

In 1767, Moses Mendelssohn published a new translation of Plato's dialogue Phaedon, or on the Immortality of the Soul, which he prefaced with a life of Socrates. The spirit, which speaks from its pages, explains why Mendelssohn was, himself, celebrated as the "Socrates of the 18th Century," and, on this intellectual foundation, he, and his poet-friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, succeeded in furthering the great project of German Classical poetry.

THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF SOCRATES

by Moses Mendelssohn

Socrates, son of the sculptor Sophroniscus and the midwife Phaenarete, was the wisest and most virtuous among the Greeks. He was born in the fourth year of the 77th Olympiad, in Athens, into the Alopecian clan. In his youth, his father encouraged him in the art of sculpture, in which Socrates must have made no little progress, if those who assert are correct, that the robed Graces, which stood behind the statue of Athena, on the wall at Athens, are his work. In the time of Phidias, Zeuxis, and Myron, no mediocre work could have been granted such an important place.

When Socrates was about 30, and his father was long dead, he was still pursuing the art of sculpture, but from necessity, and without much inclination. Crito, an aristocratic Athenian, became acquainted with him, observed his sublime talents, and judged that he could be far more useful to the human race through his intellect, than through his handiwork. Crito took him out of art school, and brought him to the intellectuals of the time, in order to allow beauties of a higher order to be put before him for contemplation and emulation. In the same way that art teaches the means by which the lifeless can imitate life, stone can be made to resemble the human form; wisdom seeks, on the other hand, to imitate the infinite in the finite, so as to bring the soul of humanity, as close as is possible, in this life, to its original beauty and perfection.

Socrates enjoyed instruction from, and conversation with, the most famous people in all the arts and sciences, among whom his disciples named Archelaus, Anaxagoras, Prodicus, Evenus, Isymachus, Theodorus, and others. Crito furnished him with the necessities of life, and Socrates, from the beginning, diligently pursued natural philosophy, which was very much in

vogue at that time. He soon decided however, that it were time that wisdom be transferred from the investigation of nature to the contemplation of humanity. This is the path which philosophy was to take for all time. It must begin with the examination of external conditions, but, with each step that it takes, it should cast back a glance to humanity, for whose true happiness all its endeavors should be directed. If the movement of the planets, the essence of the heavenly bodies, the nature of the elements, etc., don't have, at least, an indirect influence on our happiness, then man is not destined to investigate them.

Socrates was, as Cicero says, the first who called philosophy down from the heavens, established it in the cities, led it into the dwellings of men, and obliged them to apply its considerations to their deeds and omissions. In this, he went, on the other hand, as innovators are generally wont to do, somewhat too far, and spoke sometimes of the most sublime sciences with a kind of contempt, which is not befitting to the prudent judge of things.

The Sophists

At that time, in Greece, as at all times with the rabble, the kind of scholars who enjoyed great esteem, encouraged established prejudice and obsolete superstitions, through all kinds of pretexts and sophisms. They gave themselves the noble name of Sophists, which, due to their behavior, became a repulsive name. They took care of the education of the youth, taught the arts, sciences, moral philosophy and religion, in both public schools and private houses, with general acclaim. They knew that, in democratic government assemblies, eloquence was treasured above all, that a licentious man would gladly listen to mere chatter about politics, and, that shallow minds would rather fulfill their desire for knowledge with fairy tales. Hence, they never neglected glittering eloquence in their presentations, and so skillfully wove together false politics and absurd fables, that the people listened with astonishment, and lavished them with rewards.

They were on good terms with the priests; for they mutually adopted the wise maxim: live and let live. If the tyranny of hypocrites was no longer able to hold the free spirit of humanity under the yoke, so these false friends of truth were employed, to lead it astray on the false path, to jumble together natural

conceptions, and suspend all distinction between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, good and evil, through blinding fallacies. The principal axiom in their theory was: Everything can be proved, and everything can be disproved; and in the process, one must profit as much from the folly of others, and from his own superiority, as he can. This last maxim, they, of course, kept secret from the public, as one can easily imagine, and entrusted it only to their inner circle, who participated in their business. However, the ethic they taught publicly, was just as corrupting for the heart of men, as their politics were for the justice, freedom, and happiness of the human race.

