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Socrates left a Paradox behind him. In the year 399 B.C. when he was seventy years old, he was accused, among other things of corrupting the young. His accusers, partly because they believed the charge to be true and partly because they wanted to get rid of Socrates once and for all - and Socrates cheerfully acknowledged at his trial that he had indeed been very troublesome - his accusers maintained that he had taught the young highly subversive doctrines. In reply, Socrates declared that he had never taught anybody anything. And this is the 'Paradox: that the man who says this, has been remembered by his friends and admirers, from the day of his death, as one of the greatest of all teachers. How come?

This raises a number of questions. For example: what did his accusers mean by teaching? What did he mean by teaching? To say nothing of the further question: What i_s teaching?

Now, I should like it to be perfectly clear that it is Socrates who raises these questions, not I. For if there is one thing more certain than any other about Socrates it is that he was an expert, indeed the expert, at raising questions. Also, notoriously, he was far more interested in asking them than in answering them. Such questions, as these, he would say, he found very difficult to answer. So do I, and accordingly like him, in the humble spirit which is proper to the title of this paper, I won't try to answer them either - at least not until, and again like him, I ask a few questions of my own.

So, if Socrates was not teaching, what was he doing? Perhaps that is the way to get behind the Paradox. But this is not an easy question either. It will take some time, but I shall try.

To begin with; it is a biographical question. When, we might put it, did Socrates begin making himself troublesome? The guess, the educated one, is, somewhere about the year 440 B.C., when Socrates was thirty years old. About then,

it seems there came a change in his life. Earlier, apparently before he was twenty, he was reading and, when the occasion presented itself, listening to •and talking to the philosophers who came to Athens; for example, Parmenides, the "revered and awful one" as Socrates called him, who himself asked hard questions; or, the Great Anaxagoras, nicknamed "nous", that is "The Mind". He was a friend of Pericles, and one of the inventors of The Greek atomic theory. These men enquired into and discoursed upon "the nature of things," that is, they sought to understand and explain the universe of nature, more or less from top to bottom; to account for the coming into existence and the passing out of existence, of the natural bodies in the heavens, and of all the variety of inorganic and organic nature which is presented to our eyes, to account for the Phainomena, as was said in Greek.

This was a large order, and so, after a time, it seemed to Socrates. What happened with him at this time was put many years later (Cicero) in this way: "Socrates brought philosophy down from the skies and made her at home among men." In more Prosaic language, it might be said that Socrates one day, to find what he was looking for, walked out of the study into the market-place. And there, in a very real sense, he stayed for the rest of his life - to the well-known distress, it might be added, of his wife, the vociferous Xanthippe.

In writing a biography of Socrates, however brief, one attempts to confine oneself to reasonably well attested facts. They are not all intellectual facts. Part and parcel of the whole is the person. Thus we are told that Socrates was strongly and squarely built; that he had an impressive belly, and a peculiar way of walking, between a strut and a waddle, and a peculiar way of turning his eyes full on the adversary, whether in battle or in conversation. He served in three campaigns during the Peloponesian war as a heavy infantryman, a hoplite. It was well known that in battle the enemy took care to give him a wide berth. He had a face like a Silenus: snubnose, thick lips and "those bullish looking eyes."

As for his habits, they were thoroughly Athenian. Not for him the solitary delights and companionship of the country. It was the city he loved; he was gregarious and he liked to talk. It was in no way strange that an Athenian, therefore, should come to talk in the market-place. And Socrates too came to talk. But not just like any Athenian.

He arrived at one of the public buildings one day, too late to hear the great Sicilian orator Gorgias, who had, according to his following, just delivered himself of a magnificent discourse. Socrates was assured that a repeat performance could easily be arranged, for a few friends after dinner. He declined the great man's invitation with the most well-bred expressions of regret. This too was characteristic of him, his good manners. He never failed to treat his neighbor, or his adversary, with courtly respect, never attempted to talk, shout or laugh anyone down. Indeed it was just this cultivated, and sometimes ironic, urbanity of his which drove his victims frantic.

On this occasion he said that he really only wanted to ask Gorgias a few questions which Gorgias being the learned, distinguished man that he was would of course be able to deal with easily. That is the ironic note. More precisely, would Gorgias be willing to talk in a certain way? Thus: "Gorgias, would you be willing to go on in the way we have begun conversing, asking and answering questions, and put off the long speech to some other time? I should be greatly obliged to you if you would give short answers to my questions."

Socrates did not come to the market to listen to speeches, far less to hear himself talk. In fact, he had learned to be quite sceptical of lectures and speeches. You can't ask questions of speeches, he would say, and if you try you find they can't talk back.

