

# **SOCRATES IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN PSYCHOPATHOLOGY**

MORRIS J. KARPAS, M. D.



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"CONSCIOUSNESS had reached this point in Greece, when in Athens, the great forum of Socrates, in whom subjectivity of thought was brought to consciousness in a more definite and more thorough manner, now appeared. But Socrates did not grow like a mushroom out of the earth, for he extends in continuity with his time, and this is not only a most important figure in the history of philosophy—but perhaps also a world famed personage." Hegel.

"When Columbus set sail across the untraversed western sea, his purpose was to reach by a new path, a portion of the old, known world, and he lived and died in the belief that he had done so. He never knew that he had discovered a new world. So it was with Socrates. When he launched his spiritual bark upon the pathless ocean of reflected thought, his object was to discover a new way to the old world of little commonwealths and narrow interests, and he probably died thinking he had succeeded. He did not dream that he had discovered a new world—the world of humanity and universal interests. But so it was; and tho mankind are still very far from having made themselves at home in that world, and from having availed themselves of its boundless spiritual treasures, it can never be withdrawn from their sight, or, the conquest of it cease to be the object of their highest aspirations." Thomas Davidson.

## INTRODUCTION

The Hellenic influence upon the intellectual development of the world is infinite. The intellectual force emanating from the sources of Greek art, literature and philosophy permeated thru the ages and have helped to shape the destiny of our civilization. "Except the blind forces of Nature," says Sir Henry Sumner Maine, "nothing moves in this world which is not Greek in its origin." [1.] Without a shadow of doubt, Greek Philosophy forms the firm background of progressive and reflective thought in all its phases and ramifications.

In the history and evolution of Hellenic thought, we find two tendencies of inquiry,—one dealing with the objective manifestations of the universe, and the other directed towards the study of the mind. To the former class belong Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Pythagoras, and others that attempted to discover some principle for the explanation of the natural phenomena. To accomplish this end, mathematics, physics, metaphysics, etc., were resorted to. The other great epoch, which may be termed the Renaissance of Greek Philosophy, was conceived by the Supreme Greek thinker, Socrates, who forms the subject thesis of this paper.

Socrates was the father of psychology and the grandfather of modern psychopathology. He was the first one that attempted to study man from the point of view of subjectivity. In the words of Snyder, "In Socrates, the human mind burst forth into knowing itself as thinking." [2.] And Zeller very thoughtfully remarks: "The interests of philosophy being thus turned away from the outer world and directed towards man and his moral nature, and man only regarding things as true and binding of the truth of which he was convinced himself by intellectual research, there appears necessarily in Socrates a deeper importance attached to the personality of the thinker." [3.] In Phaedrus, Socrates speaks: "I am a lover of knowledge, and in the cities I can learn from men; but the fields can teach me nothing." [4.] Although Aristophanes pictures Socrates in the clouds as preaching natural philosophy, yet there is no authentic record of this.

The source of information regarding the biography of Socrates and his philosophy comes from two authors, Xenophon and Plato. The former portrays him as a moral philosopher and in his book, Memorabilia, he seems to eulogize his master. The latter however presents him as a thinker, and it is maintained by many critics that Plato put into the mouth of Socrates his own ideas. It is lamentable that this great philosopher committed nothing of his monumental work in writing.

## THE PERSONALITY OF SOCRATES

It is difficult to construct a biographic sketch of Socrates in a chronological and systematic order. He was born in the year 469 B. C. His father was Sophroniscus, a sculptor, and his mother Phaenarete, a midwife. He followed his father's vocation and it is believed that he showed poor skill in the profession. We know nothing of his early intellectual and moral development. Since he was bred in Athens, he most probably received the usual education peculiar to that age. He was a soldier and took part in military campaigns and wars. It is maintained that in military life he displayed considerable bravery, endurance and fortitude. The exact date of his appearance in public arena is difficult to ascertain, however, "in the traditions of his followers he is almost uniformly represented as an old, or as a gray-headed man." [5.]

There are distinctive traits in the personality of Socrates that are worthy of emphasis because of their dynamic import.