Since they were crafty enough to weave together their own interests with the prevailing religion, not only were decisiveness and heroism necessary to put an end to their frauds, but, even a true friend of virtue might not dare to attempt it without the utmost precaution and foresight. There is no religious system so corrupt, that it does not pay homage to some of man's responsibilities, which the humanist honors, and the reformer of morals, if he doesn't want to act contrary to his own purpose, must leave intact. From doubt in religious affairs, to frivolousness; from neglect of religious rites, to the contempt of worship generally; the transition tends to be very easy, especially for minds which are alienated from the rule of reason, and are ruled by avarice, ambitiousness, or lust. The priests of superstition depended, all too often, on this deception, and took refuge in it, as an inviolable shrine, whenever there was an attack on them.

Such difficulties and obstacles stood in Socrates' way as he made the great decision, to spread virtue and wisdom among his fellow men. On the one hand, he had to conquer the prejudices of his own upbringing, to enlighten the ignorance of others, to battle the Sophists, to suffer malice, vulgarity, defamation and abuse of his enemies, endure poverty, to battle established authority, and what was the most difficult, to counteract the dark horror of superstition. On the other hand, the weak minds of his fellow citizens were to be saved, scandal was to be avoided, and the good influence, which even the most absurd religion had on the habits of the naïve, was not to be squandered. He overcame all these difficulties at the expense and loss of all worldly goods and pleasures, with the wisdom of a true philosopher, with the patience of a saint, with the unselfish virtue of a friend of humanity, with the decisiveness of a hero. So powerfully did the love of virtue and justice and the inviolability

of duty to the Creator and Preserver of things, operate in him, that he, in the most loving way, sacrificed health, power, comfort, reputation, peace, and, finally, life itself, for the well-being of his fellow man.

However, the higher aims of a world citizen did not prevent him from fulfilling his civic duty to his fatherland. In his 36th year, he bore arms against the Potideans, the inhabitants of a town in Thrace, who rebelled against their tribute masters, the Athenians. There, he neglected no opportunity to harden his body against all burdens of the war, and severity of the seasons, and to exercise his soul in fearlessness and contempt of danger. He, by general agreement of his rivals, carried away the prize of bravery, but let Alcibiades, whom he loved, have it, and, in this way, wanted to encourage him, henceforth, to earn such honors from his fatherland through his own deeds. He had, shortly before, saved Alcibiades' life in a skirmish. Potidea was besieged in severe cold. While others complained about the frost, he remained in his usual clothing, and walked barefoot on the ice.

The plague raged in the camp, and, even in Athens. What Diogenes Laertus and Aelian attest is almost unbelievable: that Socrates was the only one who didn't get the plague. Without concluding anything from this incident, which could have been a mere accident, one can generally say with certainty, that he had a strong and sturdy constitution, which he knew how to maintain through abstinence, exercise, and avoidance of all softness, such that he was inured against all mishaps and burdens of life.

Nor did he neglect to exercise the power of his mind while in the field; rather, he exerted it to the utmost. Sometimes he would stand in the same place for 24 hours, with steadfast gaze, in deep thought, as if his spirit were absent from his body, said Aulus Gellius. It can not be denied, that these raptures bordered on enthusiastic ecstasy, and in his life, more evidence is found, that he was not entirely free from it. However, it was a harmless enthusiasm, grounded neither in arrogance nor misanthropy, and in the circumstances in which he found himself, might have been very useful to him. Perhaps, the common powers of nature don't suffice to uplift men to such elevated thoughts and steadfast resolution.

Socrates Battles the Sophists

After the campaign ended, he returned to his native city, and began to vigorously attack superstitious beliefs and sophistry, and to educate his fellow citizens in virtue and wisdom. On public streets, walkways, in baths, private houses, the workshops of artisans, anywhere he found people whom he believed he could improve, he stopped them, then and there, took up a dialogue with them, discussed with them what was right and wrong, good and evil, holy and unholy; talked to them about the providence and government of God, of the means of pleasing Him, of the happiness of men, of the duties of citizens, of heads of households, fathers, etc. This, he never did with the arrogance of a lecturer, but rather, as a friend, who wanted to search with them for the truth. He knew to start by means of childish, naïve questions, so that they could follow him, from question to question, without any special effort, arriving quite unnoticed at the goal, and not learning the truth, but rather, each believing himself to have discovered it. "I imitate my mother in this," he used to say jokingly. "She herself doesn't give birth any more, but she has the knack, through which she helps others to bring their offspring into the world. In a similar way, I perform the office of a midwife for my friends. I ask and question as long as is necessary, until the hidden fruit of their understanding comes to light."