He came then with questions in his mind. Not that he was the first to ask questions. Greek thinkers for a hundred and fifty years had been

asking questions, hard ones, and brilliant answers had been given. Still, not the kind of questions you ask in the market-place: about shoe-making, money-making, sheep-herding, war-making, cooking, law-making.

Nor had those men, of the past, asked their questions in the same way. Socrates, we should keep in mind, said to Gorgias, "would you be willing to go on conversing?" Our question was, "if Socrates was not teaching, then what was he doing?" The answer is, he was doing just this, "conversing." It looks innocent. So do those subjects of his.

The Greek word for conversation is dialogos, in English, "dialogue." We ourselves hear a lot about this. In fact, the word is in danger of becoming a cliché. Perhaps it will recover. Words sometimes do. At all events, it was to dialogue that Socrates devoted his mature life, carried on in the market-place, the stoas, the exercise grounds, wherever in the large city that Athens had lately become he could find the men (and sometimes the women; young and old, but more often young, that he sought. This was his business, his "calling", he said. Of course it was not casual conversation, rather conversation to some purpose. The Silenus-like face looked comic, indeed it is another well attested fact that if the man was devoted to one Muse more than another, it was the Muse of Comedy. But the purpose behind the mask and the comedy was serious. Socrates certainly was playful, but he was playing for keeps. For these dialogues, however simple and innocent looking, turned out to be a revolution; and of course they cost Socrates his life.

The dialogues come to us mainly through Plato. This is not the moment to go into the question of the historical accuracy of the reporting. I will leave that question out with two observations, to which I think no one in his senses could object: 1) Socrates never wrote anything (it was against his principles; hence he never could have been a member of the Literary Club); 2) Plato, one of his younger companions, dedicated a large part of his life, and all of his great talent, to reporting

Socrates as faithfully as possible.

So, what was the serious purpose? And this question I shall answer. The purpose was to awaken his fellow Athenians to the perilous state of ignorance in which they lived.

Let me give an illustration of ignorance and of Socrates at work, from the dialogue called Meno. Meno was a rich young man from the horse-country, that is, from the north Thessaly. He was, it seems, good to look at, and he travelled with a retinue. He had also gone to school to the same Gorgias, which is roughly equivalent to saying he had achieved high honors in the new learning under the tutelage of Marshall McLuhan. Meno also had a pretty good opinion of himself, and of his powerful intellect. So, he meets Socrates and (being possessed of the new learning) he charges right in. "Tell me, Socrates," he says, "is goodness teachable? Or is it not teachable, but rather a matter of habit and practice? Or, is it neither a matter of practice nor of learning, but does it come to men by nature? Or does it come some other way?"

To which Socrates replay begins in this way: "Heavens, Meno, I have long known that you Thessalians were celebrated for your wealth and your horses. But look, you are now wise too." The reply ends, however, on a different note: "But, dear fellow, you must think me a remarkable sort of man, to know whether goodness is teachable or acquired by us in some other way, when the truth is, that so far am I from knowing whether it is teachable or unteachable I really don't even know what this thing itself is - goodness, I mean."

Meno doesn't know it, but he is being given a chance of learn something; namely, that with all his fine education he doesn't know anything. Or, to put it another way, the question in this dialogue is not only, is goodness teachable, but also, is Meno teachable?

To go on, Meno is astonished at Socrates' unfamiliarity with the new learning: "Don't you really know what goodness is?" he says. Socrates

goes further: "Not only that, my friend, but it seems to me I never have met anybody else who does." "What," says Meno, falling into the trap, "have you never met Gorgias when he was in town?" "Well, yes," says Socrates. And Meno,, "Don't you think he knows?" "I can't remember very well, remind me," says Socrates. So Meno tells Socrates what goodness really is, having written it down no doubt in his notebook in the course he had from Gorgias, in the manners and customs of the ancient Greeks.

Socrates again congratulates Meno warmly on being so intelligent. However, on examination, Meno's definition proves to be not exactly bullet-proof, because, while it professes to deal with one entity, goodness, actually it makes goodness out to be a number of different and indeed contradictory things.

