

THE GADFLY

PAUL FARRELL, O.P.



FOOD is to a baby, so are sources to an historian; too few, and he starves; too many, and he develops colic or indigestion. Although the historian must rest content with a meager diet of documents concerned with the first Greek Philosophers, such is not the case when Socrates becomes the subject. About him there is an abundance of material; perhaps even too much for historical purposes, particularly when the testimony of different contemporaries is not in agreement. For Aristophanes, Socrates was nothing less than a sophisticated charlatan, a fallacious rhetorician, and a dangerous enemy of the Athenian state. Xenophon on the contrary, a disciple of Socrates and one of his most ardent admirers, presents him as an exceptionally intelligent man, whose courage and love for the state brought him into countless disputes with opponents who could not, or would not, be taught the truth. Definitely intelligent and courageous, Socrates in Xenophon's eyes was none the less of the earth earthy and perhaps just a degree or two more utilitarian than a true lover of wisdom should be. At the hands of Plato, Socrates is indeed earthbound, but the aura of divinity constantly hovers about him as he strives to wing his way heavenward, not however, without some very distressing incidents.

Three men write of Socrates, and three opinions are preserved for posterity. Must the student, therefore, decide which is the caricature and which, the true character? Not at all. Although eclecticism is frowned upon in learned circles, still there is precedent enough for harmonizing these accounts into a composite picture of the sage of antiquity. According to Plato, Socrates himself established the precedent in the course of his long defence before the Athenian judges:

And now, Athenians, I am not going to argue for my own sake, as you may think, but for yours, that you may not sin against the God by condemning me, who am his gift to you. For if you kill me you will not easily find a successor to me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by God; and the state is a great

and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you.¹

A gift of God, a gadfly to pester the Athenian state, Socrates was both of these to the men of Athens, but not always both to the same man. For many he was a particularly obnoxious species of gadfly, one that tormented their consciences, pricked at their pride, and settled upon their ignorance. Behind the metaphor lies the concrete fact that Socrates, convinced that he was a divine envoy commissioned to make men virtuous, used a peculiar method of attaining his end, the elenchus.

THE NATURE OF A SOCRATIC ELENCHUS

In its broadest sense elenchus designates a process of examining an individual concerning a statement he has proposed, by asking him questions which demand explicit answers in terms of which the truth of the original statement will be judged. Now, there is nothing unusual in the process just described, and certainly nothing can be found in it to justify Socrates' claim to be a gadfly. Only when it is given a characteristic, little twist, when it is conducted in such a manner that the original statement is always refuted to the embarrassment of the victim, does the elenchus become peculiarly Socratic.

In the latter sense elenchus is one of the predominant features contributing to the charm of Plato's early dialogues. Here Socrates is depicted as constantly putting someone to the test, not to display his own wisdom, nor to entertain by a manifestation of his rhetoric and logic. Rather, he is principally concerned with teaching morals, almost exclusively so; and what absorbs his interest is the discovery of the means through which men can become virtuous, namely the knowledge of virtue in general and of the nature of particular virtues. Simply enough, for him virtue is defined as a science, and this science must be obtained before men can become virtuous. Consequently, his questions for the most part are concerned with the definitions of virtues.

Having received as an answer an opinion that was current at

¹ Plato, *Apology*, 30 & 31. Translation by Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, Random House, New York. 1937. Vol. I, pp. 413-414. Future citations to Plato's dialogues will be listed according to title, section number, volume, and page as they appear in Jowett's translation.

the time or known to have been advanced by some reputedly wise man, Socrates asks many more questions, each of which demands an answer that is fairly obvious or inescapable. Such questions usually offer little difficulty, whereas the original question is one that presents a definite problem. Hence, a refusal to answer these secondary questions makes the victim, to say the least, look and feel a bit queer, if not actually irrational. In this way a number of more or less related agreements and denials are elicited by the interlocutor, as the gadfly circles his prey looking for a vulnerable spot. The victim is not always a dupe, even though he may well be a "dope." For instance, Thrasymachus of the *Republic* is one who set out to swat the gadfly. As Socrates finished his rather peaceful discourse with Polymarchus, Thrasymachus made known his presence in characteristic fashion. Socrates relates that "Thrasymachus could no longer hold his peace; and, gathering himself up, he came at us like a wild beast, seeking to devour us. We were quite panic-stricken at the sight of him. He roared out to the whole company: What folly, Socrates, has taken possession of you all?"² It is this same Thrasymachus who, unable to stand the constant buzzing and circling of the gadfly, attempted to leave hurriedly only to be pounced upon by the interested auditors and forced to continue the discourse.

An innocent statement of Socrates, such as : "Come now let us add our admissions together,"³ indicates that the end of a discourse is at hand. One might well imagine Socrates wringing his hands together in anticipation of his success, much as a fly manipulates his forelegs (just why is not known) in preparation for the long-awaited bite. However, this would be pushing Socrates' metaphor of the gadfly farther than the truth of the situation will allow. Actually the event bears about it the air of an impersonal, and occasionally even a somewhat disagreeable task. Of course, the term of the elenchus is always a definite victory for Socrates, since the process of recapitulation invariably produces the contradictory of the original position taken by his adversary. Thus, propositions to which the answerer had to agree have shown the falsity of his first admission.