This method of inquiring for the truth was also the most successful for refuting the Sophists. When it came to an extensive discourse, they were insufferable. They had so many evasions, so many fables, so many subterfuges, and so many rhetorical figures of speech at their command, that the listeners would be dazzled, and convinced to believe. A general applause seldom failed to break out for them. And one can even imagine the triumphant look, with which such a teacher then looked down at his students, or defeated adversary.

What did Socrates do on such an occasion? He applauded along with them; then, in an easy-going way, ventured a few somewhat remote questions on the matter, which the well-educated Sophist regarded as absurd, and responded to out of pity. Little by little, Socrates crept closer to the object, always with questions, meanwhile, always cutting off the opportunity of his adversary to ramble on in prolonged speech. In this way, the Sophists were forced to argue the ideas clearly, to give exact explanations, and to allow the absurd consequences to be drawn from their false assumptions. Finally, as they saw themselves driven into a corner, they became impatient. Socrates never

became so, but tolerated their rudeness with the greatest composure, and continued to develop the idea, until, finally, the absurdities, which followed from the Sophists' axioms, became clear to even the most naïve listeners. In this way, the Sophists would bring their own pupils to laugh at them.

In regard to religion, Socrates appears to have had the following maxim in mind: Any false teaching or opinion, which openly led to moral corruption, and was, thus, contrary to the felicity of the human race, he spared in no way, but publicly challenged, ridiculing its absurd and loathsome consequences, in the presence of the hypocrites, the Sophists, and the common people. The doctrines of the writers of legend were of this type, attributing weaknesses, injustices, shameful desires, and passions to their gods. He never held back about such propositions, as well as about false ideas of the divine providence and government of God, and, also, about the reward of the good and the punishment of evil, never appearing doubtful, but determined, to defend the matter of truth with the greatest fearlessness at all times, and, as the outcome showed, even to seal his belief with death.

But, a doctrine which was merely theoretically false, and which could not bring such great harm to morality, as was to be feared from a reform, he left unchallenged, and, on the contrary, publicly acknowledged the prevailing opinion, and observed the established ceremonies and religious customs. On the other hand, he avoided any opportunity for decisive explanations; and, when it was not to be evaded, he had a retreat ready: He pled his ignorance.

This general excuse which he made use of, was rendered very consistent by his method of teaching, which, as we have shown, he had adopted from other motives. Because he never pronounced his teachings with the arrogance of a know-it-all, and since, on the contrary, he asserted nothing himself, but, rather, always tried to draw out the truth by questioning his listeners, so that he was allowed, not to know what he either could, or might not know. The vanity of knowing the answer to all questions, has seduced many a great mind to assert things, which he would have criticized in the mouths of others. Socrates was far removed from this vanity. Of things which were beyond his comprehension, he confessed with the simplest candor: "This I don't know"; and when he noticed that traps were laid and certain admissions were wanted from him, he withdrew himself from the debate, and said: "I know nothing!"

The oracle at Delphi declared him to be the wisest of all mortals. "Do you know," said Socrates, "why Apollo regards me as the wisest man on earth? Because others, many times, believe they know something that they don't know. But I see and confess, that all that I know, amounts to this, that I know nothing."

Socrates' fame spread all over Greece, and the most respected and educated men from all around came to him, in order to enjoy his friendly company and instruction. The desire to hear him was so great among his friends, that many risked their lives just to be with him daily. The Athenians had forbidden the Megarans to enter their region on pain of death. Euclid of Megara, a friend and student of Socrates, didn't let that keep him from visiting his teacher. He went at night, clothed in gaudy women's clothing, from Megara to Athens, and in the morning, before it was day, went his 20,000 steps back home again. Socrates lived in the utmost poverty and want, and wanted to be paid nothing for his lessons, although the Athenians were so hungry for learning, that they would have spent great sums, had he demanded payment. The Sophists knew better how to exploit this willingness. ([See Plato's Dialogue "The Sophist."](#))