This turn of events distresses Meno. So Socrates encourages him to try again, and to obtain a bit more precision in definition, he asks Meno to define a number of other things: like bees, size, strength, color, shape. Meno gets very restless now, saying, "You define shape." Socrates complies. But Meno finds that he doesn't like Socrates' definition; although, he is not quick at showing what is wrong with it. After a good many attempts which fall into more and more difficulties, when Socrates urges Meno to begin all over again and say, "What you and your friend say goodness is," Meno explodes in the following remarkable way:

"Socrates, even before I met you they told me that in plain truth you are a perplexed man and reduce others to perplexity. At this moment I feel you are exercising magic and witchcraft upon me and positively laying me under your spell, until- I am just a mass of helplessness. If I may be flippant, I think that not only in outward appearance but in other respects as well you are exactly like the flat sting-ray that one meets in the sea. Whenever anyone comes into contact with it, it numbs him, and that is the sort of thing that you seem to be doing to me now. My mind and my lips are literally numb, and I have nothing to

reply to you. Yet I have spoken about goodness hundreds of times, held forth often on the subject in front of large audiences, and very well too, or so I thought. Now I can't say what it is. In my opinion you are well advised not to leave Athens and live abroad. If you behaved like this as a foreigner in another country, you would most likely be arrested as a wizard."

It is clear that Meno has lost his chance. He cannot go on, because he is unable to recognize his ignorance; just as he is unable to understand Socrates' perplexity. For how will you ever learn a thing, if you delude yourself, or are deluded by others, into thinking you already know it? How can a man in that condition ever really know what he is talking about or what he is doing?

So, Meno's case is hopeless. Certainly Socrates, whatever he tried to do with him did not teach Meno. Of course, it follows also that Gorgias didn't teach him anything either, at least nothing that stood up under examination.

Let us take another case, where the stakes are bigger. For Meno is small fry. This time, Alcibiades, the brilliant nephew of Pericles. In his young days Alcibiades had been one of those youths who were with Socrates, as the Greek has it; which is to say, who had talked with Socrates from day to day. Unlike Meno, Alcibiades had listened, and had understood, had come to know very well what Socrates was really up to. In fact, we are given to understand by Plato that Alcibiades of all that young company was the most naturally gifted for philosophy. Moreover, he had every advantage, all the "goods" in the Greek catalogue of "goods": health, beauty, wealth, birth, friends, intelligence. Success came early to him, in war, politics, horses and women. He became the darling of Athens. Then, for all his undeniable brilliance, things went wrong with him. His recklessness, his ambition and his treachery, many believed, had been a major factor in the defeat of Athens in the long war with Sparta which brought the Athenian empire to an end.

It is an old custom to hold the teacher,

like the parent, accountable for the deeds, and especially the misdeeds, of their offspring. And no doubt there is justice in it. Socrates' relation to Alcibiades was well known. Accordingly, when things went badly with Athens, there were those who, when Alcibiades was dead, pointed the finger at Socrates. It was he, they said, who had corrupted the young. And so they brought him into court.

But let us see what Alcibiades himself had had to say about this. This is reported in Plato's symposium. The scene is the house of the elegant and distinguished tragic poet Agathon, where the invited guests are celebrating Agathon's most recent success in the theatre. Best known to us among them, in addition to the host, are Socrates and his great friend, and sometime foe, the comic poet Aristophanes. There had been dinner and then talk, this time a contest of speeches on a set theme, namely the praise of love. Each man in turn round the circle had had something different to say on the subject. Aristophanes' speech is certainly the most brilliant piece of bufoonery in literature. Thus Socrates, with much banter, had been forced to listen to speeches; and then, of all things, to make a speech of his own. When he did, it turned out, of course, that nobody else really had known what he was talking about.

Then, just as Socrates finishes, Alcibiades enters from the street, on the arm of a flute girl, with a wreath on his head, already drunk, but, as he says, not so drunk that he doesn't know what he is talking about, just drunk enough to tell the embarrassing truth. He can't see very well, the wreath having slipped down over one eye. When he catches sight of Socrates he jumps up crying, "Well, I'll be damned, here you are again." And so the by-play begins in which everybody is now commanded to drink unmixed wine out of two-quart coolers.

This is part of what Alcibiades says:
"When we listen to anyone else talking, Socrates, however eloquent he is, we don't really care a damn what he says. But when we listen to you, or to someone else repeating what you've said, even if he

puts it ever so badly, and never mind whether the person who's listening is man, woman, or child, we're bewitched:...

What an extraordinary effect these words have had on me - and still do, if it comes to that. For the moment I hear Socrates speak I am smitten with a kind of sacred rage.

"Yes, I've heard Pericles and all the other great orators, and very eloquent I thought they were, but they never affected me like that; they never turned my whole soul, upside down and left me feeling as if I were the lowest of the low. But this latter-day Marsyas, here, has often left me in such a state of mind that I've felt I simply couldn't go on living the way I did - now, Socrates, you can't say that isn't true - and I'm convinced that if I were to listen to him at this very moment I'd feel just the same again. I would not be able to help it. He compells me to agree that though I am very far from perfect myself still I do not look to myself, but instead undertake to manage the affairs of the state of Athens. So I just refuse to listen to him - as if he were one of those Sirens you know - and get out of earshot, quick as I can, for fear he keep me sitting listening at his side for the rest of my life.

