II

The Ugly Joker with the Gift for Happiness

Socrates was proud of being born an Athenian. He lived all his life in the city and never left it except in her service as a soldier. He was often critical of Athenian ways and leaders but never wavered in his conviction that it was the best of all city-states in which to live. And this, like most of his views, was sound and practical.

Greece in the fifth century B.C. was a collection of city-states, of which Athens was the largest and usually the richest and most powerful. Greece as a whole was innovative, enterprising, and above all, competitive, and Athens was the epicenter of the competitive spirit. Most cities held their own annual competitions, both athletic and cultural, but in addition there were Panhellenic games open to the entire Greek-speaking world: the Olympian, Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean games. The most prestigious were the Olympian, held every four years at Olympia in the northwest Peloponnese.

We know a lot about these occasions. They were founded in 776 B.C., two centuries before Socrates' birth, and were held until A.D. 393, over a millennium later, when they were abolished as a pagan festival by the Christian Roman Emperor Theodosius I. And of course they were a pagan event for, like almost all Greek institutions, their origins were religious. Socrates was

fond of reminding young men that the point of an Olympic victory was not the honor and money received by the victors, but service to god, in the shape of Zeus, whose magnificent giant statue of gold and ivory at Olympus was created during his lifetime by his friend Phidias. The race on foot the length of the stadium was the first and remained the chief event, but other tests of speed, strength, and endurance were added—including boxing, wrestling, a race for men in armor, and chariot and horse races. Both umpires and competitors took an oath of fair play and justice, but decisions were often challenged, and crowds booed and sometimes attacked the umpires. In early times, Sparta, the first city to train its athletes professionally, just as it took warfare with deadly seriousness, usually emerged the overall victor, but gradually other cities, not least Athens, produced fierce competition. Money began to talk. Socrates' rich young friend Alcibiades, for instance, entered six chariot teams for the Olympics, and carried off first, second, and fourth prizes. We know this because a complete list of the Olympic winners, from 776 B.C. to A.D. 217, was drawn up by Julius Africanus, and preserved by the church historian Eusebius.

The competitive spirit spread to every aspect of Greek life: poetry, drama, music, public speaking or rhetoric, and art. In most, Athens was incomparably the leader, and its annual city contests, especially in tragic and comic drama, were more important than any Panhellenic occasion. Socrates was concerned in such events, being a friend of Aristophanes, who won the first prize for comedy three times, and especially of Euripides, youngest of the three great Athenian tragedians.

Euripides, though fifteen years Socrates' senior, came to him for advice, and there is a tradition that Socrates had a hand in his plays, perhaps with his trio containing *Hippolytus,* which won first prize in 428 B.C.

The competitive atmosphere in Athens and the pride Athenians took in their city were much enhanced by external events in the early years of Socrates' century. The Persian Empire, the greatest the world had ever known, west of China, was a constant threat to Greece, especially after Athens encouraged her fellow Ionian cities in what is now western Turkey to revolt against their Persian overlords. Persia invaded Greece but was repulsed by 10,000 Athenians at the Battle of Marathon (490 B.C.). According to Socrates' friend the historian Herodotus, the Persians lost 6,400 killed, against Athenian losses of 192, making it one of the great victories of antiquity. Among those who fought in the battle was Aeschylus, senior of the three great tragedians, and it is possible Socrates' father, Sophroniscus, was there too, as a hoplite or heavy infantryman.

The Persians invaded again in 480, in enormous strength—three hundred thousand men and six hundred ships. Despite heroic efforts by Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans, who died defending the pass of Thermopylae, the Persians pressed on, Athens was evacuated, and the city burned, the sacred buildings on the Acropolis being reduced to rubble. However, combined Spartan and Athenian forces routed the Persian army at the Battle of Plataea. Athens alone, under the leadership of Xanthippus, (father of Pericles, who was to dominate Athens for much of Socrates'

life), won a decisive naval war, and by 479 Athens had established herself as the leading power among the Greeks. In 477 Athens founded the Delian League of Greek States, confirming her ascendancy and laying the basis for an Athenian Empire. By 463 B.C. Miltiades' son Cimon had ended any threat from Persia and the period of Athenian greatness had begun. By then Socrates was a boy of seven.