The Slander of Xanthippe

It must have cost him all the more effort to endure this poverty, since his wife, the notorious Xanthippe, wasn't the most modest housewife, and he had also to care for children who expected their sustenance from his hand. It is certainly not yet settled, that Xanthippe was of such an ill-tempered nature as is generally believed. The legends which dishonor her, stem from later writers, who could only have known them from hearsay. Plato and Xenophon, who must have been the best informed thereon, seemed to be acquainted with her as an average woman, about whom they said neither much good nor much bad. Indeed, in the ensuing dialogues by Plato one finds that she was in jail with Socrates on the last day of his life with their children, and extremely distressed over his death. Otherwise, everything found to her detriment, in these most credible authors, comes from the *Banquet* of Xenophon, where someone asks Socrates why he took a wife who would be so unsociable, whereupon he answered in his customary manner, "He who wants to learn to handle horses, doesn't choose a gentle pack animal for practice, but rather a spirited steed, which is difficult to break. I, who want to learn to deal with

humanity, have chosen for myself a wife who is cantankerous, precisely from this motive, so as to learn to bear the different temperaments of men so much the better."

In another place in Xenophon, Socrates' son, Lamproclus, complains to his father about the harsh treatment, sullen temper, and intolerable moods of his mother. However, Socrates answers, that to her credit, with her quarrelsome temperament, she, nonetheless, observed the duties of a mother conscientiously, and loved and properly took care of her children. This testimonial of her husband refutes all insulting anecdotes, which were invented at her expense, and through which she was set down as an example for posterity as a bad wife. One can believe with good grounds, that Socrates' skill in handling men was not practiced in vain with his marriage partner; rather, that he conquered the harshness of her temperament through untiring patience, pleasantness, gentleness, and through his irresistible urging, won her love. And, she was improved in such a way, that she changed from a cantankerous wife into a good housewife and mother, and as her performance before his end revealed, a loving wife.

Be that as it may, his domestic circumstances must have made his poverty more oppressive to him, since he had to account for his deeds and omissions, not only to himself, but to his entire family, and perhaps a family which was dissatisfied and complaining about his severe frugality. No one was better informed about the duties of a head of the household than Socrates. He knew well, that he was obliged to earn and provide so much, as would be necessary for the honest living of his family, and he impressed this natural duty on his friends very often. But in what concerned him alone, a higher duty stood in his way, which prevented him from achieving those necessities. The corruption and venality of the times, and especially, the vile greed of the Sophists, who sold their corrupt teachings for hard cash, and employed disgraceful methods to enrich themselves at the expense of deceived people: This imposed the obligation on him to counter them with extreme disinterestedness, such that, his pure and undefiled intentions would be capable of no such evil explanation. He preferred to suffer want, and when scarcity weighed too much on him, lived on charity, rather than even partially justify the filthy greediness of these false teachers of wisdom, through his example.

Priests and Sophists vs. Socrates

He interrupted his benevolent activity, and marched along voluntarily into battle against the Boethians again. The Athenians lost the battle at Delphi and were decisively defeated. Socrates showed his bravery in the fighting as well as in the retreat. "Had every man done his duty as Socrates," said the General Laches to Plato, "the day would certainly not have been unlucky for us." As everyone fled, he fell back also, but step by step, and meanwhile he frequently returned, in order to resist an enemy, who came too close to him. He found Xenophon, who had been wounded, and had fallen off his horse, lying on the ground, took him on his shoulder, and carried him to safety.

The priests, Sophists, orators, and others, who promoted the venal arts, people for whom Socrates must have been a thorn in the side, made use of his absence, and tried to incite sentiments against him. On his return, he found a unified party, for whom no means were too malicious to damage him. There is reason to believe they hired the comic playwright Aristophanes to compose a farce, which was called comedy at that time, to expose Socrates to public ridicule and hatred, and to draw out the sentiment of the common people concerning him, to prepare, if the blow succeeded, to dare another. This farce had the name *The Clouds*. Socrates was the principal character, and the person playing this role, took pains to present him as he was in real life. Dress, walk, gestures, voice, everything realistically mimicked him. The play itself has been preserved, to the honor of the persecuted philosopher, until our time. But a more crass composition can scarcely be imagined.

Socrates didn't care to visit the theater, as a rule, except when the plays of Euripides (which some think, he himself had helped to compose), were performed. Nonetheless, the day that this lampoon was performed, he went in. He heard many strangers who were present ask, "Who would this Socrates be in the original, who was so mocked on the stage?" He stepped forward into the middle of the play, and remained, until the end of the piece, standing in his place, where everyone could see him and could compare him with the copy. This stroke was deadly for the poet and his comedy. The most farcical ideas had no effect, for the appearance of Socrates aroused deep respect, and a kind of astonishment about his fearlessness. Thus the play was met with no applause. The poet rewrote it, and brought it to the stage again the following

year, but with just as little success. The enemies of the philosopher found themselves obliged to postpone the intended persecution, until a more favorable time.

