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John Gould

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PART I
THE PERSONAL IDEAL

To have made an advance on Socrates without having understood what he understood is at any rate not 'Socratic'.

S. A. KIERKEGAARD, *Unscientific Postscript*

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CHAPTER I

THE SOCRATIC THEORY OF
KNOWLEDGE AND MORALITY

ABOUT the relations between the Protean figure known as the 'historical' Socrates and Plato, there is likely to be no final agreement in the present state of the evidence, and I do not propose to raise the matter here.¹ But the main point at issue in this debate has always been the relative contribution of the two men to the development of the metaphysical theories which we find in Plato's dialogues. On questions of ethics there is somewhat more agreement. It is almost universally accepted, for example, that Socrates was the author of certain ethical propositions which appear, or are referred to, in the writings of both Plato and Aristotle; among them, the propositions that virtue (ἀρετή) is knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), that evil actions are involuntary and the result of ignorance (ἄμοθια), and (though there is less certainty on this point)² that the various moral virtues, justice, courage, self-control and the rest are merely *aspects* of ἀρετή, which is in all essentials one. But agreement extends beyond the mere attribution of these theories to Socrates. There is, in this country at least, an accepted interpretation of them, so widely held that by now its premises are scarcely ever questioned. It is this theory that I wish to consider in the present chapter: I shall suggest that it involves a misunderstanding of the original meaning of ἐπιστήμη, a misunderstanding which has generated a number of

¹ The most convenient discussions, and the sanest, are probably those of Ross and Field: Ross, edition of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, pp. xxxiii–xlv and Field, *Plato and his contemporaries*, pp. 202ff. A more radical view of Socrates' comparative unimportance is held by O. Gigon in his *Sokrates*. But the question is in any case irrelevant to the subsequent discussion. I am concerned, not with problems of authorship, but with the original intention of a number of passages whose unity of conception is not likely to be denied. This problem would remain, whatever solution of the 'Socratic question' might be offered.

² See below, pp. 65 f.

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problems about Socrates' ethical beliefs which could not have occurred to their author. Although we have the impression that in discussing these Socratic ethical propositions we are talking about the concepts of ἀρετή and ἐπιστήμη as Socrates used them, most of our discussions seem rather to be bounded by preconceptions about what are taken to be their English 'equivalents', the words virtue and knowledge. The only way out of this difficulty is to examine in some detail the functioning of these words in their Greek context in the hope of gaining a more accurate picture of what these propositions were intended to mean by Socrates and Plato.

My first task, however, is to give an account of the 'official theory', as we might term it, of what is meant by saying that ἀρετή is a matter of ἐπιστήμη. Moral virtue, Socrates is supposed to have claimed, is to be achieved only by an understanding of the moral truths of the universe, that is by an intellectual insight into the nature of right and wrong. It is presumed that he believed that knowledge of moral facts¹ involves morally correct behaviour and conversely, that wrongdoing is caused by intellectual ignorance of the same moral facts. According to this view, the situation of the moral man behaving morally is for Socrates somewhat the same as the explanation we often put forward of a chess-player playing an intelligent game of chess: he is able to act as he does because, in his mind, he knows the 'rules of the game', because he possesses the theoretical equipment which is required for correct practice. Thus ἐπιστήμη denotes the successful conclusion of a process of ethical theorizing, necessarily prior to morally acceptable behaviour: the sense of ἐπιστήμη is cognitive or, to adopt Professor Ryle's terminology, some form of knowing *that*.² This, I take it, is what underlies such statements as A. E. Taylor's:

¹ There is an instructive ambiguity about the nature of the 'moral facts' which the accepted theory takes to be the object of ἐπιστήμη: if 'right' and 'wrong' are taken as applying to individual actions, not only would this involve a peculiar sort of mental feat, but it would run counter to the whole of Book I of the *Republic* (see Joseph, *Essays*, p. 6). If on the other hand the moral facts are those of the nature of Right and Wrong, this would seem to involve a metaphysical theory of the object which few would attribute to Socrates.

² Ryle, *Concept of Mind*, ch. II.

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'virtue, moral excellence, is identical with knowledge. . . vice, bad moral conduct is therefore in all cases ignorance, intellectual error';¹ or M. Léon Robin's: 'ainsi la nature de la vertu. . . apparaît comme essentiellement intellectuelle: l'intelligence est la condition dernière de la moralité'.² These are no doubt extreme statements of the accepted theory and I do not wish to suggest that the majority of scholars would necessarily formulate their views in quite the same manner. But even in the interpretations of more guarded critics, the same fallacy, it seems to me, is to be found. Cornford's exposition, for example, though closer to a common-sense view of what moral behaviour is actually like, involves a fundamentally similar approach. Socrates, he writes, 'declared that human perfection lies in the knowledge of good and evil. . . I shall not know that this or that is good or right until I can see it directly for myself. . . Knowledge of values, in fact, is a matter of direct insight, like seeing that the sky is blue, the grass green.'³ In spite of the use of such semi-metaphorical words as 'insight', it is clear that Cornford, like Taylor and Robin, believed that *ἐπιστήμη* implies a theoretical knowledge of moral 'facts' (or 'rules' or 'imperatives'): even for him, *ἐπιστήμη* is the 'bit of theory' which precedes the 'bit of practice'.