The city-state in which he grew up was by constitution and in spirit a democracy. The *polis,* or city, had long been identified with "the people in arms," the aristocracy providing the cavalry and the tradesmen, artificers, and other skilled workingmen forming the hoplites and owning their own armor and weapons. The basis of a democratic constitution had been laid down by Cleisthenes in the generation before Socrates was born, using the expression *iso-nomia,* or equality, to describe the rights of citizenship. More democratic measures were passed, when Socrates was a child, under the leadership of Ephialtes, though the fact that he was murdered in 462 B.C. indicates that politics, with its class-war overtone, was a serious, even brutal business, remaining so throughout Socrates' life.

The population of Athens varied greatly, depending on war, trade, and the economy. It is likely that when Socrates was born the total number of citizens, who had full rights to vote in the *ecclesia,* or assembly, to stand for office as general (*strategos*) or magistrate (*archon*), or to sit as jurymen, was a little over 120,000, rising to 180,000 in about 430 B.C., when he was entering middle age, and falling to perhaps 100,000 by his death. In addition, there were large numbers of *metics*, or resident

aliens, some of whom held citizen rights, their ratio to born citizens ranging from one in six to two in five. Then there were slaves, who had no rights, varying from 30,000 to perhaps 100,000. But in all it is unlikely that the population of Athens, in Socrates' lifetime, ever exceeded 250,000. This was the population of Venice at its zenith and of London at the end of the seventeenth century; the entire population of the American colonies in 1700 was around 275,000.

Socrates therefore was born (in May) in what we would call a medium-size town. His *deme,* or district, was on the south side of the city. In the *Laches* dialogue of Plato we are told his father, Sophroniscus, was friends with the family of Aristides the Just, the Athenian statesman who was at various times chief magistrate, statesman, and army and naval commander, but was later exiled for two years and reduced to poverty. His father is also credited with various carvings on the Acropolis, but without firm evidence. His mother, Phaenarete, came from a "good" family and in the *Theaetetus* dialogue is said to have been a skillful midwife—not a professional one, of course, as such did not exist. Socrates was proud of her and did not at all mind jokes being made about her activities as an *accoucheuse*, as for instance in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. He was always interested in medicine and doctoring, bringing it into his dialogues, and it seems to me highly likely that he knew Hippocrates, the greatest doctor of ancient Greece, who was his exact contemporary and who evidently told Plato about medical science.

From the *Crito* dialogue we learn that his father gave his son a good education at the gymnasium: reading,

writing, athletics, music. Tradition says he went into his father's trade as a stone carver. The travel writer Pausanias (second century A.D.), the Baedeker of ancient Greece, says in his day a group of statues, *The Graces* on the Acropolis, was shown as Socrates' work, and this claim is repeated by Diogenes Laertius. But he may have been confused with another Socrates: it was a common name in fifth century B.C., and there were many stone carvers, for there was so much work for the trade in Athens, attracting masons from all over Greece and the Middle East. Socrates certainly held views on art. Sculptors, indeed, can be heavily sententious about it. Rodin could be a bore on the subject, as more recently could the Yorkshire-born Henry Moore. Socrates was never a bore—far from it—but Xenophon says he had a discussion on expressions in art with the sculptor Cleiton and the painter Parrhasius. "Nobility and dignity," he is recorded as saying, "self-abasement and servility, prudence and understanding, insolence and vulgarity, are all reflected in the face and in the attitudes of the body, whether still or in motion, and can be captured by the artist." This observation is all the more remarkable in that Socrates disliked allowing his emotions to show in his face. Four centuries later, Cicero, who seems to have known a lot about him, said that to show fears or appetites on your face was undignified: "Always keep the same expression, like Socrates."

While we do not know for sure if Socrates ever worked as a stone carver or whether he had any other manual occupation, we can be certain of one thing: He was a soldier, and an admirable one. This is attested by various references in Plato and Xenophon, and by other sources.