The war with the Boethians was scarcely over, and the Athenians, by this time, had to recruit a new army, in order to call a halt to the Lacedemonian (Spartan) commander Brasidas, who had taken power in several Thracian cities, among others, the important city Amphipolis. Socrates didn't let the danger which confronted him in his last absence prevent him from serving his country again. This was the last time he left his native city. After this, until his death, he never left Athens, and never failed to grant his friendly company to the youth who sought him out, and to influence them to the love of virtue through instruction and good example.

Beauty of Body and Soul

As he was, generally, a great friend and admirer of beauty, he appeared to pay regard to physical beauty in the choice of his friends. A beautiful body, he was wont to say, promises a beautiful soul, and if it doesn't fulfill the expectation, so the soul must have been neglected. He then took great effort to make the inside of this person harmonize with his well-formed exterior. No one was as close to him as Alcibiades, a younger man of uncommon good looks and great talent, who was arrogant, brave, thoughtless, and above all, of fiery temperament. He pursued Alcibiades tirelessly, engaged him in discussion at every opportunity, to prevent him, through friendly admonition and loving rebukes, from the excesses of ambition and lasciviousness, to which he tended by nature. Plato, on occasion, allows Socrates to use expressions which seem almost amorous; because of this, Socrates was accused, in later times, of a criminal association with young people.

But the enemies of Socrates themselves, Aristophanes in comedy, Melitus in his accusation, don't make the slightest mention of this. It is true, that Melitus accused him, as Socrates' answer clearly showed, of corrupting the youth, but only in regard to the law of religion and politics, towards which he supposedly made the youth indifferent. Granted also, the corruption of morals at that time had gone so far that this blasphemy against nature was almost taken as natural, but his enemies would not have remained entirely silent about this, if it had

not been impossible to publicly accuse the model of chastity and abstinence of such a beastly lechery. One reads the strong reproaches, which he made to Critias and Critobulus; one reads the testimony that the wanton, half-drunk Alcibiades made against him, in Plato's dialogues. The utter silence of his enemies and slanderers, and the positive evidence of his friends to the contrary, leaves no doubt, that the accusation was groundless and would be a punishable calumny.

The expressions of Plato, as strangely as they also ring in our ears, prove nothing further, than that this unnatural gallantry was at that time the manner of speaking, as perhaps the most serious-minded man of our time wouldn't refrain from, when he writes to a lady, as if he were in love.

The Genius of Socrates

The opinion of scholars is divided, about his guardian spirit [*Daemon*], which Socrates purported to possess, and which, as he said, always prevented him from doing anything harmful. Some believe that Socrates, himself, would have allowed a little fabrication in this, in order to find a hearing with the superstitious population; but all this seems to dispute his usual truthfulness. Others see in this guardian spirit a keen sense of good and evil, which, through reflection, long experience, and constant exercise, instinctively became moral judgment, by means of which, he could judge and test every free action by its probable consequences and effects, without being able to account to himself for this faculty. But, several instances are found in Xenophon as well as Plato, where this spirit foretells things to Socrates, which are not demonstrated by any natural power of the soul. Perhaps these were added by his disciples from good intentions; perhaps also, Socrates, who, as we saw, was inclined to raptures, had a weakness or enthusiastic imagination, sufficient to hypothesize a familiar spirit, to account for this lively moral feeling, which he did not know how to otherwise explain; and, also, subsequently, to attribute notions to it, which arise from entirely different causes. Must an excellent man necessarily be free from all weaknesses and prejudices? Today, it is no longer a point of merit, to mock visions. Perhaps, in Socrates' time, it required an uncommon strain of genius, which he employed to a more useful purpose. It was usual for him, in any case, to tolerate any superstition, which did not lead directly to moral corruption.

Political Developments in Athens

The felicity of the human race was his only study. As soon as a prejudice or superstition gave rise to open violence, injury to human rights, corruption of morals, etc., nothing in the world could stop him from defying all threats and persecutions, to declare himself against it. There was a traditional superstition among the Greeks that the spirits of the unburied dead must wander restlessly, for 100 years, on the bank of the River Styx, before they were allowed to cross over. The first founders of society might have taught this delusion to a barbarous people, out of laudable intentions.

