

THE APOLOGY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DYNAMICS OF THE MORAL LIFE

Kevin E. O'Reilly

Faculty of Philosophy, Milltown Institute, Dublin

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ผู้เขียนนำเสนอให้ไตร่ตรองแนวคิดสี่อย่างซึ่งดูเหมือนว่าสนับสนุนแนวทางหลักของศีลธรรมของโสเครติส ดังที่ปรากฏให้เห็นต่างๆ ในบริบทของการพิจารณาคดีของเขา: 1) ธรรมชาตินิยมเชิงจริยะ 2) ชีวิตทางศีลธรรมในฐานะที่ตอบสนองต่อเสียงเรียกของพระเจ้า 3) บริบททางสังคมของชีวิตทางศีลธรรม 4) บทบาทของการคิดแบบมีวิจารณญาณในชีวิตทางศีลธรรม แนวทางเหล่านี้ได้รับการพัฒนาขึ้นมาในยุคของพวกเขาโสเฟิสต์ ซึ่งสนับสนุนศีลธรรมแบบสัมพัทธนิยมและปฏิเสธมาตรฐานของศีลธรรมแบบสัมบูรณ์นิยม และแนวคิดแบบวิมุตินิยมของพวกเขานำไปสู่ทัศนคติแบบอเทวนิยม ในทางตรงข้าม โสเครติสตระหนักในความสำคัญของบริษัททางสังคมในการเผยแสดงชีวิตทางศีลธรรม เขามุ่งมั่นในการแสวงหาคำตอบอย่างไม่ลดละ และในที่สุดเขาก็ได้เปิดรับการกระทำของภาวะเหนือธรรมชาติในชีวิตของเขา

Abstract

In this article I propose to reflect upon four themes that seemingly underpinned Socrates moral enterprise as adumbrated in the context of his trial: (1) ethical naturalism; (2) the moral life as a response to a divine call; (3) the social context of the moral life; and (4) the role of critical thinking in the moral life. This was developed at the time of the Sophists who espoused moral relativism, denying any basis for absolute moral standards. And their scepticism led them to adopt an atheistic attitude. Socrates, in contrast, recognized the importance of a societal context for the unfold-

ing of the moral life. He engaged in a relentless pursuit of the good. And, finally, he was open to the operation of transcendence in his life.

While there are various interpretations concerning what constituted the exact moral teaching of Socrates,¹ there can be little doubt that the *Apology* is a faithful account of his trial for, as Hugh Tredennick points out, “however much its form owes to Plato’s artistry; it would have been stupid to misrepresent the facts which were familiar to a great part of the Athenian people”.² Even the most cursory reading of *The Apology*, reveals that Socrates believes that moral goodness is the one thing that matters. Indeed, the *Apology* typifies Socrates’ abiding interest in ethical enquiry, an interest that far outweighs his concern with natural philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, or any other branch of investigation that falls outside of the domain of moral philosophy. If we accept the veracity of the *Apology*’s account of Socrates’ mission and trial, we can perhaps argue that the various seminal ideas that are placed before us in it furnish the origins of Western moral philosophy.

In this article I propose to reflect upon four themes that seemingly underpinned his moral enterprise as adumbrated in the context of his trial: (1) ethical naturalism; (2) the moral life as a response to a divine call; (3) the social context of the moral life; and (4) the role of critical thinking in the moral life. The *Apology* does not, of course, offer a systematic treatment of any of these issues; their status there can be described rather as being somewhat embryonic. It fell to the lot of the subsequent Western moral tradition to develop these seminal notions. What the following reflections offer therefore is an attempt to unpack the significance of Socrates’ deliberations in the *Apology* with the support both of contemporary scholarship and speculation on the issues broached by Socrates.