Socrates had strong views about the use of force, as we shall see. But he was not a pacifist. Bertrand Russell's rejection of participation in World War I would have been alien to him, and he would have made short work of the specious arguments with which Russell sought to persuade others from serving (and which landed him in jail). As a citizen of Athens, which he loved, Socrates felt it a duty to fight her battles, in his middle rank as a hoplite. I think it likely he saw service as a young man, though there is no specific evidence of it. But we know he was at the siege of Potidaea, a strongly fortified port and former colony of Corinth. As a member of the Delian League, it was subject to Athenian leadership. Its tribute, or contribution to the common war fund, was increased to fifteen talents in 434 B.C. It revolted, and Athens besieged and reduced the city in 430 B.C., sending soldier-colonists (*cleruchs*) to occupy it. Socrates was there. He was then in his late thirties. He also fought at Amphipolis on the North Aegean coast, a place colonized by Athens in 437–436 B.C.—it was near the gold and silver mines of the Pangaean district and commercially important. In the early stages of the Peloponnesian War, Amphipolis surrendered to Sparta without a fight, and Athens went to a lot of trouble trying to get it back. The future historian Thucydides, then a young officer—he was ten years Socrates' junior—was involved at Amphipolis too. Both these great men, though they differed on many things, notably religion, agreed on their devotion to Athens and its importance, and Thucydides' clarity of historical causation and fair-mindedness may owe much to Socrates. But there is no clear evidence of their contact.

In 432 B.C. Socrates fought in the painful Athenian retreat from Potidaea. It was deep winter and bitterly cold. Socrates showed remarkable endurance and courage, all the more admirable because he was then forty-six, almost an old man by the normal reckoning of those days. We have eyewitness evidence of Socrates' conduct in this campaign from his young aristocratic friend Alcibiades. He makes three distinct points. First he says that Socrates saved his life by standing over him when he was wounded and driving off the enemy, regardless of his own safety. Second, he says that Socrates, fully armored and carrying his weapons, was a formidable figure, even in retreat. He says there was something about his bearing that made the enemy leave him severely alone: They sensed that if they had tried to seize him, they would have "met with desperate resistance." Third, he testified to Socrates' amazing hardiness. He wore thin clothing despite the cold and went barefoot even in the snow. No discomfort or shortage of food or drink seemed to dismay him. He was a splendid and cheerful campaigner.

Socrates' indifference to physical well-being—clothing, food, drink, warmth, and shelter, everything except company, which he always relished and needed—was a characteristic throughout his life and is well attested by a variety of sources. It seems to have been partly temperament and partly self-training. He decided early in life to be a teacher or, as he would have put it, an "examiner" of men and that such was to be his occupation but not his profession: He would take no pay. Hence one of his objects was to reduce his needs to an absolute minimum. He took delight in this process,

deliberately nourishing negative appetites. He observed the shop displays in the Athens agora (marketplace) and said, "How many things I can do without!" He also liked to observe the prices, and exclaim: "How expensive Athens is!" then, the next moment, "How cheap Athens is!" Various sayings survive in different forms: "Some men live to eat. I eat to live." "Hunger is the best *aperitif*." "I only drink when I am thirsty." When someone offered him land to build a house, "Would you give me leather to make shoes?" "Greedy people don't appreciate delicacies." He kept fit in the stadium and gymnasia: "A healthy body is the greatest of blessings." He "frequently danced," saying, "It is good for me." He did not disdain drinking, in company, but was never seen drunk. But there is an image of him, at a feast, drinking from a large, wide vessel known as the Silver Sea. He said, "Those who drink a lot don't relish rare wines." Asked "What makes a young man virtuous?" he replied, "Avoiding excess in anything." He said, "Poverty is a shortcut to self-control." And "Leisure is the most valuable of possessions." And "Nothing is to be said in favor of riches and high birth, which are easy roads to evil."

Socrates was, by the standards of Greece in the fifth century B.C., an ugly man. For the Greeks set a high value on regularity of features and a head and face we would call Byronic. Alcibiades, a spectacularly handsome man, compared Socrates to Silenus. Socrates said the same. He did not mind the comparison at all. Silenus represented, among men, the spirit of the wilderness, being half animal. The satyrs were similar. These creatures were the organic origin of Athenian comedy, and the first comics wore Silenus masks on the stage. These and the

stone portraits of Silenus that have survived (usually in Roman copies) are remarkably similar to stone, marble, or bronze representations of Socrates that have come down to us, in copies of copies. It is likely that, soon after Socrates' death, a bronze statue was made of him for Athens to set up in a public place in expiation of the crime the city had committed against him. Many Roman copies, usually in marble, survive. Often the body is missing and only the head survives. There is one in Berlin, another in Copenhagen. In the Borghese Gallery, Rome, there is a composite statue, of which the arms and hands and other bits are modern, the head Roman. All these are Silenus-type in face but with human ears. Two are inscribed SOCRATES. There is also, in the British Museum, an alabaster statuette of Socrates, probably from Alexandria, a Roman copy of a Greek fourth-century-B.C. bronze.