However, in Socrates' time, it cost many brave patriots their lives, through a shameful abuse. The Athenians obtained a decisive victory over the Lacedemonians at the island of Argos. But the commanders of the victorious fleet were prevented by a storm from burying the dead. On their return to Athens, they were publicly accused of the crime of this omission in the most ungrateful way. On this day, Socrates presided in the Senate of the Prythaeum, which oversaw such public affairs. The malice of a few powerful people in the realm, the hypocrisy of the priests, and the meanness of the mercenary rhetoricians and demagogues, combined to provoke the blind passion of the people, against these defenders of the state. The people pressed vehemently for their condemnation. Even a part of the Senate was bewitched by this vulgar madness; and the rest didn't have enough courage to oppose the general frenzy. Everyone consented to condemn these unfortunate patriots to death.

Socrates, alone, had the courage to defend their innocence. He scorned the threat of the people in power and the rage of the furious rabble, and stood entirely alone on the side of persecuted innocence, and preferred that the anger be directed against him, rather than consent to such a terrible injustice. Nonetheless, all his endeavors on their behalf ended fruitlessly. He was mortified to see blind passion gain the upper hand, and the Republic inflict disgrace on itself, sacrificing its bravest defenders to a mistaken prejudice.

The following year, the Athenians were decisively defeated by the Lacedemonians, their fleet levelled, their capital besieged, and brought to such an extreme, that they had to surrender, unconditionally. It is very likely, that

the lack of experienced commanders on the Athenian side, was, at least in part, the cause of this defeat. Lysander, the commander of the Lacedemonians, who had taken the city, promoted a rebellious faction, transformed the democratic government into an oligarchy, and installed a Council of Thirty, who were known by the name of the Thirty Tyrants. The cruelest enemy would not have been able to rage in the city, as these monsters raged. Under the pretext of punishing political crime and rebellion, the most righteous people in the city were robbed of their lives or their fortunes. Plunder, robbery, and banishment, the latter publicly, the former surreptitiously, were deeds with which they distinguished their government.

How Socrates' heart must have bled to see Critias, who had formerly been a student, in the leadership of this holy terror! Yes, Critias, his former friend and pupil, now proved himself to be an open enemy, and sought the opportunity to persecute him. The wise man had once harshly rebuked him for his swinish and perverted lechery, and since that time, the ogre bore a secret resentment, which increasingly sought an opportunity to erupt.

When he and Charicles were named as legislators, they introduced a law that no one should teach rhetoric, in order to find a reason to indict Socrates. They had heard that Socrates had defamed them, and had repeatedly let it be known, that it would indeed be wonderful, if shepherds, who made the flocks entrusted to them smaller and more meager, and yet, should not be regarded as bad herdsmen; but it would be even more wonderful, if the leaders of a state made the citizens fewer and worse off, and yet were not regarded as bad leaders.

They sent for him, showed him the law, and forbade him to engage in conversation with the young people.

"Is it permitted," replied Socrates, "to ask you about that which in this ban isn't quite clear to me?"

"Oh, yes!" answered one.

"I am ready," he rejoined, "to follow the law, and fear only to offend from ignorance. I ask, therefore, for a clearer explanation: If by rhetoric, it is understood, an art by means of which to speak correctly, or to speak wrongly? If it is the former, then I must refrain from saying anything about how one should speak correctly; but, if it is the latter, then, I must instruct no one, how he should speak wrongly?"

Charicles became indignant, and said: "If you don't understand this, then we will make it clear, and absolutely forbid you to speak with young people."

"Then I would also know, how should I conduct myself," said Socrates. "Specify for me, how long do you consider people to be young?"

"As long as they can't sit in the council," answered Charicles, "that is, as long as they don't have mature understanding, namely until 30 years."

"But, if I want to buy something," replied Socrates, "that a younger man under 30 years has to sell, should I not ask, how much it costs?"

"This is not forbidden you," said Charicles, "but you know very well that you at times ask certain things: refrain from such questions anymore!"

"Then tell me," said Socrates further, "if a young man asks me, where Charicles or Critias live, may I answer him?"