Ethical Naturalism

There are two distinct groups of accusers whom Socrates has to confront in his defence: one group comprises his immediate adversaries in court; the other is a more diffuse group and much more difficult to deal

with. The latter group is made up of the great many people who for many years have propagated false rumours about Socrates. He begins his treatment of their accusations by summarizing their substance: “There is a wise man called Socrates who has theories about the heavens and has investigated everything below the earth, and can make the weaker argument defeat the stronger”.³ Indeed, this misrepresentation had formed the basis of a caricature of him in a play by Aristophanes in his play, the *Clouds*, produced in 423.⁴ In the popular depiction of him Socrates went around, as he says, “proclaiming that he is walking on air, and uttering a great deal of other nonsense about things of which I know nothing whatsoever”.⁵ Socrates simply asks those present to tell one another if they have ever heard him discuss such things. In this way they will realize that there is absolutely no foundation to these or to other reports about him.

Not only are the foregoing accusations false, Socrates maintains that he never tried to educate people and to charge a fee. In this way he once again distances himself from the sophists who charged for the “instruction” which they imparted. Socrates cites a conversation with Callias the son of Hipponicus who had paid more in sophists fees than everybody else whom Socrates knew put together. This conversation offers us an avenue into one strand of the tradition of ethics which was to develop in Western civilization. Socrates says to Callias:

[I]f your sons had been colts or calves, we should have had no difficulty in finding and engaging a trainer to perfect their natural qualities; and this trainer would have been some sort of horse-dealer or agriculturalist. But seeing that they are human beings, whom do you intend to get as their instructor? Who is the expert in perfecting the human and social qualities? I assume from the fact of your having sons that you must have considered the question. Is there such a person or not?⁶

The foregoing quotation constitutes in my opinion a rudimentary statement of what contemporary authors call *ethical naturalism*. This concept is strictly speaking one that belongs to the Aristotelian tradition of moral philosophy, but it seems to have been prefigured in Socrates. This is

only to be expected, for just as Plato knew Socrates and acted as his mouthpiece, so too Aristotle himself was a pupil of Plato. Although Aristotle's philosophy is opposed to that of Plato in many ways, there are some elements of continuity. There are some ideas which he did not reject, but which he rather developed and integrated into his own system. Ethical naturalism, I suggest, is one such idea. Perhaps it would be useful at this point to explain more fully what exactly ethical naturalism is. As I indicated at the outset, I will do so in the light of contemporary philosophical discourse.

After many centuries during which virtue ethics disappeared from the domain of moral theorizing, Elizabeth Anscombe wrote an important and influential paper, entitled "Modern Moral Philosophy", which proved to be a catalyst in its revival. A central concept in virtue ethics is that of ethical naturalism. Subsequent authors have elucidated this concept and it is my intention to draw upon two of them at this point in order to elucidate and elaborate on Socrates' statement.

Philippa Foot begins her reflections on ethical naturalism with a linguistic consideration. The word "good", like "small" is an attributive adjective. Consequently, although we are free to evaluate and choose things according to almost any criteria we wish, when giving linguistic expression to our evaluation or choice we must choose our words carefully for they determine the criteria of goodness that are appropriate. Thus, although I can deem a particular dead cactus to be good because I think that it would constitute a wonderfully decorative addition to my mother's windowsill, what I cannot do is describe it as being a good cactus because a cactus is a living thing. On this basis Foot, following Anscombe, argues that this grammatical feature of the word "good" and its related terms do not suddenly undergo a mysterious change when employed in ethical discourse. In fact, as Rosalind Hursthouse states: "What goes for "good cactus", "good knife", "good rider", also goes for "good human being" even when we use that phrase in ethics".⁷ These authors are in opposition to the fact-value distinction common in analytic philosophy in particular and the corresponding idea that the word "good" is purely descriptive in non-ethical contexts but somehow becomes an evaluative term in ethical ones.

