

WAS SOCRATES TRULY HUMBLE?

RAPHAEL COMEAU, O.P.



THE result of the search for truth by early Greek Philosophers was Sophistry, the negation of the search for truth, the pernicious attitude of mind in which truth was supplanted as the object of man's quest by the desire merely to seem wise. The wise man became the intellectual quibbler. Into this world of intellectual pride and arrogance came one who confessed his own ignorance and sought to lead men through the avowal of their ignorance to the truth. It is precisely this confession of ignorance, this attitude of humility that Socrates at least assumed that has been disputed by Christians. Was Socrates truly humble?

To answer this let us first consider what is meant by humility. St. Thomas Aquinas says that humility is that moral virtue by which a person, considering his deficiency, holds himself to what is lowly, according to his measure, out of subjection to God.¹ There are in this definition three essential notes. The first is that of self-knowledge, a realization of one's defects, as well as of the particular gifts or talents with which one has been endowed by God. The second implies the restraining of oneself to what is lowly according to the measure of those talents which God has given one. The *lowly* is to be understood here in a relative sense; it is a lowliness based on that self-knowledge which is the first essential of humility. It means that, realizing the fact that God has intended a particular mode of life or sphere of influence for each man, He has given each one some particular task to fulfil. The humble man will hold in check the ambitions that would seek to push him higher than the level designed by God's providence and, contrariwise, will not permit himself to sink below that level. In a word, the humble man will fulfil that which is God's providence for him. The third note is that this fulfilling of God's design is done out of subjection to or reverence for God.

In applying this definition to Socrates we must first determine whether or not he truly knew himself. His attitude towards his own abilities seems at first to be at utter variance with any idea of humility. He conceived of himself as a man of superior intellect with a divine mission to perform. This cannot however, in itself be ad-

¹ *Ila Ilae*, q. 161 a. 1 ad 1, 2.

duced as an argument against his humility or as a lack of proper estimation of himself, for he acted in all things under an influence which, while it may have been, in truth, mere hallucination or, perhaps, something caused in a rather mysterious yet natural manner, was for him the voice of God. He believed himself to be directed in all things, especially in his mission in life, by the voice of God speaking to him directly. His belief in superior powers was, therefore, consonant with humility since it must have seemed but natural that God, Who designed for him a special mission, must have endowed him with special capabilities to fulfil that mission. Furthermore, his concept of his capabilities was confirmed at least, if not originated by the oracle at Delphi who was for him the mouthpiece of God. So it is in consideration of the lights whereby he viewed himself, that his idea of extraordinary capabilities seems to be not in excess but merely an honest viewing of himself. He was, in addition fully cognizant of his own defects and limitations. F. J. Church says: "His professions of his own ignorance are wholly sincere. . . . He never wavered in his belief that knowledge was ultimately attainable; but he knew that he knew nothing himself and in that his knowledge consisted. . . . Socrates was ignorant and he had the idea of knowledge."² It would seem then that Socrates was his own best exemplar of his admonition "Know Thyself."

Did he however, answer to the second requirement, that of holding himself in lowliness, of realizing the position designed for him by God and neither permitting himself to over-reach that position through ambition nor to fail to live up to it? Did he, in other words, seek to fulfil what he felt was God's providence for him? To answer this we must first see what was his idea of God and whether or not he believed that God designed the purposes of man's life. Socrates' position in regard to God seems to have been a two-fold one. Externally he paid devotion to the traditional gods of Greece. He differed however, in that he excluded from this adherence any acceptance of the myths with which Greek gods were surrounded, which showed them acting in a merely human fashion. There is a doubt also as to the sincerity of his belief in the Grecian gods which arises from his teaching that it is expedient to worship in the manner customary in the country in which one resides; this seems to imply that his adherence to the traditional gods may have been a purely nominal one based on expediency. This inference is further brought out in his trial; he paid little attention to the indictment charging

² Introduction to *Trial and Death of Socrates*, translated by F. J. Church, M.A.

him with disbelief in the gods and nowhere definitely committed himself to such a belief. On the contrary, he said: "I do believe in the gods as no one of my accusers believes in them—and to you and to God I commit my cause."³ His external devotion was to polytheism, but this was reconciled at least to his undoubted monotheistic belief, his belief in a Supreme Being, the Creator of the universe, one, true, and good; a Supreme Being Who not only created man but guided him through life by means of oracles, signs, dreams, et cetera. Indeed it was Socrates who first formulated the teleological argument, the argument from the order in the universe, for the existence of a Supreme intellectual Being, God. "God alone," says Socrates, "is wise and knows all things." He protects good men from evil. He declares His will to men by dreams and oracles, and the priestess at Delphi is His mouthpiece. His law and His commands are supreme and must be obeyed at all costs.⁴

Socrates believed not only in the true God but also in God's providence. In his own particular case he believed himself to be directed by God in all that he did, to be divinely inspired, and to have been given a divine mission to fulfil. To the fulfillment of that mission he devoted his whole life and energies. He spoke of his mission as the service of God and from that mission he would allow no threat, no danger, no consideration whatever to avert him; even the threat of death itself was insufficient. In his trial he said: "Athenians, I hold you in the highest regard and love, but I will obey God rather than you."⁵ His whole life was one of devotion to what he believed was God's will in his regard and his death was in harmony with his life for he refused the offers of his friends for aid in making his escape as he believed it to be God's will that he should die.

In regard to the third essential of humility, the seeking to fulfil God's providence out of subjection to or reverence for God, what has been said seems sufficient to demonstrate that Socrates fulfilled it to a marked, if not heroic, degree.

Socrates knew himself and God's providence in his regard and directed his life to the fulfilment of that providence in a manner analogous to that of the Christian Saints.

Was Socrates truly humble? The answer seems definitely to be: Yes.

³ *Dialogues of Plato-Apologia*, p. 126, Vol. III, Tudor Publishing Co., N. Y.

⁴ F. J. Church, *Introduction to Trial and Death of Socrates*, translated by F. J. Church.

⁵ *Dialogues of Plato-Apologia*, p. 118, Vol. III, Tudor Publishing Co., N. Y.