"And there's one thing I've never felt with anybody else - not the kind of thing you'd expect to find in me - either and that is a sense of shame. Socrates is the only man in the world that can make me feel ashamed. Because there's no getting away from it, I know I ought to do the things he tells me to, and yet the moment I'm out of his sight I don't care what I do, seduced as I am by the honors that are paid me. So I dash off like a runaway slave, and keep out of his way as long as I can, and then next time I meet him I remember all that had been agreed between us; and I am ashamed. There are times when I'd honestly be glad to hear that he was dead, and yet I know that if he did die I'd be in a worse state - so I ask you, what is a man to do?"

At the time when Alcibiades spoke, about

416 B.C., he was on top of the heap. The future, political, military, seemed to be all his. He was looked upon as the natural heir to the empire, successor to the great Pericles. But, in the event, he failed and with him, Athens. Was Socrates to blame? Not if we are to believe Alcibiades. On the contrary, he had not done what Socrates in their talks showed him, and he himself recognized, he must do. And what was that? "Look to myself." That is all, but it was too much. This much seriousness lies behind the marvellous comedy.

Did Socrates teach Alcibiades anything? The question is not an easy one: Alcibiades is not like Meno, for Alcibiades had understood and "agreed." And that is one stage in teaching. But had he learned? For Socrates, no. For, by his own admission, nothing that Alcibiades had learned had affected his life. And if Socrates was dogmatic about anything it was this: that a man who sees the truth, or even catches glimpse of it, cannot help but live by it. Alcibiades' trouble, Socrates would say, is not Socrates. It's the truth he cannot bear to look at; that is what he runs from.

Now the story of what Socrates was doing is told in Plato's Apology, in which in defense of his life Socrates tells what this life of his in the public places had been. He had come there, he says, to find wisdom, that is to find men, or even one man, he would say, who was in possession of the truth, and above all in possession of the truth about himself. In this greatest, most brilliant, most gifted, richest city in the world he found none: neither statesman, soldier, scientist, sophist, - poet, nor craftsman - nobody.

When Meno said so patronizingly, "Do you really not know what goodness is?" we remember Socrates had said rather shortly, "No, I do not and I have never met anybody who does." He was not joking. He did find men who thought they knew what the good life was, and who were indeed able to convince the people that what was best for General Motors was best for the people; or, as in the case of Pericles, free let us say of selfish or privileged interests, he found men who seemed

to believe that the goodness of a city could be measured by the number of ships in its harbors, the shining temples on its acropolis, the number of dollars in its treasury, and the flow of luxuries brought by those ships from every corner of the world for the enjoyment of the Athenian people. The trouble with all this, according to Socrates, was that none of these so-called educated men, trained in the know-hows of life, had ever given real consideration to what is best, to what is good for men in general or for themselves in particular.

So what must one do? Clearly there had to be a re-evaluation. This is what Socrates went about forcing on the attention of his fellow-citizens. And they did not like it.

Socrates moved freely, among the generals, like Pericles, as well as the privates; among the politicians, the poets, the architects as well as the shoemakers. Thus, one day, in a company made up, as it usually was, of young and old, where the conversation had turned on war, he put a question to a well-known commander, not about tactics, weapons or supply, but this: "My dear Laches, how would you describe or define bravery?" A form of virtue or goodness, as any man would agree. So Laches answered confidently, like young Meno; but, as the questions went on, it became clear that less and less was he able to talk without contradicting himself.

Now a man who contradicts himself, who says that black is white, quite literally does not know what he is talking about. But the situation Socrates found was often worse than that. If it is gently pointed out to such a man that he does contradict himself, and he does not know what you are talking about (he may of course be ill) and especially if he resorts to haranguing the audience and threatening the questioner, the situation is hopeless.

That a general should not understand what is surely a fundamental part of his business, bravery, is bad. But much worse if he is incapable of learning. And he is incapable if he insists on thinking

he knows while he does not. The pilot of a ship who thinks he knows navigation but doesn't, will, when the going gets rough, lose crew, cargo, passengers and himself. The analogy is a Socratic one, and he let it be well known that it applied to those who steered the Athenian ship of state.