The contention is that just as words such as "good", "well", "de-

fective”, and so on can be used in relation to plants and to non-human animals, so too they can be employed in evaluating the behaviour of members of the human species. Foot’s idea is that just as “there is something wrong with a free-riding wolf, who eats but does not take part in the hunt and with a member of the species of dancing bees who finds a source of nectar but does not let other bees know where it is”, so too there is something wrong with a human being who does not possess and practise the virtues of charity and justice.⁸ She concludes her deliberations as follows:

In my view . . . a moral evaluation does not stand over against the statement of a matter of fact, but rather has to do with facts about a particular subject matter, as do evaluations of such things as sight and hearing in animals, and other aspects of their behaviour. Nobody would, I think, take it as other than a plain matter of fact that there is something wrong with the hearing of a gull that cannot distinguish the cry of its own chick, as with the sight of an owl that cannot see in the dark. Similarly, it is obvious that there are objective, factual evaluations of such things as human sight, hearing, memory, and concentration, based on the life-form of our own species. Why, then, does it seem so monstrous a suggestion that the evaluation of the human will should be determined by facts about the nature of human beings and the life of our own species? Undoubtedly the resistance has something to do with the thought that the goodness of good action has a special relation to choice. But . . . this special relation is not what noncognitivists think it, but rather lies in the fact that moral action is rational action, and in the fact that human beings are creatures with the power to recognize reasons for action and to act on them.⁹

It is precisely the notion that we can evaluate the goodness or badness of human beings on the basis of the extent which they live up to the demands which issue from the form of the human species that informs Socrates’ comment quoted above. He takes colts or calves as an analogy

in order to illustrate his point: “[I]f your sons had been colts or calves, we should have had no difficulty in finding and engaging a trainer to perfect their natural qualities; and this trainer would have been some sort of horse-dealer or agriculturalist. But seeing that they are human beings, whom do you intend to get as their instructor?” Just as we can avail of the services of experts who are able to bring out the best in these animals, that is to say, to perfect their characteristic qualities, can we not also say that there are presumably people who are expert in matters concerning human nature and human conduct. If there are, who are these people? Comically, Callias thinks that a sophist called Evenus of Paros is to be numbered among one of these experts, while Socrates denies that he possesses any such knowledge! Surely a case of turning reality on its head.

If there are experts in human nature, presumably they will have reflected at length on human nature and discerned the kinds of things that conduce in general to its flourishing and the kinds of things that undermine its well-being. Such experts will no doubt be keenly aware of a fact that will be discussed further on in this article, namely that the flourishing of individuals depends on the flourishing of society – as well as *vice versa*. In other words, the notion of ethical naturalism possesses a political significance, a point concerning which Socrates is acutely conscious.

Socrates’ Activity: a Response to a Divine Call

The question arises in the course of the trial as to how Socrates has acquired the reputation that has finally brought him to face charges in the Athenian court. He offers this answer: “I have gained this reputation, gentlemen, from nothing more or less than a kind of wisdom”.¹⁰ He explains what he means. A friend of his, Chaerephon, went to Delphi and asked whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. The priestess replied that there was no one. Socrates was perplexed by this response, for he did not lay claim to any wisdom, great or small, so he eventually decided to check its truth. He therefore went to examine a person – a politician, to be more precise – who had a great reputation for being wise. During the course of the examination it became abundantly clear that the politician only thought he was wise, but was in fact not really so. As a

result of being exposed, the politician and the many other people present resented Socrates' questioning. This experience led Socrates to the following conclusion:

Well, I am certainly wiser than this man. It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of; but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate it seems that I am wiser to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.¹¹

In an effort to check the truth of the oracle, Socrates went to question someone else with an even greater reputation for wisdom, but the result was the same. Indeed, compelled by a sense of religious duty, he interviewed person after person. When he had finished with the politicians, he turned to the poets, dramatists and lyricists, in the belief that he would eventually expose himself as "a comparative ignoramus".¹² Finally Socrates turned to the skilled craftsmen, but once again he met disappointment. The effect of Socrates' activity was to arouse a huge amount of hostility towards him. Moreover, whenever he disproved an interlocutor's claim to wisdom in a particular subject, everybody assumed that he knew everything about the subject himself, something which definitely was not the case. All that Socrates claimed was that in respect of wisdom he was *worthless*.¹³ True wisdom in fact belongs to God alone:

But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this: that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless.¹⁴

It is clear that Socrates' activity was inspired by some kind of experience of the divine.¹⁵ Whatever the precise nature of that experi-

ence may have been,¹⁶ it compelled him to become obsessed with a search for wisdom. Indeed, this search was not something he could choose either to engage in or not to engage in, like one might choose to watch a match on television rather than listen to a CD. Rather, this search was a matter of conscience for him; it was imbued with a moral tenor. Not to question people would have constituted moral failure on his part. Consequently, in spite of the increasing unpopularity which it brought on him, Socrates was compelled to continue interviewing people, one after another, and to show up their ignorance.

We can see, moreover, that the moral imperative which fuelled Socrates' activity was not of mere human origin. Its source was rather divine. We can assert of Socrates what Eric Voegelin states concerning Plato, Socrates mouthpiece: he "was engaged concretely in an exploration of the human soul, and the true order of the soul turned out to be dependent on philosophy in the strict sense of the love of the divine *sophon*".¹⁷ Further on Voegelin, when adumbrating the significance of this experience, posits that "The true order of the soul can become the standard for measuring both human types and types of social order because it represents the truth about human existence on the border of transcendence". And again, he avers:

[N]ot the arbitrary idea of man as a world-immanent being becomes the instrument of social critique but the idea of a man who has found his true measure through finding his true relation to God. The new measure that is found for the critique of society is, indeed, not man himself but man in so far as through the differentiation of his psyche he has become the representative of divine truth.¹⁸

It becomes clear that considerations of truth in the realm of human affairs, moral and political, cannot be dissociated from relationship to God. In the experience of Socrates as recounted in *The Apology* we witness the beginning of a realization of this fact. Here we witness one who has opened his psyche to the truth of God and allowed himself to be measured by it. Having been informed by the unseen measure of the divine being he can then become a true living measure of human affairs, as wit-

nessed by his questioning of all whom he meets who have pretensions to wisdom: “That is why I still go about seeking and searching in obedience to the divine command, if I think that anyone is wise, whether citizen or stranger; and when I think that any person is not wise, I try to help the cause of God by proving that he is not”.¹⁹ To Socrates we can apply Voegelin’s assessment of Plato and Aristotle: “The validity of the standards developed by Plato and Aristotle depends on the conception of a man who can be the measure of society because God is the measure of his soul”.²⁰

Various scholars question exact nature of Socrates’ experience. They argue that it was merely his way of expressing his deep-seated conviction that his life of philosophising was something laid upon him by his conscience. This may indeed be so, but the point still remains that conscience and experience of the divine are intimately linked. Conscience might be compared to a sensorium of transcendence. The documents of Vatican II capture the essence of conscience wonderfully when they describe it as man’s inner sanctuary where he is alone with God. Let me quote a little from *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World):

Deep within their consciences men and women discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves and which they must obey. Its voice, ever calling them to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells them inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For they have in their hearts a law inscribed by God. Their dignity rests in observing this law, and by it they will be judged. Their conscience is people’s most secret core, and their sanctuary. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths.²¹

To speak of Socrates’ conviction concerning an experience of the divine as being merely a metaphor is inaccurate. Socrates was arguably aware that conscience is man’s most secret core where the divine communes with him. Indeed the more conscience develops the greater one’s consciousness of the divine presence there. The two realities cannot be

separated; or more precisely, when they are severed from one another, the ethical consequences are catastrophic. For Socrates the experience of conscience was incessant, touching even the minutia of life: “In the past the prophetic voice to which I have become accustomed has always been my constant companion, opposing me even in quite trivial things if I was going to take the wrong course”.²²

It is clear, in the Socratic conception, philosophy is not simply about developing the capacity to formulate good arguments and to think critically – although these capacities are certainly crucially integral to the philosophical enterprise; it is more fundamentally concerned with living a good life. The truly philosophical life is shot through with moral consciousness – which as we have argued is grounded in an experience of the divine. (Indeed, attempts at formulating good arguments and at critical thinking are themselves moral activities, as we shall see presently.)