Such is the current interpretation of what is perhaps the central thesis of Socratic ethics. It is of distinguished parentage. Aristotle in a passage of the *Eudemian Ethics*⁴ describes Socrates' theory as follows: 'the elder Socrates held it to be the aim [of ethics] to know what virtue (*ἀρετή*) is. . . He believed that all the moral virtues were forms of knowledge; in such a way that when one knew what justice was, it followed that one would be just. . . And yet where moral virtue is concerned, the most important

¹ Taylor, *Socrates*, p. 141. Cf. p. 143.

² Robin, *Platon*, p. 258. See also Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (2nd ed.), pp. 14f.

³ Cornford, *Before and after Socrates*, pp. 45f. (my italics). Cf. *C.A.H.* vol. vi, pp. 305f. and for his latest view, *Principium Sapientiae*, pp. 46f., especially 'Socrates had been convinced that all men. . . cannot be just until they know what Justice is.'

⁴ *Eth. Eud.* 1216b 2ff. The essence of Aristotle's interpretation (and of his criticism) lies in the phrase: οὐ γὰρ εἰδέναι βουλόμεθα τί ἐστιν ἀνδρεία, ἀλλ' εἶναι ἀνδρείοι. Cf. *Eth. Eud.* 1230a 6ff., 1246b 33ff.; *Eth. Nic.* 1147b 9ff.

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thing is not to know what it is, but how it arises: we do not wish to know what courage is: we wish to be courageous.' It is obvious that Aristotle's conception of what Socrates meant is substantially the same as that of modern commentators: he departs from them only in offering a criticism. As to this latter, what he is saying in effect is this: Socrates was wrong in supposing that if a man achieved an understanding of what justice involves, he would necessarily become just in behaviour, since the whole problem of choice intervenes between knowledge and action. On the interpretation which we have been considering, this is clearly a pertinent objection and the embarrassment of it has been acknowledged in one way or another by most modern critics. But there is no need here to consider the various answers which they have made to Aristotle, since the main purpose of this chapter is to put forward an alternative interpretation of Socrates' meaning, in the light of which Aristotle's objection becomes irrelevant.

Before doing this, I should like to add something to what I have already said about the roots of the intellectualist theory. The question, I believe, goes somewhat deeper than the effects of a misleading terminology. Professor Ryle has well pointed out how confused are our ideas about the relationship between knowing *how* and knowing *that*.¹ We have the idea that, in general, 'the capacity to attain knowledge of truths is the defining property of a mind' and therefore that to act rationally is 'to have one's non-theoretical propensities controlled by one's apprehension of truths about the conduct of life'. We are thus led to believe that in order to explain what we mean by describing someone as behaving 'intelligently', we must point to some prior condition of the intellect, such as the careful application of rules or the observance of theoretical maxims: 'he knew', we might say, '*what* he was doing'. In this way we can see that there is an almost universal tendency to assimilate cases of knowing *how* to cases of knowing *that*. Nor is this merely a confusion of our own era. As Professor Onians has pointed out,² cognition and conation are often hardly

¹ Ryle, *op. cit.* pp. 27ff. The whole book might be read with profit by those who are concerned to understand this difficult phase in the history of Greek ethical ideas. ² R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought*, pp. 13–22.

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distinguishable in the vocabulary of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; but in this instance the assimilation seems to be the other way about. As we shall see, the basic meaning of several Greek words for the concept of knowledge seems to be that of knowing *how*. In any case, although I am by no means sure that the distinction between the two modes of knowing was as clear to Socrates and Plato as the following pages may inevitably suggest, I am convinced that the Socratic proposition that we are now discussing is far better understood in the light of earlier usage, going back to Homer and beyond, than in the misleading light of a later attachment to intellectual or contemplative theories of the mind, which stem in the main from the subsequent work of Plato and Aristotle.

Briefly what I wish to suggest is this. In putting forward the thesis that ἀρετή is only to be attained by ἐπιστήμη, Socrates was *not* asserting that ἀρετή necessarily results from a personal apprehension of the nature of good and evil (still less, of Good and Evil), but that for the achievement of ἀρετή what is required is a form of moral *ability*, comparable in some respects to the creative or artistic ability of potters, shoemakers and the like; that the ἐπιστήμη which Socrates envisaged was a form of knowing *how*, knowing, that is, *how to be moral*. In order to give substance to this suggestion, I shall examine the usage of ἐπιστήμη and its cognates in Greek literature both before Plato and in the dialogues themselves, as well as in the works of some of his near-contemporaries.¹ The rest of Part I of this work will consider some of the other ethical propositions of the early dialogues and their relationship to this central thesis.

