

This is not to say that Morgan's explorations of radical evil, Egyptian pyramids, regicide, talion law and so on are not interesting, nor that they are unconnected to the architectonic metaphor she wants to deconstruct. Her exploration of these "very heterogeneous themes" (as Morgan herself describes them¹³) is in fact fascinating for anyone interested in Kant, and the way she draws them together is generally convincing. Her prose is readable and engaging, both for the philosophical and the literary audience. It's just that there are too many heterogeneous themes, and too many textual references, to analyze adequately in one fairly short book without the analysis seeming scattered and incomplete. If the reader is left with a sense of frustration at the end of *Kant Trouble*, it is not because Morgan has revealed the principle of crumbling at the foundation of Kant's system, but because she has failed to give her most interesting points the attention they deserve.

One wants both more and less of Morgan: more analysis of Kant's texts within the limitations of a single thematic cluster, and less wandering through her extensive library. This is my one reservation about this otherwise enticing, original, and interesting book. The obvious question, the one about the philosophical validity of asserting the instability of the Kantian edifice on the basis of the metaphors he uses, seems to be precluded by the genre of cultural studies, under which even a comparative analysis of Kant and Gainsborough might be applauded. While the more scholastic Kantian might be hard pressed to find philosophical value in Morgan's hypo-critical deconstruction, students of philosophy, literature, and cultural studies will happily be led along the garden paths that Kant unknowingly plotted, and that Morgan, as textual archaeologist, unearths.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

The Problem of Socrates

Sarah Kofman, *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher*, Translated by Catherine Porter (London: Athlone, 1998)

JOHN SELLARS

*They say that Socrates,
having heard Plato reading from his Lysis, said,
"By Heracles, how many lies this young man says about me".¹*

For many people Socrates is the archetypal philosopher, the patron saint of philosophers. He is also a notoriously slippery fellow, a philosopher who wrote nothing, a philosopher who claimed to know nothing yet one who gained an unsurpassed reputation for wisdom. Moreover, he is the inspiration for a number of quite diverse philosophical traditions, from Cynic practical training in self-sufficiency to the Platonic search for unchanging essences.² For a later ancient philosopher such as the Stoic Epictetus, Socrates is *the* philosopher, the ultimate role-model: "even if you are not yet Socrates, you ought to live as someone wanting to be Socrates".³

Modern European philosophy has continued this fascination with Socrates, most recently in works by Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault,

*Abbreviation: *SSR* = *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae*, ed. G. Giannantoni, 4 vols (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1990).

¹ Diogenes Laertius 3.35 (= *SSR* I C 90). I would like to express my thanks to Mr. F. Beetham for bringing this passage to my attention.

² See the survey of the various philosophical traditions deriving from Socrates in Cicero *De Oratore* 3.61-62 (= *SSR* I H 4).

³ Epictetus *Enchiridion* 51.

and in a volume by Sarah Kofman which recently has been translated into English.⁴

Kofman's *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher* is in many ways a very difficult book to pin down. On the one hand the title seems to indicate that what we have here is a book about Socrates, a reasonable enough assumption, and one that appears to be confirmed when Kofman says that in this volume she has "embarked upon a Socratic novel, one possible novel among others" (p. 1). On the other hand the '(s)' in the French title indicates that what we are faced with here is a book concerned with the various portraits of Socrates that have been produced by later philosophers, ranging from Plato to Nietzsche, a book of Socrates(es) to use the rather inelegant English equivalent. Part One deals with Plato's account of Socrates in the *Symposium*. Kofman singles out this text on the basis that it offers a clear example of the way in which Plato "fictionalized Socrates" (p. 11). This sets the scene for the three main sections of the book which examine the portraits of Socrates made by Hegel in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, by Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Irony*, and by Nietzsche, which is of course spread out over a number of his works, the most important being *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Twilight of the Idols*.