He was described as eccentric in his general mode of conduct. He "strutted proudly barefoot along the streets of Athens; he was careless and shabby in his dress; in his manner he was affected and haughty and was subject to ecstatic trances and visions. During these trances he would maintain a standing posture for hours, buried in his thoughts, and was quite oblivious to the external world. There was a celebrated occasion in the camp at Poteidaice, when Socrates was not quite forty; on that occasion he stood motionless from early morning on one day till sunrise on the next, right through a night when there was a very hard frost. When the sun rose he said his prayer and went about his business." [6.] It is also claimed that he would give vent to bursts of anger and fiery passion.

Ever since early boyhood Socrates is supposed to have heard an inner voice, which he called a divine sign. It came to him quite often both on important and on insignificant occasions. According to Xenophon, this voice gave him both negative and positive warnings; however, Plato holds that this voice only exercised its influence in opposing the execution of certain things. "And not only was he generally convinced" says Zeller, "that he stood and acted in the service of God, but he also held that supernatural suggestions were communicated to him, not only through the medium of public oracles, but also in dreams, and more particularly by a peculiar kind of higher inspiration which goes by the name of the Socratic daimonion." [7.]

Even by his contemporaries he was regarded as singular and eccentric and his general behavior was ever foreign to his compatriots. Indeed Lelut [(8)] boldly asserts that Socrates was "un fou." Nevertheless "attempts were not wanting to excuse him," so writes Zeller, "either on the ground of the universal superstition of his age and nation, or else of his having a physical tendency to fanaticism." [9.]

Another interesting feature in the life of Socrates is that he married late and that his matrimonial life was far from being happy, and in the words of Schwegler, "He nowhere shows much regard for his wife and children; the notorious, though altogether too much exaggerated ill-nature of Xantippe, leads us to suspect, however, that his domestic relations were not the most happy." [10.] It is also important to note that there was a turning point in the history of his life when he took up the preaching of philosophy. It must be borne in mind that he took no money for his teaching and at the same time he left his wife and children destitute. In regard to this Draper remarks, "There is surely something wrong in a man's life when the mother of his children is protesting against his conduct, and her complaints are countenanced by the community." [11.]

It is also significant that Socrates displayed a certain degree of masochism; our historians tell us that Socrates would deny himself bodily comforts and insist on enduring hardship. Xenophon in *Memorabilia* says: "But they knew that Socrates lived with the utmost contentment on very small means, that he was most abstinent from every kind of pleasure, and that he swayed those with whom he conversed just as he pleased by his arguments." [12.] Again, "Is it not the duty of every man to consider that temperance is the foundation of every virtue, and to establish the observance of it in his mind before all things? For who, without it, can either learn anything good or sufficiently practice it? Who, that is a slave to pleasure is not in an ill condition both as to his body and his mind? It appears to me, by Juno, that a free man ought to pray that he may never meet with a slave of such a character, and that he who is a slave to pleasure should pray to the gods that he may find well-disposed masters; for by such means only can a man of that sort be saved." [13.] And, "He appeared also to me, by such discourses as the

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following, to exhort his hearers to practice temperance in their desires for food, drink, sensual gratification, and sleep, and endurance of cold, heat and labor." [14.]