For Socrates living the good life obviously entails prompting others to do the same. He compares himself to a gadfly/stinging fly which stimulates a large thoroughbred horse to activity; in the same way he awakens people from their moral slumber. This view of the moral responsibilities of the philosopher are of particular interest in an age such as our own which has suffered a severe dimming of moral consciousness. The philosopher has a duty to enter the realm of public debate in an attempt to stimulate right moral thinking and action in others, taking the risk of having to endure public opprobrium and material poverty as a result - as was the lot of Socrates. He never let a day pass without discussing goodness and examining both himself and others. He regarded this as “really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living”.²³ Socrates studiously avoided wrongdoing. Proof positive of this contention is the fact that none of those whom he is supposed to have harmed have come forward to accuse him; neither have any of their families. To suffer an injury is better than to commit one, for wrongdoing harms the soul.

Socrates and the Social Context of the Moral Life

In beginning his defence against his first group of accusers,

Socrates restates the accusation levelled against him: “Socrates is guilty of corrupting the minds of the young, and of believing in deities of his own invention instead of the gods recognized by the state”.²⁴ Socrates now takes up the first part of this charge with gusto and subjects it to keen critical appraisal.

Our philosopher asks his interlocutor who it is that makes the young good, to which Meletus replies, “The laws”.²⁵ This answer does not satisfy Socrates. He is interested in knowing *who* makes the young good. In other words, whose business is it to know the laws and then to communicate this knowledge to the young? Meletus responds that that this responsibility in fact falls to the members of the jury, *all* or them. On questioning, Meletus extends the sphere of influence to the spectators present in court and to members of the Council and of the Assembly. So, as Socrates points out, it follows from Meletus’ contention that Socrates is the only person in Athens who exercises a negative influence on young people!

At this point the kind of ethical naturalism which we have already noted makes a return:

Take the case of horses. Do you believe that those who improve them make up the whole of mankind, and that there is only one person who has a bad effect on them? Or is the truth just the opposite, that the ability to improve belongs to one person or to very few persons, who are horse-trainers, whereas most people, if they have to do with horses and make use of them, do them harm? Is this not the case, Meletus, both with horses and with all other animals? Of course it is, whether you and Anytus deny it or not”.²⁶

Socrates’ point is that the reality is in fact diametrically opposed to what Meletus has maintained. Just as there are very few people who are skilled in the training of horses, of bringing out the very best in them, because they are intimately acquainted with equine nature and what the best conditions are for the flourishing of this nature, so too there are very few people who have reflected deeply about human nature and, being

intimately acquainted with this nature, are capable of cultivating it and bringing it to its optimum fulfilment in individual human beings. Consequently, states Socrates: “It would be a singular dispensation of fortune for our young people if there is only one person who corrupts them, while all the rest have a beneficial effect”.²⁷

Continuing his critique of Meletus’ claim, Socrates points out that if he spoils the character of someone else he runs the risk of being harmed by him. Someone who is bad is no great respecter of personages. Now nobody in their right mind would run this risk, so if Socrates does spoil the characters of his companions, it must be unintentional. So he either does not have a bad effect on others or this bad effect unintentional. In either case, he should not have been brought before the court. If he did have an unintentionally negative influence on the youth of Athens, somebody ought to have taken him aside and enlightened him as to the errors of his activity. This, however, did not happen.

Implicit in the foregoing argument is a recognition of the social context of the moral life. We are brought up in a society in which moral values or disvalues are transmitted to us all. The society in which we live makes an important contribution to our moral formation. None of us can in fact stand outside of a social context. At least there is one important sense in which we cannot do so. I have been born into a particular family and brought up in a particular way, according to certain values or lack thereof. I have been schooled in the education system of a particular society, perhaps in a school run by a particular part of that society. I am subjected to the values of the press and even more so to those of television. And so on. Now each of these sources of influence may be at cross-purposes with one or other, or some or all of the rest. Nevertheless, in my own person they have some influence in the formation of my value system, which is unlikely to be completely coherent. (Hence the need for constant critical evaluation.) The point is that various societal influences condition my sense of right and wrong. W. Jay Wood makes this point in the following way:

[W]e are not alone in our efforts to become morally and intellectually virtuous persons; our careers as moral and intellectual agents are developed in a community con-

text [. . .] Family, friends and social institutions such as the church contribute mightily toward shaping the framework within which our development takes place. What goals are worth pursuing, what goals should be subordinated to others, what practices ought to be avoided and which pursued, and what resources are available to assist us in moral and intellectual growth are matters shaped in large measure within families, churches, schools and other social frameworks.²⁸

Unfortunately, however, what societal consensus teaches us to be right and wrong may not in particular cases be in accord with objective reality. This kind of teaching was the object of Socrates' own critique. He posits that the best defence against being infected by the mistaken tenets of an official morality is furnished by a life of virtue. After showing up the incoherence of Meletus' charge concerning belief in deities, Socrates proclaims: "You are mistaken, my friend, if you think that a man who is worth anything ought to spend his time weighing up the prospects of life and death. He has only one thing to consider in performing any action – that is, whether he is acting rightly or wrongly, like a good man or a bad one".²⁹ The rightness or wrongness of an action is never and can never be determined by pragmatic considerations. Just because prevailing public opinion says that something is right does not necessarily mean that it is in fact so. As a cursory knowledge of world history teaches us, whole societies can get things badly wrong. Upright conscience – which is a conscience informed by the demands of objective reality and sustained by a life of virtue, and not simply constituted by some kind of subjective feeling – offers the only way of escape from the barbarity that can ensue. Werner Jaeger offers a succinct characterization of Socrates' life and mission which accords with our own understanding of the same: "In the *Apology* Socrates' influence and the way he taught his fellow-citizens to approach true aret? are related to "the polis itself". That stamps his mission as a political one".³⁰ Indeed, what Socrates has to say in this dialogue reveals that education in aret? is a political task. In other words it is a task towards which society cannot remain indifferent without undermining its very own well-being.

Critical Thinking and Virtue

In *The Apology* we learn that the examined life was important for Socrates. He consequently subjected his own beliefs and those of others, moral and otherwise, to constant examination. In this final part of my treatment of the relevance of *The Apology* for an understanding of the moral life, I wish to look at intellectual virtue.

We are all familiar with moral virtues such as compassion, self-control, generosity, kindness, gentleness, courage, patience, and so on. These virtues contribute in large measure to the kind of persons we are. But there are also intellectual virtues. This term is a little unfortunate, as it might suggest that they are not also informed by a profound moral dynamic. Their moral import cannot in fact be overstated.

What are the intellectual virtues? Well, they include wisdom, prudence, foresight, studiousness, discernment, truthfulness, and so on. The opposite of intellectual virtues, namely intellectual vices, include the following: dishonesty, uncritical acceptance of others' opinions, gullibility, folly, and so on. The intellectual virtues are crucial to our functioning as intellectual and moral agents. For our ability to grasp the truth depends on much more than our IQ or on the kind of education we receive. More fundamentally, this ability rests on whether or not we have cultivated virtuous habits of the mind. In the words of W. Jay Wood: "Our careers as cognitive agents, as persons concerned to lay hold of the truth and pursue other important intellectual goals, will in large measure succeed or fail as we cultivate our intellectual lives".³¹

Viewing the intellectual virtues as important to the unfolding of the life of mind formed an integral part of the ancient and medieval traditions of philosophy.³² The intellectual virtues are central to our integrity as human beings: on them depend our ability to grasp truth, as already stated; on them also depends the kind of persons we become: truthful, critical, attentive to detail, aware of nuances, and so on; or dishonest, uncritical, fuzzy, forcing reality into black and white categories, and so on. What distinguishes us from even the highest of the other animals is our rationality. To be good beings of our kind, therefore, that is to say, good human beings, requires that we function well as rational agents. Whether or not we do so will have a fundamentally determining effect on the moral vir-

tues, for their unfolding and right development depends to a large extent, for adults, on an attitude of critical reflection – precisely the kind of reflection that Socrates was concerned to cultivate.