Kofman's central claim is that the "three Socratic novels" she discusses tell us nothing about Socrates himself, each one being instead "symptomatic only of its author" (p. 245). In contrast to the recent volume by Alexander Nehamas entitled *The Art of Living* that traces the way in which Socrates functions as a role-model in Plato, Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault (and does so very well),⁵ Kofman *seems* not to claim that Socrates was an important figure for her three subjects at all; rather she *seems* merely to suggest that the name of Socrates is a mask used by her three authors as a medium through which they could pour out their own neuroses, notably certain 'problems' they all seem to have had

⁴ First published as *Socrate(s)* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1989). As for Athlone's English edition, a number of minor mistakes mar the volume, from the occasional error in the bibliography to footnote numbers that do not match up with the notes which have been moved inconveniently to the end of the book (see for instance Chapter One, notes 48-50). As far as I am competent to judge, the translation seems to be fine although in the translator's notes there is some confusion between Nietzsche's *Die vorplatonischen Philosophen* and *Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen*. This derives from Kofman herself who often cites passages from the former under the title of the latter (e.g. p. 226). The addition of the subtitle seems to be unnecessary although the one chosen is apt.

⁵ See A. Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

with 'femininity' (pp. 246-47). One example of this approach should suffice:

Hegel says nothing more about Socrates' mother, nor does he even mention the name of the shrewish Xanthippe, of whom the ancient sources and, later, Nietzsche make a great deal. Nor does he point out Socrates' bigamy. As Plato does in the *Phaedo*, Hegel evacuates the women and children; he dismisses the housewives with their pathos, their lamentations and their cackling, which might offer resistance to the dialectics of his system (p. 63).

Despite her opening claim that she is embarked upon her own Socratic novel, by which she presumably means her own fictional construction of a portrait of Socrates, it soon becomes clear that Kofman's book is not only *not* a book about Socrates (fictional or otherwise), it is not even a book about the influence of Socrates upon her three modern authors. Instead it might best be characterised as a summary of what her three subjects say about themselves when supposedly discussing Socrates. This is in fact exactly what the bulk of the book is concerned with, namely a discussion of the various characteristics of Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche that come to the surface in their respective portraits of Socrates.

Although much of this volume is devoted to the analysis of her three occasionally unstable modern subjects, one is nevertheless left with the feeling that Kofman is genuine when she claims that she wanted to write her own Socratic novel and not merely a commentary on these three other portraits. The little that Kofman says herself concerning what has come to be known as 'the problem of Socrates' is confined to the Introduction.⁶ There, one can soon discern her approach. On the very first page she tells us that "with Socrates, we cannot escape from fiction" (p. 1). All we can say for sure about Socrates, Kofman claims, are his date of birth, the

⁶ This is often defined as the problem of distinguishing the philosophy of the historical Socrates from that propounded by Plato's literary character 'Socrates'. A broader definition would be simply the problem of reconstructing the philosophy of Socrates from the various second-hand sources. For a thorough discussion of the history of this problem, plus collections of relevant texts, see three works by Mario Montuori: *Socrates: Physiology of a Myth*, London Studies in Classical Philology 6 (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1981); *De Socrate Iuste Damnato: The Rise of the Socratic Problem in the Eighteenth Century*, London Studies in Classical Philology 7 (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1981); *The Socratic Problem: The History – The Sources*, Philosophica 4 (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1992).

names of his parents, and his age at death. With regard to the ancient sources, the most obvious being of course Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes, Kofman says "there is no way to choose one of these interpretations over the others, no way to establish an 'actualized' and 'necessary' conception by going beyond the fictional reappropriations" (p. 3). To be sure, there are no *a priori* grounds for affirming any one of these authors as more reliable than the others. Yet, as many modern philosophers have tended to do, Kofman then proceeds to assume that Socrates is *the* ironist *par excellence* (p. 4 & *passim*), despite the fact that this trait is absent from Xenophon's account altogether.⁷ Indeed, she dismisses what she calls "Xenophon's flat, vulgar interpretation" (p. 3) without pausing to consider it at all, despite her claim that no one ancient account carries any more weight than any other. If all of the ancient accounts are mere 'fictions' then presumably they are all equally valid or invalid, and Socrates' irony is presumably as fictitious as anything else one might care to say about him.

Thus Kofman's attitude to Socrates seems to lie somewhere in the no-man's land between two all too common claims; on the one hand that we can say nothing at all about Socrates, and on the other that, for some unspoken reason, certain features of Plato's characterisation of Socrates can be assumed without any further discussion. Moreover, her claim that with Socrates we are always already in the realm of fiction renders her unable to execute her other task, namely the evaluation of the three Socratic novels produced by her three modern subjects. This attitude renders these three portraits worthless, except as documents that might be used in the psychoanalytical evaluation of their authors (which is exactly how she tends to view them). Moreover, it forces her to conclude that every presentation of Socrates is no more correct or incorrect than any other.