Although he condemned poederastia, yet he was always fond of the male sex, particularly of the young. This, however, may be explained on the ground that his object was to appeal to the young. Nevertheless, dynamic psychology demands a deeper meaning for such a motive. In this connection it would be interesting to quote Xenophon: "As to love, his counsel was to abstain rigidly from familiarity with beautiful persons; for he observed that it was not easy to be in communication with such persons, and observe continence. Hearing, on one occasion, that Critobulus, the son of Criton, had kissed the son of Alcibiades, a handsome youth, he asked Xenophon, in the presence of Critobulus, saying, "Tell me, Xenophon, did you not think that Critobulus was one of the modest rather than the forward, one of the thoughtful rather than of the thoughtless and inconsiderate?" Certainly," replied Xenophon. "You must now, then, think him extremely headstrong and daring; one who would even spring upon drawn swords, and leap into the fire." "And what," said Xenophon, "have you seen him doing, that you form this opinion of him?" "Why, has he not dared," rejoined Socrates, "to kiss the son of Alcibiades, a youth extremely handsome, and in the flower of his age?" "If such a deed," returned Xenophon, "is one of daring and peril, I think that even I could undergo such peril." "Unhappy man!" exclaimed Socrates, "and what do you think that you incur by kissing a handsome person? Do you not expect to become at once a slave instead of a freeman? To spend much money upon hurtful pleasures? To have too much occupation to attend to anything honourable and profitable? And to be compelled to pursue what not even a mad man would pursue?" "By Hercules," said Xenophon, "what extraordinary power you represent to be in a kiss!" "Do you wonder at this?" rejoined Socrates; "are you not aware that the Tarantula, an insect not as large as half an obolus, by just touching a part of the body with its mouth, wears men down with pain, and deprives them of their senses?" "Yes, indeed," said Xenophon, "but the Tarantula infuses something when it bites." "And do you not think, foolish man," rejoined Socrates, "that beautiful persons infuses something when they kiss, something which you do not see? Do you not know that the animal, which they call a handsome and beautiful object, is so much more formidable than the Tarantula, as those insects instil something when they touch, but this creature, without even touching, but if a person only looks at it, though from a very great distance, instils something of such potency, as to drive people mad? Perhaps indeed Cupids are called archers for no other reason but because the beautiful wound from a distance. But I advise you, Xenophon, whenever you see any handsome person, to flee without looking behind you; and I recommend to you, Critobulus, to absent yourself from hence for a year, for perhaps you may in that time, though hardly indeed, be cured of your wound." Thus he thought that those should act with regard to objects of love who were not secure against the attractions of such objects; objects of such a nature, that if the body did not at all desire them, the mind would not contemplate them, and which, if the body did desire them, should cause us no trouble. For himself, he was evidently so disciplined with respect to such matters, that he could more easily keep aloof from the fairest and most blooming objects than others from the most deformed and unattractive. Such was the state of his feelings in regard to eating, drinking, and amorous gratification; and he believed that he himself, with self-restraint, would have no less pleasure from them, than those who took great trouble to pursue such gratifications, and that he would suffer far less anxiety." [15.]

There is another interesting anecdote which is worthy of mention: "The Syrian soothsayer and physiognomist, Zopyrus, saw in the countenance of Socrates the imprint of strong sensuality. Loud protests were raised by the assembled disciples, but Socrates silenced them with the remark: 'Zopyrus is not mistaken; however, I have conquered those desires.'" [16.]

It is also evident that Socrates' mother must have played some role in his mental life. It should be recalled that at first he followed his father's profession, which seemingly made no impression upon him, and later he took up his new vocation, preaching philosophy, which he loved to identify with that of his mother, and indeed by reason of this the positive side of the Socratic method is known as "the art of intellectual midwifery." "Socrates compared himself," writes Schwegler, "with his mother, Phaenarete, a midwife, because his office was rather to help others bring forth thoughts than to produce them himself, and because he took upon himself to distinguish the birth of an empty thought from one rich in content." [17.]

Further evidence of the deep reverence for his mother is seen in Memorabilia where his eldest son, Lamprocles, finds fault with his mother, and Socrates, though apparently entertaining very little love for his wife, yet takes up a defensive attitude towards her and offers the following argument to his son: "Yet you are displeased



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at your mother, although you well know that whatever she says, she not only says nothing with intent to do you harm, but that she wishes you more good than any other human being. Or do you suppose that your mother meditates evil towards you?" "No indeed," said Lamprocles, "that I do not imagine." "Do you then say that this mother," rejoined Socrates, "who is so benevolent to you; who, when you are ill, takes care of you to the utmost of her power that you may recover your health, and that you may want nothing that is necessary for you, and who, besides, entreats the gods for many blessings on your head, and pays vows for you, is a harsh mother? For my part, I think that if you cannot endure such a mother, you cannot endure anything that is good." [18.]

And in *Crito*, Socrates relates a dream shortly before his death, in which his mother appeared, and to quote Plato: "Crito says, 'And what can this dream have been?' Socrates replied, 'I thought a woman came to me, tall and fair, and clothed in white, and she called me and said 'Socrates, Socrates, in three days' time you will come to the fertile land, Phthia.'" [19.]

