphro is eventually led to reply that the gods love it because it is pious. So, says Socrates, pious can't *mean* 'loved by the gods', because that would be circular. 'Loved by the gods' must be an *attribute* of pious, not its essence. Euthyphro is totally confused, but Socrates helps him out by suggesting another approach. Perhaps piety is a subset of the morally right; Euthyphro agrees, and specifies that it is that part of morality which deals with tending to the gods. Socrates gets Euthyphro to admit that tending to people – as one tends to dogs or horses – is designed to improve them, whereas the gods are beyond the need for improvement. So Euthyphro switches the definition slightly: it's the sort of service that slaves give their masters. When Socrates asks what good this is supposed to do, Euthyphro changes tack again and suggests that the relation between gods and men is a sort of commerce. Trouble is, whereas the gods give us things we need (if we're lucky), the things we give the gods are not things they need, just things that are gratifying to them. So piety is doing what is gratifying to the gods – but we've already shot that idea down . . . at which point Euthyphro says, "Another time, then, Socrates. At the moment I have an urgent engagement somewhere, and it's time for me to be off" (15e).

Socrates's method

Notice first of all that this is a discussion, not the expounding of a view. Socrates views philosophy as a shared activity, in which people ask questions, challenge each other's assumptions. The trouble with books, he is made to say in Plato's *Phaedrus* (275d), is that, if you ask them a question, they always say the same thing! He never wrote a book, or gave lectures, and he would disapprove strongly of this kind of talk – at least until the question session afterwards, when you have the chance to pull everything I've said to pieces.

Secondly, the discussion is not an academic exercise, but arises out of an actual moral dilemma – whether it's pious for Euthyphro to prosecute his father for manslaughter. And most Socratic dialogues begin with some practical problem, often about how to teach young people to be good citizens. The arguments, however theoretical they may be, are engaged in to solve some practical, and important, moral problem; and the other participants are very rarely philosophers.

Thirdly, Socrates appears not to have any definite views of his own, but is asking a so-called expert for his expert opinion; he does this – as always – with an ironic show of humility, as if longing to learn from someone cleverer than him. The expert opinion turns out not to bear scrutiny, and the important man Euthyphro is made to look rather confused.

That brings in the fourth point, that, far from settling the question that Socrates asked, the discussion ends in *aporia* – the term used by commentators for the state of uncertainty with which most Socratic dialogues of this period end. Some commentators even call these dialogues the 'aporetic dialogues'.

Socrates's rationale

Now in the *Apology* – the defence speech Plato puts in his mouth – Socrates explains these last two features (the questioning of experts and the confusion that results) as a deliberate policy. One of his friends had once asked the Delphic Oracle if there was anyone wiser than Socrates. No, said the Oracle. Socrates was amazed at this, as he regarded himself as extremely ignorant and stupid. So he embarked on a mission to disprove the oracle by interviewing men with a high reputation for, or claim to, wisdom – whether in politics, the arts, or the professions – and showing that they were wiser than he. But on every occasion the man showed by his answers that he was not at all wise. This went on for decades, and by the time of his trial at the age of 70 Socrates must have alienated just about everyone in Athens by showing them up as pretending to wisdom they did not have, especially as this activity was usually done in public, to the great amusement of passers-by. Socrates's rationale was that he was the only person who was wise enough to know that he wasn't wise. Over the years his mission changed from an attempt to disprove the oracle to a determination – in obedience to Apollo's implied command – to persuade people to "make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your minds" (30a-b).

He saw his role vis-à-vis the people of Athens as similar to a gadfly stimulating a large, lazy horse. That's the simile he gives in the *Apology* (30e); elsewhere, in another dialogue he is described by Meno as like a sting-ray who numbs people so that, like Euthyphro, they are reduced to a feeling of helplessness (*Meno* 80a). And he tells the jury that he will continue his stimulating, or numbing, activity even if they acquit him – which they didn't!

This may sound like a moral crusade; and in a sense it is. But Socrates is not a preacher, appealing to people's emotions. He is not one of the philosophy teachers that are advertised on Facebook, like personal trainers, who would like to make me look deep into my soul, find my identity, put some meaning into my life. He is an intellectual through and through.

Definitions

Let us look at the most common feature of Socrates's *elenchus* (the Greek word used today for his method of questioning), that is his demand for definitions. Some modern commentators, including Wittgenstein, think Socrates is wrong to attach such importance to definitions. We can live our lives perfectly happily, and – in the words of Peter Geach (Morrison 2011: 196) – "know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge." In fact, it is precisely because people *do* know what words like 'courage' and 'justice' mean that they are able to have an intelligent debate about whether a given definition is invalidated by some counter-example. So what exactly is Socrates after?

When Euthyphro gives his first proper definition, that piety is what the gods love, Socrates reminds Euthyphro of the conversation they had had a few moments before. There Socrates had expressed scepticism about the myths involving the gods, especially those in which they fight wars against each other; but Euthyphro – as the theology expert – had assured him that they are true. When Euthyphro now claims that piety is what the gods love, Socrates is able to turn that response back on Euthyphro; the gods are not agreed on what they love. Euthyphro now has to amend the definition. Notice that Socrates is not here refuting the original definition with a fact that he himself claims to be true, but with a belief that Euthyphro holds, and which Socrates almost certainly does not. It's not that the definition is shown to be false, but that Euthyphro's position is shown to be incoherent.