An Alternative Approach

In contrast to what seems to me at least to be Kofman's dead-end approach to the problem of Socrates, I would like to propose an alternative approach, hopefully one that might be more productive. But first, there are I think a number of basic points that are all too often forgotten:

⁷ See the discussion in A. A. Long, 'Socrates in Hellenistic Philosophy', *Classical Quarterly* 38 (1988), 150-171, esp. pp. 151-52.

1. The account of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues should have no greater claim upon us than any other ancient source, that is, not until the status of each as a doxographical source has been carefully examined and evaluated.

2. Plato was but one, and certainly not the first, author who wrote Socratic dialogues. Dialogues are also attributed to Antisthenes, Euclides, Phaedo, Crito, Aeschines, and Aristippus,⁸ while the creation of the genre is credited to an otherwise unknown associate of Socrates called Simon the Shoemaker.⁹

3. Plato was far from being the only ancient philosopher to claim Socrates as his own. In his day, the proto-Cynic Antisthenes may well have appeared to his contemporaries as the true heir to Socrates, while later Cynics and Stoics all claimed to be Socratics.¹⁰

4. Beyond Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes, there are a huge number of Socratic *fragmenta* and *testimonia* which are rarely taken into account, many of which may report material contained in the lost Socratic dialogues of Socrates' contemporaries mentioned above. It is now

⁸ For accounts of this genre (famously mentioned by Aristotle in *De Arte Poetica* 1447b9-13 = *SSR* I B 2), see D. Clay, 'The Origins of the Socratic Dialogue', in P. A. Vander Waerdt, ed., *The Socratic Movement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 23-47; C. H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 1-35.

⁹ See the 'Life of Simon' in Diogenes Laertius 2.122-24 (= *SSR* VI B 87). For further information on Simon (whose shoe shop has been excavated on the edge of the Agora) see R. F. Hock, 'Simon the Shoemaker as an Ideal Cynic', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 17 (1976), 41-53; J. M. Camp, *The Athenian Agora: Excavations in the Heart of Classical Athens* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), pp. 145-47. Charles Kahn doubts the historical reality of Simon (*Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, p. 10), and suggests an otherwise unknown Alexamenos of Teos as the creator of the Socratic dialogue (p. 1), citing a fragment from Aristotle's *De Poetis* (fr. 72 Rose³ = Athenaeus 505c; see also Diogenes Laertius 3.48). However this passage does *not* say that Alexamenos invented the *Socratic* dialogue but simply that he wrote imitative dialogues *before* the Socratic dialogues and therefore before Plato.

¹⁰ See for example the judgement of G. Grote, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, 3 vols (London: Murray, 2nd edn 1867), vol. 2, p. 505: "Antisthenes, and his disciple Diogenes, were in many respects closer approximations to Sokrates than either Plato or any other of the Sokratic companions". For the Cynics see A. A. Long, 'The Socratic Tradition: Diogenes, Crates, and Hellenistic Ethics', in R. B. Branham & M.-O. Goulet-Cazé, eds, *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 28-46. For the Stoics see Philodemus *De Stoicis* col. 13 Dorandi; A. A. Long, 'Socrates in Hellenistic Philosophy' (above); G. Stricker, 'Plato's Socrates and the Stoics', in P. A. Vander Waerdt, ed., *The Socratic Movement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 241-251.

possible to examine all of these sources thanks to the monumental collection *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae* edited by Gabriele Giannantoni.¹¹ Yet it must be remembered that these sources, like all doxographical reports, must be handled with the utmost caution.

Once these points have been taken on board it will be possible to begin considering what one can and cannot say about the philosophy of Socrates. An example of the sort of work that is yet to be done can be found in the exemplary ‘Socrates in the Academic Books and Other Ciceronian Works’ by John Glucker.¹² In this paper Glucker offers a preliminary philological analysis of the dozen or so references to Socrates in the works of Cicero. As he himself acknowledges, no firm conclusions are drawn from his careful study; rather we are simply presented with the texts themselves together with close commentaries outlining some of the linguistic and literary problems that the interpreter will face. Just one example of these sorts of problems is the issue of the philosophical affiliations of the various speakers in Cicero’s texts and the extent to which these may betray some of Cicero’s sources for his sometimes contradictory reports.¹³ The great achievement of Glucker’s paper is not just in the provisional conclusions it draws but more importantly in the articulation of the sort of work yet to be done if we are to begin to understand the relatively sparse references to Socrates made by just one ancient author.