To sum up briefly, the personality of Socrates showed some psychopathic traits. It must also be borne in mind that in that critical period, middle age, a sudden change occurred in his mental life when he suddenly commenced to exhibit profound interest in preaching philosophy. Moreover, it must be emphasized that he apparently reacted to hallucinations of an auto psychic nature. The self-asceticism, and most probably the mother-complex cannot be passed without mention. Although he presented these negative qualities, nevertheless he left a great school of philosophy, which beyond doubt is still felt in the intellectual and moral world. Despite this, Athens committed an unpardonable crime in putting Socrates to death. He, like other martyrs, shared the same fate of the mob. Lowell's verse very justly applies to Socrates:

"Truth forever on the scaffold; Wrong forever on the throne." [20.]

With this characterization of Socrates, we are now in a position to discuss that part of his philosophy which has a definite bearing on modern psychopathology. Three important phases of his philosophy come under consideration:

1. The dialectic method; 2. The conception of virtue; 3. Know thyself.

## THE DIALECTIC METHOD

In Socratic philosophy the Dialectic Method occupies a lofty position. By this method he was enabled to penetrate deeply into human nature and unfold all phases of man's experience. Aristotle characterizes this method as the induction of reasoning and the definition of general concepts. Gomperz, speaking of the great zeal that Socrates exhibited in this method, says, "to him (Socrates), a life without cross-examination, that is, without dialogues in which the intellect is exercised in the pursuit of truth, is for him not worth living." [21.] And Schwegler pertinently asserts "that through this art of midwifery the philosopher, by his assiduous questioning, by his interrogatory dissection of the notions of him with whom he might be conversing, knew how to elicit from him a thought of which he had been previously unconscious, and how to help him to the birth of a new thought." [22.]

Briefly stated, the Dialectic Method is divided into two parts, the negative and the positive. The former is known as the Socratic Irony. By this method the philosopher takes the position that he is ignorant and endeavors to show by a process of reasoning that the subject under discussion is in a state of confusion and proves to the interlocutor that his supposed knowledge is a source of inconsistencies and contradictions.

On the other hand, the positive side of the method, "the so-called obstetrics or art of intellectual midwifery" [23] leads to definite deductions. To illustrate the two phases of this method, the following example may be taken. A youth of immature self-confidence believed himself to be competent to manage the affairs of state. Socrates would then analyze the general concept of the statecraft, and reduce it to its component parts, and by continuous questions and answers would show to this supposed statesman that he was lacking true knowledge. Again, a young man of mature judgment, but of an exceedingly modest temperament, being reluctant to take part in the debates of the Assembly, Socrates would prove to him that he was fully competent to undertake such a task.

In a word, the Socratic method presents two striking tendencies; one destructive, the other constructive; the former annihilates erroneous conceptions, and the latter aids the building up of a healthy mental world, in which men may find pleasure. In a broad sense, the dialectic method bears some resemblance to the psychoanalytic, inasmuch as both seek to analyze human nature in the light of individual experience; to find the ultimate and predominating truth underlying such an experience; both attempt to make the individual realize the extent of his limitations and capacity of adjustment by subordinating the antagonistic forces and at the same time aiding the construction of a world of healthy concepts.

## SOCRATIC CONCEPTION OF VIRTUE

Before attempting to discuss the Socratic Conception of Virtue, it is important to call attention to two facts;

1st, The principles of mental life, and

2nd, The Greek conception of the state.

Roughly speaking, mental life is composed of two parts; the unconscious, or instinctive, and the conscious. In the early development of the child, mental adjustment is purely instinctive or unconscious. As the child grows older, the unconscious life becomes gradually subordinated to the conventional and cultural requirements. The influence of education, religion, morality and environment begin to exert their influence upon the child and the conscious life commences gradually to assert itself. The characteristic difference between a very young child and the conventional adult, lies in the fact that the former's behavior is not controlled by conventionalities or tenets, whereas the latter conforms with all the rules and customs of society.