The word ἐπιστήμη is comparatively late in appearing in Greek literature,² but the verb from which it is derived, ἐπίσταμαι, is

¹ I am much indebted in the following pages to the invaluable work already done in this field by Bruno Snell in his two books, *Die Ausdrücke für den Begriff des Wissens in der vorplatonischen Philosophie* (1924), and *Die Entdeckung des Geistes* (1948), especially ch. viii. (References to *Die Entdeckung des Geistes* are to the English edition, referred to as *Discovery*; see Bibliography, p. 229). Professor René Schaefer's study, *Ἐπιστήμη et τέχνη: Étude sur les notions de connaissance et d'art d'Homère à Platon*, despite its title, is not of much assistance in this inquiry: M. Schaefer is more concerned with the externals of these concepts than with their nature as states of mind.

² Its first appearance is (presumably) at Bacchylides, x, 38 (Snell).

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already found in the *Iliad*. The etymology of ἐπίσταμαι is perhaps still obscure,¹ but its usage in the *Iliad* is unambiguous: it denotes, not awareness of the facts of a case, but always the ability to carry out some action. Scamander, speaking to his brother Simois in *Iliad* XXI, boasts that he will bury the body of Achilles so deep in sand that the Achaeans will not be able to collect his bones:

κάδ δέ μιν αὐτὸν
εἰλύσω φαμάθοισιν ἄλις χέραδος περιχεύας
μυρίον, οὐδέ οἱ ὅσπερ ἐπιστήσονται Ἀχαιοὶ
ἀλλέξαι.²

The precise shade of meaning varies somewhat: in this case it is not far removed from the idea of a merely physical ability (a scholiast on the passage paraphrases it by δυνήσονται); on other occasions it is nearer to an acquired capability, a mark of intelligence, as in the phrase ἐπιστάμενοι πολεμίζειν,³ or in the description of Harmonides, ὃς χερσὶν ἐπίστατο δαίδαλα πάντα τεύχειν.⁴ The use of ἐπίσταμαι with the infinitive to denote capability is, of course, a well-known Greek construction, usually recorded in lexicons as the primary meaning.⁵ But it is essential to remember it as the basic significance of the word: we must not suppose that because it comes later to denote ‘knowing *that*’, the earlier meaning altogether disappears. So pervasive is the denotation ‘knowing *how*’ in the *Iliad* that on two occasions no ‘explanatory’ infinitive occurs: the sense is clear, merely because there is only one possible significance. The phrases are ἐπιστάμενος ἄκοντι⁶ (where μάχεσθαι or πολεμίζειν must be supplied) and the odd conjunction ἐπισταμένοισι πόδεσσι⁷ (of dancers’ feet). Similarly we may compare the usage of ἐπισταμένως, always of the *manner* in which something is done.⁸ Finally, for what it is worth, the scholiasts and

¹ See Boisacq, *Dictionnaire Etym. de la Langue Grecque*, and Ebeling, *Lexicon Homericum*, s.v. ἐπίσταμαι.

² *Il.* XXI, 318 ff.

³ *Il.* II, 611, etc.

⁴ *Il.* V, 60.

⁵ See Liddell-Scott-Jones, s.v. ἐπίσταμαι.

⁶ *Il.* XV, 282.

⁷ *Il.* XVII, 599. An instructive use of ἐπίσταμαι is to be found in Archilochus’ phrase (fr. I, Diehl): καὶ Μουσέων ἑρατὸν δῶρον ἐπιστάμενος.

⁸ E.g. *Il.* VII, 317. Cf. *Od.* XI, 368; XII, 307; *Hymn to Hermes*, 390; Hesiod, *Theogony*, 87.

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lexicographers are unanimous in paraphrasing Homer's use of ἐπίσταμαι in the *Iliad* by the word δύνανται.¹ They were aware, as we sometimes are not, of the changes in meaning which are so frequent in the history of Greek between Homer and their own day.² From the fourth century onwards ἐπίσταμαι was almost exclusively used in the sense 'knowing *that*', but these writers had enough historical awareness to know that this was not its original meaning. Erotian, commenting on the meaning of ἐπίστασθαι in a passage of the Hippocratic treatise *περὶ ἄρθρων ἐμβολῆς*,³ gives as his note: ἐπίστανται· δύνανται, ὡς καὶ Ὀμηρος, and quotes *Iliad* xiv, 92.⁴ In much the same vein, a scholiast on *Iliad* xvi, 142 ends with the remark (which aptly summarizes the transition in meaning): τῇ ἐπιστήμῃ δὲ προσάπτει τὴν δύνανται.⁵