SOCRATIC IRONY

Such is the Socratic elenchus stripped to its bare essentials. Constantly used throughout the early dialogues, this process invariably results in the refutation of the person questioned. Despite the fact

² *The Republic*, 336. Vol. I, p. 601.

³ *Protagoras*, 332. Vol. I, p. 102 "Let us recapitulate our admissions," is another formula used.

that the refutation ordinarily follows upon a rigorous discourse of reason, Socrates remains adamant in his insistence that he is thoroughly ignorant about the subject under discussion. Questions insidiously precise, a dialectic pitiless in its subtlety are the weapons used by Socrates to pummel the citadels of his opponent's false opinions, to undermine their foundations, and to lay bare their inherent weakness. But when the badly-beaten victim turns to Socrates for help, the latter retreats behind the most convenient barricade of his self-confessed ignorance. He insists that his rôle is not to supply answers but merely to suggest questions; all he knows is the fact that he does not know anything. This is his attitude, and in proof of his sincerity he needs only to remind his adversary that all his questions have been requests for information; none of them could be considered as an attempted examination of another's knowledge. Typical of this rejoinder is the maneuver employed by Socrates to gain time for thought, when Critias suddenly changed the grounds of the argument: "... you come to me as though I professed to know about the questions which I ask, and as though I could, if I only would, agree with you. Whereas the fact is that I enquire with you into the truth of that which is advanced from time to time, just because I do not know; and when I have enquired, I will say whether I will agree with you or not. Please then to allow me time to reflect."⁴ Again, when Critias insists that Socrates has so maneuvered the argument that he cannot escape the charge of seeking to refute his opponent, an accusation which Socrates always denies, the ever-present haven of ignorance is waiting to afford Socrates a storm-cellar; "And what if I am? How can you think that I have any other motive in refuting you but what I should have in examining into myself? (sic) which motive would be just a fear of my unconsciously fancying that I knew something of which I was ignorant."⁵

It was against this attitude of Socrates that the volatile Thrasymachus exploded into a torrent of words which are responsible for the name given to this nuance of the elenchus: "How characteristic of Socrates! . . . that's your ironical style. Did I not foresee—have I not already told you, that whatever he was asked he would refuse to answer, and try irony or any other shuffle, in order that he might avoid answering?"⁶

⁴ *Charmides*, 165. Vol. I, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 166, p. 16.

⁶ *Republic*, 337. Vol. I, p. 602. Thrasymachus insisted on his point vigorously: "Yes, he replied, and then Socrates will do as he always does—refuse to answer himself, but take and pull to pieces the answer of some one else. *Ibid.*

EFFECTS ON THE VICTIMS

Thrasymachus was not alone in his wrath against Socrates' use of the ironical elenchus. Many others felt the sting of the gadfly much to the amusement of the onlookers (*Sophist*, 230), and the victims' anger increased in proportion to their humiliation. Socrates himself confessed that "my inquisition has led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind, and has given occasion also to many calumnies."⁷

Nevertheless, not everyone who experienced Socrates' irony became his enemy. Many who were well disposed humbly admitted their ignorance (e.g. *Laches* and *Charmides* depict such conversions); others, wounded in their vanity, sought an expedient means of beating a hasty retreat with some shred of their self-respect remaining intact. Thus Protagoras at a decisive moment in his discourse suddenly remembered that several important matters demanded his immediate and undivided attention.

By far the most universal effect is the complete bewilderment of the one questioned. Meno was not talking only for himself, when he said:

O Socrates, I used to be told, before I knew you, that you were always doubting yourself and making others doubt; and now you are casting your spells over me, and I am simply getting bewitched and enchanted, and am at my wit's end. And if I may venture to make a jest on you, you seem to me both in your appearance and in your power over others to be very like the flat torpedo fish, who torpifies those who come near him and touch him, as you have now torpified me, I think.⁸

WHY A GADFLY?

By its very nature the ironic elenchus is both destructive and to some extent hypocritical: destructive, because it is ordained solely to refutation; hypocritical, because the interrogator simulates ignorance. Moreover, among its effects must be enumerated the confusion and embarrassment of its victims. Finally, it made many enemies for Socrates; and, as he himself confesses in the *Apology*, it was the occasion for his trial and thereby indirectly led to his death. On the whole, then, Socrates' antics as the gadfly do not present a favorable

⁷ *Apology*, 23. Vol. I, p. 406. Socrates' method was so well known that even when the young men who, had nothing better to do, started to imitate him, their victims reviled him as a villainous misleader of youth. *Ibid.*

⁸ *Meno*, 80. Vol. I, p. 359.

picture. Why then does Plato cast him in this offensive rôle and at the same time attempt to present him in a favorable light? In other words, on what grounds does Plato justify or at least condone the use of this method?