Although the handful of references to the philosophy of Socrates that one can find in Cicero may seem to be of little import when compared to the much larger testimonies of Plato or Xenophon, one must remember that in antiquity there were numerous other Socratic authors whose works that, although now lost, could in principle carry just as much historical and doxographical weight as those of Plato. It is likely that a number of these other testimonies would still have been in circulation in Cicero’s

¹¹ G. Giannantoni, *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae*, 4 vols (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1990). An earlier collection of some of these *testimonia* in English translation can be found in J. Ferguson, *Socrates: A Source Book* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

¹² J. Glucker, ‘Socrates in the Academic Books and Other Ciceronian Works’, in B. Inwood & J. Mansfeld, eds, *Assent and Argument: Studies in Cicero’s Academic Books*, Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium Hellenisticum, *Philosophia Antiqua* 76 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 58-88.

¹³ In various passages Cicero presents Socrates as both ironic and serious with regard to his profession of ignorance, yet in each case these judgements are put into the mouths of different characters each with their own philosophical agenda. For example compare *De Oratore* 2.269-70 (= *SSR* I C 438) and *Academica* 1.15-16 (= *SSR* I C 439), both discussed by Glucker.

day.¹⁴ Thus this handful of Ciceronian *testimonia*, if handled carefully, may provide access to material from one of these lost accounts.

Cicero is of course just one of a number of authors who claim to report the opinions of Socrates. Giannantoni’s section of Socratic *reliquiae* runs to almost 400 pages, drawing from authors as historically diverse as Aristophanes and Augustine, divided as they are by a period of some 750 years. What remains to be done, then, is the sort of close philological analysis ably executed by Glucker for *each* of the ancient authors who mention Socrates. Next, a doxographical *stemma* needs to be constructed, classifying all of the surviving material according to the sources they draw upon wherever these can be identified.¹⁵ This *stemma* should include not only the surviving Greek and Latin sources but also the numerous Arabic *testimonia* and the important but neglected traditions concerning Socrates in Islamic philosophy.¹⁶ The accounts of Plato and Xenophon should of course also be included in this *stemma*, placing them for the first time alongside all of this other surviving evidence. Only then will we have a full picture of what can and cannot legitimately be said about Socrates.

Only once this essential philological groundwork has been done will it be possible to interpret the content and status of any one group of Socratic *testimonia*, let alone to reconstruct an image of Socrates based upon the contents of the *stemma* as a whole. In the words of A. R. Lacey, “we simply have to go about it the hard way”.¹⁷ In the light of what is yet

¹⁴ See Glucker, ‘Socrates in the Academic Books’ (above), p. 60. In Cicero’s *Brutus* 292 (= *SSR* I C 438) for instance, there is a reference to the dialogues of Aeschines (alongside Plato and Xenophon) as an apparently still readily available source for Socrates. The fragments of Aeschines’ dialogues – of which some were only discovered in the 20th century in the papyri from Oxyrhynchus and published as recently as 1972 – can be found in *SSR* V A 41-100. A selection of these are translated in G. C. Field, *Plato and his Contemporaries* (London: Methuen, 1930), pp. 146-52.

¹⁵ A *stemma* is a schematic ‘family tree’ constructed in order to illustrate the relations between the surviving manuscripts of a particular ancient author. The aim is to understand the relation between each existing manuscript and a usually hypothetical archetype in order to weigh the authority of respective textual readings.

¹⁶ For a preliminary survey see I. Alon, *Socrates in Mediaeval Arabic Literature, Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Science* 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1991). Alon is planning a collection of the 800 or so Socratic *fragmenta* and *testimonia* that survive in Arabic with an *apparatus criticus* and an English translation (see p. 22).