In the *Odyssey* the word is rarer, but most of the instances, like those in the *Iliad*, are instances of knowing *how*. When Odysseus, in Book xxi, wields his bow with skill, he is compared to an accomplished musician, ἀνὴρ φόρμιγγος ἐπιστάμενος καὶ ἀοιδῆς.⁶ It is true that in the *Odyssey* we find the first example of ἐπίσταμαι in the sense 'know *that*':⁷ yet Bruno Snell is clearly right in general when he says that for Homer 'ἐπίσταμαι is still completely expressed by its original meaning, denoting a practical activity, and it remains wholly in the sphere of capability (Sphäre des Könnens)'.⁸ A fragment from the Pseudo-Homerica completes the picture: the famous quotation from the *Margites*, πολλὰ ἠπίστατο ἔργα, κακῶς δ' ἠπίστατο πάντα.⁹ In spite of Socrates' commentary on this in the second *Alcibiades* (closely akin to his 'commentary' on a fragment of Simonides in the *Protagoras*), this surely means 'was a jack of all trades and a master of none'.

In the lyric poets ἐπίσταμαι, understandably enough, is even

¹ See Hesychius, s.v. ἐπίσταμαι; Lehrs, *De Aristarchi studiis Homericis*, p. 147 and the scholia on *Il.* xvi, 142; xxi, 320, etc. (*Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem*, ed. Dindorf-Maass, vol. II, pp. 100, 222; vol. VI, p. 168).

² Lehrs, *op. cit.* pp. 35 ff.

³ [Hippocrates], *De Art. Med.* 37.

⁴ *Erotiani vocum hippocraticarum collectio* (Nachmanson), p. 39.

⁵ *Scholia in Iliadem* (Dindorf-Maass), vol. IV, p. 117.

⁶ *Od.* xxi, 406. Cf. IX, 49; XIII, 207, 313; *Hymn to Hermes*, 479.

⁷ *Od.* IV, 730.

⁸ Snell, *Ausdrücke*, p. 82.

⁹ *Margites*, fr. 3 (Allen), quoted by [Plato], *Alcibiades II*, 147B. Cf. fr. 2.

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rarer. Before Pindar it seems to be used only once, by Sappho, in the meaning 'know *how*'.¹ But Herodotus provides us with more material. He has over a hundred instances of the word, some fifteen of which have this meaning.² In view of Plato's later equation of ἐπιστήμη with τέχνη, an interesting example is the phrase τεχνάζειν ἐπιστάμενος.³ Most of the instances in Herodotus refer to acquired abilities, to cases of intelligent practice, as in the common phrase νέειν ἐπιστάμενος. There is another usage of the word in Herodotus, equally interesting, although it denotes knowing *that*: there are a number of examples of ἐπίσταμαι in the meaning 'to be convinced', where any translation that might imply objectivity is impossible, since the conviction is mistaken. In one case ἐπίσταμαι is modified by the addition of δόξη,⁴ but in the majority of instances only an examination of the context reveals that the translation 'to know' is incorrect. Thus when in Book v Herodotus says of Dorieus, the younger brother of Cleomenes, εὔ ἠπίστατο κατ' ἀνδραγαθίην αὐτὸς σχήσων τὴν βασιληίην⁵ it is only after reading the following sentence, in which it becomes clear that he did *not* in fact become king, that we can be sure whether ἠπίστατο denotes an awareness of the (objective) facts or merely a subjective feeling, which we should have to translate by certainty or conviction. As we shall see, one of the major problems which seems to arise over Plato's use of ἐπιστήμη is precisely the question of subjectivity. Not only should we remember the precedent which Herodotus affords, but also that there is no sense in which ἐπιστήμη, *qua* ability, could be other than subjective. Moral ability cannot solve the problem, if it is a problem, of moral objectivity. With the subjective examples from Herodotus, Snell compares a fragment of Heraclitus⁶ and says of it: 'here too the decisive element in the meaning of the

¹ Sappho, Γ 6 (App.) (Lobel). Cf. Pindar, *Pyth.* viii, 6f.; *Olymp.* vi, 25f. etc.

² Herodotus, I, 95, 1; II, 16, 1; III, 15, 2; I30, 2; IV, 174; VI, 44, 3; VII, 29, 3; I35, 2; VIII, 89, 1, 2; I29, 2, etc.

³ III, 130, 2.

⁴ VIII, 132, 3.

⁵ v, 42, 1. Cf. III, 67, 1; I39, 3; VI, I39, 4; VII, 218, 3; VIII, 10, 2, etc. (fourteen instances in all).

⁶ Heraclitus, fr. 57 (DK). Cf. fr. 19.