The Greeks entertained a very high idea of the function of the state. It was invested with a high moral value and pedagogic aim. In fact, Plato's republic demonstrates this very well. An important point must be emphasized, that the state exercised a potent influence upon the development of the conscious life of the individual.

Now we can understand the Socratic Conception of Virtue in relation to the conscious and unconscious life. What Socrates maintained was that true virtue must depend upon knowledge; hence knowledge is the strongest power of man and cannot be controlled by passion. In short, knowledge is the root of moral action, and, on the other hand, lack of knowledge is the cause of vice. In other words, no man can voluntarily pursue evil, and to prefer evil to good would be foreign to human nature. Hence, in the Socratic sense, in the unconscious lies the root of antisocial deeds, and, as Forbes puts it: "Socratic view of sin, in fact, keeps it in a region subliminal to knowledge. The sinner is never more really than an instinctive man, an undeveloped, irrational creature; strictly speaking, not a man at all." [24.]

Since Socrates identified virtue with knowledge, and made knowledge a conscious factor in mental life, it is evident that education, environment, religion and conventionality are the determining factors in the cultivation of the conscious. "What may be called institutional virtue," writes Snyder, "is for Socrates the fundamental and all-inclusive Virtue, the ground of the other Virtues. He believes in the State, obeys the Laws, performs his duties as a citizen. This does not hinder him from seeing defects in the existent state and its Laws, and trying to remedy them. Indeed, his whole scheme of training in Virtue is to produce a man who can make good Laws, and so establish a good State. 'What is Piety?' he asks, not a blind worship of the gods, but worship of them according to their laws and customs, which one must know. That is, one must know the law of the thing, the time of mere instinctive action and obedience is past." [25.] And Zeller expresses himself in a similar manner: "Of the importance of the state and the obligations towards the same, a very high notion indeed is entertained by Socrates:—He who would live amongst men, he said, must live in a state, be a ruler or be ruled. He requires, therefore, the most unconditional obedience to the laws, to such an extent that the conception of justice is reduced to that of obedience to law, but he desires every competent man to take part in the administration of the state, the well-being of all individuals depending on the well-being of the community. These principles were really carried into practice by him throughout his life. With devoted self-sacrifice his duties as a citizen were fulfilled, even death being endured in order that he might not violate the laws. Even his philanthropic labors were regarded as the fulfillment of a duty to the state; and in Xenophon's Memorabilia we see him using every opportunity of impressing able people for political services, of deterring the incompetent, of awakening officials to their sense of their duties, and of giving them help in the administration of their offices. He himself expresses the political character of these efforts most tellingly, by including all virtues under the conception of the ruling art." [26.]

To recapitulate briefly; the Socratic conception of the unconscious conforms in many respects with our present knowledge of it, especially insofar as our psychoanalytic experience shows us conclusively what a potent factor is exercised by the unconscious in the determination of psychotic and neurotic phenomena. Indeed in the Socratic sense such manifestations are anti-social and cannot be identified with virtue, hence they are not conscious. One may say that Socrates unconsciously conceived the modern idea of the dynamics of the unconscious.



## KNOW THYSELF

The great Socratic Maxim, "Know Thyself," is one of the strongest moral precepts in Ethics. Although the sophists had already called attention to the fact that "man is the measure of all things," however they applied to the individual and not to human nature in general. "But Socrates proclaimed that this self-knowing Ego knows itself likewise as object, as the principle of the world, in which man is to find himself in order to know it." [27.]

To know one's self implies calmness of self-possession, fearlessness and independence. Furthermore it leads one to a striking realization of one's limitations and shortcomings, which form the foundations of success, and, as Forbes expresses it, "in this self-knowledge is the secret of blessing and success in the handling of human affairs, and right relationship with others." [28.]