¹⁷ See Text E 1.8 in M. Montuori, *The Socratic Problem* (above), p. 315: “The early Plato is rightly regarded as our main source, but no source can be trusted or ignored entirely, and no source can be assumed to be equally reliable throughout. We simply

to be done at this basic yet fundamental level, one should be careful when making claims concerning the historical Socrates.

A Modest Proposal

Although this approach might appear to rule out the possibility of affirming anything meaningful about the philosophy of Socrates for the foreseeable future, I would like to finish by proposing how, without the detailed analysis of the sources that is still needed, one might tentatively proceed.

Despite the need to contextualise Plato as but one author of Socratic dialogues among many, naturally his texts remain without a doubt the most important sources for the historical Socrates. Yet evaluating just these documents as sources for Socrates is a considerable problem in its own right. It is common practice to divide the Platonic dialogues into three groups – early, middle, and late – and to suggest that the early dialogues can be taken, broadly speaking, as accurate accounts of the philosophy of Socrates himself. This approach is most famously employed by Gregory Vlastos.¹⁸ What this *sometimes* leads to, however, is the assumption that certain early dialogues – such as the *Crito* – can be read as almost historical documents.

In contrast to this I would suggest that a more sensitive path might be that proposed by Charles Kahn.¹⁹ He draws attention to the fact that of all Plato's works, the only one that claims to report a public event is of course the *Apology*. Kahn suggests that although still a literary recreation, this text, and this text alone, would have been produced under certain external constraints if it were to appear convincing to Plato's contemporaries, many of whom would have been at the trial themselves or have heard first hand accounts of it. Unlike the *Apology*, all of Plato's early dialogues present private conversations and thus would not have been subject to any comparable external constraints. On the basis of this, Kahn proposes what he calls a 'minimal' approach to the Platonic

have to go about it the hard way and examine the available evidence *ad hoc* for the particular problem that we happen to be concerned with".

¹⁸ See G. Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (above), esp. pp. 88-95. The unique status of the *Apology* within the Platonic corpus had already been noted by John Burnet, *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito*, Edited with Notes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), pp. 63-64.

characterisation of Socrates, accepting the testimony only of the *Apology* with any measure of trust, and drawing upon the early dialogues *only* when they present or elaborate ideas corroborated by the *Apology*. For instance, one might propose approaching the discussion of 'taking care of oneself' in the *First Alcibiades* as 'Socratic' on the basis that this can be seen as an elaboration of a theme already announced in the *Apology*.²⁰

This seems to me to be a sensible way to begin any attempt to reconstruct the philosophy of Socrates, although, as I am sure Kahn would acknowledge, not without its own pitfalls. What this approach enables one to do is to construct an image of Socrates as someone who holds on to a number of specific philosophical doctrines, most famously the ethical claim that 'knowledge is virtue' and an accompanying monistic psychology.²¹ More interestingly here, it gives us an image of someone who is far from ironic. When Socrates proclaims his ignorance in the *Apology* there is no trace of irony whatsoever.²² This is a far cry from Kofman's essentially ironic figure.

Taking Plato's *Apology* as a point of departure, then, and locating it along with Plato's other accounts, Xenophon's reports, and all of the other *testimonia* within a carefully constructed *stemma*, one may begin the immense task of assessing what one can and cannot legitimately say about Socrates. As Kofman herself rightly acknowledges, it would be naïve "to suppose that somewhere there is one 'authentic' portrait of Socrates that we can use as a yardstick for evaluating all others" (p. 13). Yet that does not mean that we can say either nothing at all about Socrates or anything that we like; what it means is that we must tread very carefully.

²⁰ See *Apology* 30a-b; *First Alcibiades* 128a-132b. This theme also appears outside Plato in a fragment from Aeschines' *Alcibiades* (= *SSR* VI A 50; see note 14 above).

²¹ These are of course far from explicit in the *Apology* taken by itself yet they appear to stand behind Socrates' claim that his judges will do more harm to themselves than to him if they decide to execute him (*Apology* 30c).

²² Nevertheless, Socrates remains as paradoxical as ever, sincerely proclaiming his ignorance yet at the same time holding a number of specific philosophical doctrines. Compare for example *Apology* 21d and 29b. For a detailed discussion of this paradox see G. Vlastos 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge', first published in *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985) and recently reprinted in G. Fine, ed., *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 64-92.