These all confirm the information from literary sources that Socrates was bearded, hairy, with a flat, spreading nose, prominent, popping eyes, and thick lips. In Xenophon's *Symposium,* he is recorded as challenging Critobulus to a contest in beauty. As usual, he was joking, speaking with his customary tone of irony and self-deprecation. The dialogue begins, "Why, Critobulus, do you flaunt your looks, as if you were more handsome than me?" "Oh, I know I am inferior to you in beauty, Socrates, and therefore I must be even uglier than Silenus." Socrates continues, using his usual method of cross-questioning: "Are only men handsome?" "No. A horse or a bull can be handsome. Even a shield." "How is it that such different things can all be handsome?' "Because they are well made, by art or nature, for their

purpose." "What are eyes for?" "To see." "For that reason my eyes are more handsome than yours." "How so?" "Yours can see only in a direct line. Mine can do that but sideways too, because they stick out so." "And is your nose better shaped than mine?" "Yes, if God made the nose for smelling, for your nostrils are turned down, whereas mine are wide and turned up and can receive smells from every direction." "I grant you your mouth is better, for if God gave us mouths to eat yours is big enough to gobble three times as much as mine." "Yes, and my kisses are more sweet and luscious than yours since my lips are so big and thick."

Socrates, then, was ugly, and later in life he developed a paunch. He had a tendency to be bow-legged and walked in a sideways motion. As he was in the streets every day, he became an unmistakable figure in Athens, and for many a comic one, even disreputable. Sometimes he was mocked and even jostled. Asked why he did not resent such treatment, he replied, "If a donkey kicks you, do you take legal action against him?" Or: "If a man slaps my face, he does me no evil, only himself." As Alcibiades noticed during the retreat from Delium, Socrates was imperturbable. He exuded serenity. There were many things he deplored, but nothing left him depressed. If he was angry, he never showed it—except, in contrast to most people, who raise their voices in anger, he lowered his, and spoke quietly. He was genial, and reminds me of Lord Holland, of whom the poet Thomas Moore said, "He came down to breakfast every morning looking as though he had just received a tremendous stroke of good fortune." To those who knew Socrates, he was impossible to dislike and difficult not to love.

There may have been one exception: his wife. Or, possibly, wives. It is notorious that exceptionally good public figures are difficult to live with. When Lady Longford, married to the famous philanthropist and do-gooder Frank Longford, was questioned on this point, she said, "What do we call the wife of a saint?" and answered herself: "A martyr." There are confusing tales that Socrates had an earlier (or later, or bigamous) marriage to a woman called Myrto. If she gave birth to children, they are unrecorded even in traditional stories. What we do know is that he had, at the time of his death, a wife called Xanthippe and had three children by her. He had evidently married her late in life, possibly already over fifty. At the time of his death, aged seventy, the eldest was only a youth of about seventeen or eighteen, and the others younger still. One may have been a child in arms. When Xanthippe, as we know, spent Socrates' last night with him in the jail, she had a child with her, presumably because he was too young to be left alone. Plato and Xenophon, our two best sources, say nothing against Xanthippe's character. But various traditions present her as a shrew, who shouted at Socrates and gave him a hard time. Why had he married her instead of a more docile woman? He answered, "Because we know from the business of horse training that owners often like to pick a difficult animal, which poses more interesting problems." Could he live happily with her? "Yes, and it proves I could live happily with anyone." She was a splendid subject for his jokes, as when, having bawled him out at length, inside the house, she poured a basin of slops on him from the roof. He said, "As always, the thunder is followed by rain." So far as I can

see, he was perfectly content with her, and it is notable (for the age) that he was still having sex with her and begetting children in his late sixties. Xanthippe must have contributed to his high opinion of the ability of women and to his belief that in most matters they were the equal of men. My belief is that their life together was happy.

What strikes one most about Socrates as a human being, however, is not just his opinions, often unusual, even revolutionary, and his personality, which was riveting to those who came close to it, but his reciprocal delight in the people and city of Athens. If ever a man was at home in the place where he was born, lived, and died, it was Socrates the Athenian. All the more so in that Athens was going through the most glorious, exciting, and dangerous phase in its history. Let us look more closely at this remarkable city.