The shifting ground of popular amusement certainly does not serve as the foundation for the destructive, passion-arousing ironic elenchus. None other than the solid rock of religion is Plato's ultimate foundation. In the *Apology* Socrates maintains that his method took its origin in the Delphic god's response to Chaerephon that no man was wiser than Socrates. Convinced that he had no true wisdom, Socrates looked upon the response as a riddle, which certainly had some meaning since a god can not lie. "After long consideration," he tells us, "I thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand."⁹ His first experience with a politician reputedly wise generated hatred and enmity for himself, because he tried to show that the wisdom attributed to the politician did not actually belong to him. Others are visited; other enemies are made; poets are discovered to possess some sort of genius or inspiration by which they write poetry but not the wisdom to interpret their own writings; artisans are found to be truly wise, but in their conceit they attempt to extend this knowledge beyond its legitimate limits. Consequently, Socrates concluded that the god was right; he himself was wiser than other men, for whereas those who were said to be wise in reality knew nothing, he at least knew that he did not know. "And so I go about the world, obedient to the god, and search and make enquiry into the wisdom of anyone, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise; and my occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god."¹⁰

From the background of this religious and moral setting, the purpose of the ironic elenchus emerges as a means of moral improvement undertaken and continued by Socrates in accordance with a divine command. Despite the fact that this method of logical inquisition hardly seems apt to effect the purgation presupposed to moral formation, Plato constantly pictures Socrates as a moral reformer thoroughly preoccupied with applying his elenchus. In *The Sophist*

⁹ *Apology*, 21. Vol. I, p. 404.

¹⁰ *Apology*, 23. Vol. I, p. 406.

Plato contrasts the elenchus with another, more orthodox method of moral education called admonition, which involves the traditional measures of spankings, coaxings, corrections, advising, etc. But the Stranger, who is Socrates' spokesman in this instance, is quite sure that admonition gives more trouble than it is worth and does little good in making men willing to learn those things in which he mistakenly thinks himself well versed. Against this spirit of conceit, another method must be used, the elenchus. In glowing terms the Stranger compares Socrates' medium to the process of medication, and thus indicates that it is a preliminary to knowledge and not productive of science or wisdom by itself:

As the physician considers that the body will receive no benefit from taking food until the internal obstacles have been removed, so the purifier of the soul is conscious that the patient will receive no benefit from the application of knowledge—until he is refuted, and from refutation learns modesty; he must be purged of his prejudices first and made to think that he knows only what he knows and no more. . . . For all these reasons we must admit that refutation is the greatest and chiefest of purifications, and he who has not been refuted, though he be the great King himself, is in an awful state of impurity. . . .¹¹

A third passage suggests that the elenchus has its uses not only in moral reformation but also in placing an individual on the road to knowledge. Here the nuances of religious and moral motives fade into the background, as the gadfly strips men of their complacency in ignorance and arouses their curiosity, truly the stepping-stone to wisdom for philosophy begins in wonder. This passage occurs immediately after Meno's ignorant slave has been induced to venture a solution to the problem of constructing a square double the area of a given square. Socrates, turning to Meno, summarizes the situation:

Do you see, Meno, what advances he has made in his power of recollection? He did not know at first, and he does not know now, what is the side of a figure of eight feet: but then he thought that he knew, and answered confidently as if he knew, and had no difficulty; now he has a difficulty, and neither knows nor fancies that he knows. . . . But do you suppose that he would ever have enquired into or learned what he fancied he knew, though he was really ignorant of it, until

¹¹ *The Sophist*, 230. Vol. II, p. 236.

he had fallen into perplexity under the idea that he did not know, and had desired to know?¹²

THE GADFLY IS SWATTED

In its own right the ironic elenchus proved its merit as a method of instruction both in moral education and in philosophical discipline. Admittedly, it was never intended as a method of indoctrination; nevertheless elenchus performed the yeoman's task of making its victims docile, and this in a twofold manner: 1) it removed self-conceit, an almost impenetrable barrier to knowledge, by establishing clearly the ignorance of the one questioned; 2) it awoke men from their dogmatic slumber into an active wonder about matters truly philosophical.

Plato and Aristotle, who "cut their philosophical teeth" on Socratic elenchus, recognized its value and attempted to preserve its most useful features. The first move was to take the sting out of the gadfly by removing the ironic features. In his middle and later dialogues Plato incorporates a gentler type of elenchus into the more constructive and scientific dialectic. Nevertheless, refutation and moral improvement never totally disappear as the effects of Plato's elenchus.

Aristotle swatted the gadfly and preserved its remains in the innocuous museum-piece, topical or probable reasoning. Such reasoning can and does serve a useful purpose in intellectual discipline and in the investigation of indemonstrable principles.¹³ When engaged in these activities men are too busy at important work to bother about flies. However, Aristotle left a small opening through which the gadfly might squeeze his way back into philosophical circles, for topical reasoning may be employed in what he calls "casual encounters," where elenchus is definitely in style. Should the gadfly begin to buzz again in these new surroundings, then, as far as Aristotle is concerned, someone else will have to attend to the swatting.

¹² *Meno*, 84. Vol. I, pp. 363-364.

¹³ Aristotle, *Topics*, Bk. I, chs. 1, 2.