In the *Apology* we witness the intertwining of a cultivation of intellectual virtue and moral virtue, pursuit of truth and pursuit of goodness. Socrates adopts a critical stance toward the accepted norms of behaviour and common opinions of his day, norms and opinions based on the sophistical desire for power, pleasure and success. He subjects to close examination the opinions of those who subscribe to life lived in this way. Socrates' approach is dialogical, that is to say, it is based on dialogue with others in a genuine search, at least on his part, for truth – that truth which pertains to human nature and upon which are predicated the conditions for true human flourishing.³³

Conclusion

In the course of our deliberations concerning the *Apology* we have attempted to unpack some of the philosophical riches virtually contained in Socrates' discussion of his mission. The ethical notions that he highlights cannot in reality be disentangled from each other, a fact to which the overlapping between the various sections of this article bears witness. Not only is the moral life itself a dynamic affair, there also obtains a dynamic inter-involvement between its various constitutive parts. Thus, for example, there is the question of a correct understanding of human nature and the education of young people based upon this understanding, which education clearly has implications for the wider society. Clearly, moreover, a sense of the divine, as manifested through moral consciousness, is an indispensable condition for the unfolding of the moral life – one of the defining characteristics of human beings and clearly the one with which Socrates is obsessed. This unfolding, however, cannot take place without the exercise of critical reason which, in the case of Socrates, receives its initial and ongoing stimulus from his experience of the divine. The significance of this exercise of critical reason – and, by extension, an opening of the human psyche to the transcendent source of moral experience – for equipping anyone to be a suitable mentor for the young is apparent. Their

importance for the well-being of society at large follows from this fact.

Interestingly, it was at a time when Athenian society had fallen under the sway of the teaching of the Sophists – in spite of the fact that the Sophists had at the same time become unpopular - that Socrates enunciated his teaching.³⁴ It was arguably the experience of not being able to “find his way around” in this “world” that forced Socrates to embark upon his philosophical crusade, a crusade which was inescapably moral in tenor.³⁵ The Sophists espoused an individualist doctrine, summed up in Protagoras’ famous assertion that man is the measure of things. They espoused moral relativism, denying any basis for absolute moral standards. And their scepticism led them to adopt an atheistic attitude.³⁶ Socrates, in contrast, recognized the importance of a societal context for the unfolding of the moral life. He engaged in a relentless pursuit of the good. And, finally, he was open to the operation of transcendence in his life.

Although I do not wish to make any sweeping generalizations, it cannot be denied that the three characteristics of the sophist movement mentioned here have gained greater prominence once again in the wake of the Enlightenment project, particularly in the postmodern era. Perhaps this fact alone provides sufficient reason for bringing both the teaching and the existential attitudes of Socrates into dialogue with our own age. Perhaps the initiation of such dialogue will fall to the lot of those who find difficulty “finding their way around” in contemporary civilization.

Endnotes

¹Frederick Copleston, S.J., summarizes these interpretations as follows: “The character of the sources at our disposal - Xenophon’s Socratic works (*Memorabilia and Symposium*), Plato’s dialogues, various statements of Aristotle, Aristophanes’ *Clouds* - make this a difficult problem. For instance, were one to rely on Xenophon alone, one would have the impression of a man whose chief interest was to make good men and citizens, but who did not concern himself with problems of logic and metaphysics - a popular ethical teacher. If, on the other hand, one were to found one’s conception of Socrates on the Platonic dialogues taken as a whole, one would receive the impression of a metaphysician of the highest order, a man who did not content himself with questions of daily conduct, but laid the foundations of a transcendental philosophy, distinguished by its doctrine of a metaphysical world of Forms. Statements of Aristotle, on the other hand (if give their natural

interpretation), give us to understand that while Socrates was not uninterested in theory, he did not himself teach the doctrine of subsistent Forms or Ideas, which is characteristic of Platonism” (*A History of Philosophy, vol. I, Greece and Rome* (Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1944), p.99.