So, was Socrates teaching the young subversive doctrine? He certainly upset the Athenians. It is easy to see how what we like to call now, the establishment, came to hate and fear him, and, like Alcibiades in his weaker moments, wish him dead. But what did the young hear when they sat by and listened and talked? They heard and saw that men are prone to think they know what they do not, that, therefore, they act and live like the blind; and they came to understand, that, man must fully recognize his own ignorance; that without this a man's life is not a life at all; that it is a delusion, a shadow, a dream and just as durable; that the man who does not consider what he has in his mind and his heart, in his soul, Socrates would say, very closely, endeavoring to sort out the true from the false, who does not examine his beliefs, his assumptions, his aims and ends, and examine them with utmost rigor every day of his life, is no man. In other words, the young had heard many times that famous challenge which was thrown down to the Athenians by Socrates again on the day of his trial: "the unexamined life is no life at all."

That is the subversive Socratic doctrine. Is it also teaching? We better believe it is. But it is not a course. I am quite sure no faculty and no dean would print a course in the catalogue entitled "How to realize your own ignorance" or "The examined life" MWF at 10.00. And, of course, that is what Socrates meant when he said, "I do not teach"; that, unlike his sophistic friends, he was giving out nothing you could put in the note-book, no syllabus, no text-book, no bibliography, no lectures, no techniques - only examination.

We began with a paradox and in proper Socratic fashion we end with an irony: that the man who was accused of ruining Athens was the man who in a very real sense saved -it, saved it for the

future, for mankind. His conviction that men must realize their ignorance and that his realization is the beginning of knowledge – for a man who truly realizes he does not know is necessarily a man who wants to know the truth – this took root, a very deep root: first in those young who were with him, like Plato, then in Aristotle, then in the Stoics, and on and on from then to now, and in men to whom often Socrates has been only a name. That is to say, the demand on men that their proper life is the life which is guided by reasoning, this begins with him. There have been other views of the good life, but this was his. He never pretended it was easy to be happy. But the demand for reason in our lives was put by him with such force that, however much we may try, we have never quite been able to forget it. Heaven help us if we do.

And let me quote again from that great reprobate who did try to forget, Alcibiades: "So far I've said nothing I need blush to repeat in any company, but you'd never have heard what I'm going to tell you if there wasn't something in the proverb. 'Drunkards and children tell the truth' – drunkards anyway. Besides, having once embarked on my eulogy of Socrates it wouldn't be fair not to tell you about the arrogant way he treated me. People say, you know, that when a man's been bitten by a snake he won't tell anybody what it feels like except a fellow sufferer, because no one else would sympathize with him if the pain drove him into making a fool of himself. Well, that's just how I feel, only I've been bitten by something much more poisonous than a snake; in fact, mine is the most painful kind of bite there is, I've been bitten in the heart, or the mind, or whatever you like to call it, by Socrates' philosophy, which clings like an adder to any young and gifted mind it can get hold of, and does exactly what it likes with it. And, looking round me, gentlemen, I see Phaedrus, and Agathon, and Eryximachus, and Pausanias, and Aristodemus, and Aristophanes, and all the rest of them – to say nothing of Socrates himself – and everyone of you has had his taste of this philosophical frenzy, this sacred rage; so I don't mind telling you about it because I know you'll make allowances for me."

One final look at Socrates at work, again from the Symposium. But first I must mention another of his accomplishments. Nobody ever saw Socrates drunk. He did not choose to drink, but, if forced it was well known that he could drink his companions down, onto the floor in fact. This is what happened on that great occasion. Near the end only Socrates, Agathon, the tragic poet, and Aristophanes, the comic poet, are still upright. But the latter two, as day is breaking, finally reach the floor. Here are the last words of the Symposium: "So he tucked them up, stood up and left. He went to the Lyceum, washed and spent the day as he spent every day. And when the day was done, towards evening, he went home and slept." Thus did philosophy, working night and day, prevail over poetry.

What is teaching? We asked that ridiculous question at the beginning. Then let me make this answer - an answer in negatives to be sure; but then it has never been possible to answer the hard questions, "what is God?" e.g. in any other way. It is true that what Socrates was doing is contained in no catalogue list of courses. What goes on in the courses that are listed is another matter. And I would say, if they are not grounded somehow in that Socratic realization of ignorance, then it is likely that nothing is going on in them that deserves the name of teaching. A paradox, it will be remembered, is something that sounds absurd but may be essentially true.

It is the questions and the questioning that come first, and maybe even last. There is a story, somewhere, about Gertrude Stein, no mean controversial figure in her own right. She was on her death-bed. Her friend, Alice B. Takas, I suppose, leaned over her as she was breathing her last: "Gertrude," she whispered, "what is the answer?" To which the redoubtable Miss Stein, a teacher to the last, said in a loud clear voice: "What is the question?", and thus died.

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