Socrates, discussing his maxim with Euthydemus, gives a clear and comprehensive idea of this interesting subject: "Socrates then said: 'Tell me, Euthydemus, have you ever gone to Delphi?' 'Yes, twice,' replied he. 'And did you observe what is written somewhere on the temple wall, Know Thyself?' 'I did.' 'And did you take no thought of that inscription, or did you attend to it, and try to examine yourself to ascertain what sort of a character you are?' 'I did not indeed try, for I thought that I knew very well already, since I should hardly know anything else if I did not know myself.' 'But whether does he seem to you to know himself, who knows his own name merely, or he who (like people buying horses, who do not think that they know the horse that they want to know, until they have ascertained whether he is tractable or unruly, whether he is strong or weak, swift or slow, and how he is as to other points which are serviceable or disadvantageous in the use of a horse so he), having ascertained with regard to himself how he is adapted for the service of mankind, knows his own abilities?' 'It appears to me, I must confess, that he who does not know his own abilities, does not know himself.'

"'But is it not evident,' said Socrates, 'that men enjoy a great number of blessings in consequence of knowing themselves, and incur a great number of evils, through being deceived in themselves? For they who know themselves know what is suitable for them, and distinguish between what they can do and what they cannot; and, by doing what they know how to do, procure for themselves what they need, and are prosperous, and by abstaining from what they do not know, live blamelessly, and avoid being unfortunate. By this knowledge of themselves too, they can form an opinion of other men, and, by their experiences of the rest of mankind, obtain for themselves what is good, and guard against what is evil.'

"'But they who do not know themselves, but are deceived in their own powers, are in similar case with regard to other men, and other human affairs, and neither understand what they require, nor what they are doing, nor the character of those with whom they connect themselves, but, being in error as to all these particulars, they fail to obtain what is good, and fall into evil.

"'They, on the other hand who understand what they take in hand, succeed in what they attempt, and become esteemed and honoured; those who resemble them in character willingly form connections with them; those who are unsuccessful in their affairs desire to be assisted with their advice, and to prefer them to themselves; they place in them their hopes of good and love them, on all these accounts, beyond all other men.

"'But those, again, who do not know what they are doing, who make an unhappy choice in life, and are unsuccessful in what they attempt, not only incur losses and sufferings in their own affairs, but become in consequence, disreputable and ridiculous, and drag out their lives in contempt and dishonour. Among states, too, you see that such as, from ignorance of their own strength, go to war with others that are more powerful, are, some of them, utterly overthrown, and others reduced from freedom to slavery.'" [29.]

What Socrates attempts to show, is that self-knowledge is conducive to human happiness. Indeed, sanity in a broad sense, depends upon insight into one's true knowledge of his limitation and capacity for adaptation. However, Socrates holds that madness is not ignorance, but admits that for "A man to be ignorant of himself, and to fancy and believe that he knew what he did not know, he considered to be something closely bordering on madness. The multitude, he observed, do not say that those are mad who make mistakes in matters of which most people are ignorant, but call those only mad who make mistakes in affairs with which most people are acquainted; for if a man should think himself so tall as to stoop when going through the gates in the city wall, or so strong as to try to lift up houses, or attempt anything else that is plainly impossible to all men, they say that he is mad; but

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those who make mistakes in small matters are not thought by the multitude to be mad; but just as they call 'strong desire' 'love,' so they call 'great disorder of intellect' 'madness.' "[30.]

This Socratic principle plays an important role in psychopathology; in psychoanalysis, what the physician does is to acquaint the patient with the unconscious mental processes, thus putting him in full knowledge of his condition to enable him to adjust himself to his environment. In mental diseases the prognosis of a psychosis is not looked upon so gravely when the patient has some realization of his situation, and likewise the recovery from a mental infirmity is more hopeful when the patient exhibits considerable insight into his condition. It is a well known fact that in a malignant psychosis, self-knowledge does not exist, and this in part is responsible for its malignancy. On the other hand the benignant nature of a psychoneurosis may be in part attributed to the patient's appreciation of his affliction.

However, the Socratic maxim has another moral and social value, that is, by only knowing one's self can one understand his fellowmen. Indeed, Plato makes Socrates say, in *Phaedrus*, that it is ridiculous to trouble one's self about other things when one is still ignorant of one's self. It is well known to every psychoanalyst that a patient cannot be analyzed by the physician unless the latter has conquered his own resistances and adjusted his complexes. The Immortal Poet, Shakespeare, truly says:

"This above all—to shine own self be true  
And it must follow as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man. " *Hamlet Act I, III.*

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