Another example of a definition is that of courage given in the *Laches*, where some generals are discussing what sort of experts to send their sons to so that they learn to become courageous (as usual, a practical context), and typically Socrates points out that they must first be sure they know what courage *is*. The first definition given by Laches (190e) is that courage consists in standing one's ground in battle and not running away. Socrates reminds him that some fighters, like the Scythians and, in one instance, the Spartans, fight very bravely and effectively while making a clever tactical retreat. Laches agrees, and has to amend his definition, not because it's incoherent but because it fails to include examples which he himself knows are courageous. A third example comes at the beginning of the *Republic*: Cephalus says, or at least is taken by Socrates as implying, that being just (the Greek word *dikaion*, which really means morality in general) consists in telling the truth and giving back what one has borrowed (331c). Socrates

imagines borrowing a sword from a friend who subsequently goes mad; surely, he says, it would not be right to give it back even if he asked for it. Cephalus agrees. Here, too, Socrates is pointing out an example of something that his interlocutor believes which shows the definition to be wrong – too extensive, rather than too narrow, in this case.

I think – though not everyone agrees – that in these (and other) discussions Socrates is not trying to disprove the interlocutor's definition by showing that it is inconsistent with facts; that after all would require that these facts were shown to be more probable than the definition. It's rather that he is showing that the definition is not consistent with other beliefs of the interlocutor, and that the interlocutor's belief system is therefore incoherent. It is significant that the last four-fifths of the *Republic*, where the Socratic dialogue gives way to a Platonic exposition, attempts to provide exactly that kind of account of justice, where it fits into a whole system of ethical values based on the Form of the Good.

"No one does wrong willingly"

If we accept that explanation of Socrates's demand for definitions – to examine the coherence of a person's beliefs – the further question arises: what does it matter if the person's belief system is incoherent? It seems that many thoroughly decent people lead thoroughly decent lives without even knowing what a definition is, let alone having a coherent philosophy of virtue. Could Socrates really have thought that you need to know the place of, say, self-control in a system of ethics in order to be self-controlled? Do you have to be an intellectual to be moral? Well, he does say in another early dialogue, the *Protagoras* (345d-e): "No wise man believes that anyone does wrong willingly." He does not claim that you need to be an intellectual to be good, but he suggests that you *do* need to be intellectually mistaken to be bad.

When I first came across this view of Socrates I thought it was just silly. But let's take an imaginary example of something Socrates would probably consider bad. I'm walking along a deserted lane, I see a woman wearing a Rolex watch that I fancy, so I knock her down and take the watch. There are three possibilities here:

1. I have no moral scruples at all, I just want the watch, and, if asked by the police why I took it, I say, "I wanted it, and so I took it."

2. I have a grudge against society, especially people who, unlike me and through no merit of their own, can afford to buy Rolex watches; so I believe the woman deserves to be knocked down and robbed, just to redress the balance in my favour. That's what I tell the police, too.

3. I simply feel like taking the watch and have no serious moral scruples, but I do feel the need to justify my actions morally; so, when asked by the police why I took the watch, I make that stuff up about feeling hard done by.

How might Socrates, in his rôle of prison visitor, deal with me?

1. In case 1, he might say, "Contrary to my plea in the *Apology*, you are putting possessions above the welfare of your *psyche* (translatable as 'mind' or 'soul'). If only you knew that your *psyche* is your real self, and that your body and material possessions are irrelevant, you would not damage your *psyche* by doing a morally bad thing."

2. In case 2, Socrates would ask me what I meant by words like 'society', 'merit' and 'deserve', until I realised that my logic was seriously flawed and that what I'd thought was a justified act was in fact wrong. From then on, I'd stop stealing watches from women in country lanes.

3. In case 3, he might well adopt the same interrogation procedure as in 2, but it would make no difference to my later behaviour as my action wasn't actually based on the reasons I used to justify it. He'd be better off arguing as if it were case 1.

So someone who does wrong simply to get some advantage for himself is mistaken in thinking that the body and possessions are more important than the *psyche*, which is damaged by the perpetration of bad

acts. Someone who does wrong for a reason that he thinks justifies the act is mistaken in thinking the reasoning is logical. Either way, no one does wrong willingly. QED!

That's why, in the dialogues, the target of his attacks is not so much people's bad behaviour as the views they hold about ethical principles – that is, the reasons which might underlie both what they themselves do and the way they react to what others do. He is keen to show that those who think they are wise in these matters, and who, like today, pontificate about other people's bad behaviour as well as their own upright lives, do not have a coherent understanding of the ethical concepts which they bandy around and of the way they fit into a consistent philosophical system. The focus on definitions of the virtues is a way of showing up that lack of coherence.