²*The Last Days of Socrates* (London: Penguin, 1988), p.12.

³*Apol.* 18b. Hereafter, the edition referred to is *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

⁴Aristophanes represents Socrates as a Sophist of the worst possible type - a quack scientist and a rhetorician with no religion or morals. Aristophanes probably meant no harm, for the two men are quite friendly in another of Plato’s works, the *Symposium*. The play nevertheless probably did Socrates great personal harm.

⁵*Apol.* 19c.

⁶*Apol.* 20a-b.

⁷Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p.195.

⁸Philippa Foot, “Does moral subjectivism rest on a mistake?”, *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 15 (1995): 1-14.

⁹*Ibid.*, p.14.

¹⁰*Apol.* 20d.

¹¹*Apol.* 21d.

¹²*Apol.* 22b.

¹³This claim constitutes Socrates’ interpretation of the riddle posed by the Delphic oracle. Clearly, it could not be lying and yet it obviously could not be taken literally. Socrates therefore concludes that the god took advantage of Chaerephon’s question to emphasize that human wisdom is not worth anything. As Guthrie states: “He simply took Socrates as an example and used his name in order to say that the wisest thing a man could do was to be aware of his own unwisdom” (W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. III, *The Fifth Century Enlightenment* (Cambridge: CUP, 1969), p.408).

¹⁴*Apol.* 23a-b.

¹⁵See, however, Gerald M. Mara, *Socrates Discursive Democracy: Logos and Ergon in Platonic Political Philosophy* (NY: SUNY, 1997), p.47: “Chaerephon must have been motivated to ask the oracle about Socrates by what he had seen in Socrates’ “pre-Delphic” conduct ... According to this view, then, Socrates’ confrontations with the politicians, the poets, and the handworkers stem less from a dramatic metamorphosis than from a continuing identity”. No doubt Mara is correct in maintaining a continuing identity in Socrates’ behaviour; nevertheless, I think that one can at the same time posit discontinuity, a discontinuity that has its source in the oracle experience. Clearly, the post-Delphic Socrates is motivated by some kind of experience of the divine in a way that was lacking in the pre-Delphic Socrates. Thus, we can say that the post-Delphic Socrates is characterized by elements of continuity and discontinuity, sameness and difference.

¹⁶See Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, p.404: “The exact nature of the ‘divine sign’ may be left to students of psychology or religious experience. At this distance of time, and on the evidence available, it probably cannot be decided with certainty”.

¹⁷Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.63.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 67-68.

¹⁹*Apol.* 23b.

²⁰Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, p.70.

²¹GS 16.

²²*Apol.* 40a.

²³*Apol.* 38a.

²⁴*Apol.* 24b.

²⁵*Apol.* 24d.

²⁶*Apol.* 25a-b.

²⁷*Apol.* 25b.

²⁸W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), p.20.

²⁹*Apol.* 28b.

³⁰Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture. Vol. II: In Search of the Divine Centre*, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: OUP, 1986), p.95.

³¹Wood, *Epistemology*, p.16.

³²Thomas Aquinas tells us that while moral virtue “can be without some of the intellectual virtues, viz., wisdom, science, and art”, it cannot be without understanding and prudence (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, 58, 4).

³³See, for example, Wood, *Epistemology*, pp.54-56.

³⁴One must of course avoid falling into a simplistic description of the sophist movement, which was in reality quite complex, and its influence on Greek society. A superficial reading of Plato might give the impression that the Sophists were responsible for corrupting public morality. The reasons for the decline in public morality in fifth-century Greece, if such there was, were however probably much more involved than what one might conclude from a simplistic reading of Plato.

³⁵The notions of “finding one’s way around” and “world” are drawn from Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

³⁶These three traits are not meant to offer an exhaustive depiction of the Sophists. They simply provide points of clear contrast with Socrates’ teaching and attitudes.