Socrates's target audience

How wide did Socrates cast his net? If you've read Plato's dialogues, you'll have noticed that Socrates's interlocutors are exclusively aristocratic men. That, however, may be more to do with Plato's literary intentions than with the true facts about Socrates. It does seem certain that the real Socrates – as opposed to the Platonic Socrates that I've stuck to until now – was a well-known figure among the people of Athens in general, for two related reasons.

First, he is a central character in Aristophanes's comedy, the *Clouds*, produced when Socrates was about 46. As comedies were performed as part of a competition in front of a mass audience – far too large to have contained more than a minority of aristocrats – it's fair to assume that Socrates was a well-known character around Athens. In fact the targets of Aristophanes's scorn are ideas Socrates probably didn't himself espouse – obsession with scientific research and the teaching of rhetoric, for example – but which must, like Socrates, have been familiar to the audience for the comedy to make sense.

Secondly, the jury at Socrates's trial (24 years later) consisted of 501 men, and it is thought that the juries in that period were predominantly from the bottom half of the wealth range – and probably the top half of the age range – i.e. not aristocrats but predominantly ordinary people. In the *Apology*, the defence speech which Plato attributes to him, Socrates claims to be facing a general prejudice against him which he attributes partly to the comedy, taking it as read that the jury will know the play and probably saw it in their youth. He complains that people associate him, as the play did, with the common run of Sophists, who charge fees, teach rhetoric and have theories about the physical world. He appeals to the majority of the jury to be witnesses themselves: "I ask those of you who have ever heard me talking – and most of you are in that category – to talk to each other and to explain; tell each other if any of you has ever heard me discuss such matters [i.e. scientific theories] either briefly or at length" (19d). Here he (or at least Plato) is assuming that the majority of this huge jury have not only heard rumours about Socrates, either in the comedy or elsewhere, but have on some occasion actually heard him talking. Of course the real Socrates may not have said anything of the sort, but Plato, in writing the speech, must have thought that such words would at least be plausible to his readers. So Socrates, as a person and a talker, is regarded as something familiar to ordinary people.

Socrates and the English riots

To bring this topic round to the question of the day, what is the *point* of the philosophical activity in which Socrates engaged? As I was writing this, people were rioting in various cities in England, and it occurred to me to wonder how Socrates would have reacted. One thing he would certainly *not* have done is to express a view either condemning or excusing the rioters; in that he would be unique. But I *can* imagine him traipsing round the streets of Tottenham or Salford, barefoot and shabbily dressed, listening to people – both rich and poor – giving their opinions about the rioters to television journalists. One, who may have taken part, would say, "They just want respect". Another, who disapproved, would ask, "Why do people think it's sensible to attack the very community they are part of?" (Those are both actual things I heard people in the street say on television.) Socrates would not contradict either of them, but would ask one, "When you say 'respect', what exactly do you mean by that?" And to the other, "Please define 'community', and what is it to be a 'part' of one?" Assuming he didn't get punched on the nose, the discussion would then continue along the lines of the *Euthyphro*, with the interlocutor ending up confused but acknowledging that what she had thought was obviously true was not consistent with other things which she had to admit she believed, and so her position was not coherent. Anyone who could be

persuaded by Socrates to play his game would – whether they knew it or not – be doing philosophy. They would be using the tools of analytical philosophy – e.g. defining terms, being logically consistent, even distinguishing between essence and attribute – to examine the beliefs they held: not any old beliefs, but beliefs which underlie, or are thought to justify, both their own behaviour and their reactions to the behaviour of others.

Conclusion

Socrates claims in the *Apology* that the best thing anyone can do is "every day to have discussions about virtue and the other topics you hear me discussing when I'm examining both myself and others; for a human being the unexamined life is not worth living" (38a). So when he asks for a definition of 'justice' or 'piety', he is not kicking off an academic seminar, but asking an ordinary person to examine – in an entirely rational, even intellectual way – an idea that the person himself has brought up and which is the basis both of his behaviour and of his judgment of the behaviour of others. Examining one's life, in Socrates's interpretation, means first abandoning any claims one thought one had to wisdom, and, second, subjecting one's *beliefs* to rational examination, to see if they cohere together and so might conceivably be true.

This is dangerous stuff, and not just for Socrates if he chooses the wrong person in Tottenham to interrogate. If we follow Socrates in examining our own assumptions, we may find that they are incoherent, or erroneous, and if we base our way of life – and our views on other people's way of life – on assumptions that we come to realise don't stand up to analysis, not only is any smug feeling of wisdom we may have banished, but we've got serious work to do! Much easier to behave like the lazy horse to which Socrates compared the people of Athens and to live what he calls the unexamined life. In the words of Camus (1942), "Commencer à penser, c'est commencer d'être miné (beginning to think is beginning to be undermined).

References

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Morrison, D.R. (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates* CUP, Cambridge 2011
Plato, *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, *Meno, Protagoras*, *Republic*

NB: I've used the standard referencing system for the works of Plato, and quoted the passages in translation, which is usually based on the various Penguin Classics volumes but modified by me on occasions.