"Yes, yes," said Critias, "but refrain from the worn-out examples and similes of leather tailors, room servants, and blacksmiths,"

"Presumably," replied Socrates, "also the idea, which I am accustomed to elucidate through these examples, about justice, holiness, piety, etc.?"

"Entirely correct!" answered Charicles. "And above all things, speak not of shepherds. Pay attention to that, or I fear, you will also make 'the herd' smaller."

Socrates paid as little attention to their threats, as he did to their absurd law, which they had no authority to establish, and which was directly against sound reason and the law of nature. He continued his efforts to improve virtue and justice with untiring enthusiasm. Even so, the tyrants didn't dare to attack him directly. They tried roundabout ways, and sought to embroil him in their injustices: They assigned him, together with four other citizens, to bring Leon of Salamin to Athens, so as to execute him. The others assumed the task; but Socrates declared, that he never would offer his hands to commit an injustice.

"So do you then," said Charicles, "want to have freedom to speak what you want, and not suffer for it?"

"Every possible evil," he answered, "would I suffer for it, only not this: to do injustice to someone."

Charicles was silent, and the rest looked at each other. These liberties would have cost Socrates his life, if the people hadn't tired of the cruelty of these tyrants, provoked a rebellion, slain their high-ranking leaders, and driven the rest of them away from the city.

Under the restored democratic government, the old enemies of Socrates, the Sophists, priests, and orators, found the long-awaited opportunity to persecute him with better luck, and finally to do away with him. Anytus, Melitus, and Lycon are the three of those, who, to their unforgettable disgrace, lent themselves to the execution of these shameful schemes. They spread the slander among the people: Socrates supposedly taught Critias the principle of tyranny, which he so lately exercised with such extreme cruelty. Anyone who knows the gullibility and inconstancy of the rabble, will not be amazed, that the Athenians gave a hearing to such an obvious falsehood, even though everyone knew what had happened between Socrates and the Tyrants.

A few years before this, Alcibiades, a great talent, but a very wild character, had smashed the statue of Hermes, in the company of other mischievous youths, and had openly mocked the Eleusian mysteries, and then, because of these insolences, had to flee from his homeland. These stories were stirred up again, and spread by the enemies of Socrates, that he had supposedly taught contempt of religion to the young men. Nothing was more contrary to the

teaching and conduct of Socrates than such a heinous deed. As superstitious as it might have been, he had always honored public worship; and, as concerned the Eleusian mysteries, he counselled his friends to be initiated in the same; even though he had, at the same time, his own reasons not to do so.

There are good grounds to believe, that the great mysteries of Eleusis were nothing other than the teachings of true natural religion, and a rational interpretation of myths. If Socrates himself refused to accept the initiation, it is probable that he did so, in order to retain the freedom to spread these secrets in an unrestrained way, which the priests would have taken away from him through the initiation.

When the slanderers believed they had sufficiently prepared the people by the malicious dissemination of these stories, Melitus brought a formal charge against Socrates to the state authorities, thereby giving the people the news of it. The law court of the Hellenes convened, and the usual number of citizens who would judge the defendants, was determined through lot. The charges were, that Socrates acted against the law, in that he: 1) didn't worship the gods of the state and wanted to adopt a new divinity, and, 2) corrupted the young, to whom he taught contempt of everything holy. His penalty was to be death.

His friends brought him well-thought-out speeches for his defense.

"They are very fine," he said, "but for an old man like me, those kinds of arts are not befitting."

"Will you not yourself draft something for your defense?" they asked him.

"The best defense that I can make," he answered, "is that I never did anything unjust in my life. I have, at different times, begun to think of a defense speech, but God always prevents me from it. Perhaps it is his will, that I die an easy death this year, before the frailty and illness corresponding to old age comes, and neither my friends nor myself should be responsible."

There are those who have wanted, for some time, to find in these words the evidence that Socrates was faint hearted, and would fear the inconvenience of

age more than death. It requires more than a little boldness for the reader to be willing to believe this!

The Trial of Socrates

On the appointed day for this public investigation, Melitus, Anytus, and Lyko appeared, the first for the poets, the second for the people, and the last for the orators. They stepped up to the podium, one after the other, and gave the most venomous and slanderous speeches against Socrates.

After they had done, he stepped up in their place, without trembling or hesitating, without attempting to move the judges to sympathy with a pathetic aspect, according to the custom at tribunals, at that time; but, with a composed manner, and confidence in his wisdom. He delivered an unrehearsed and unprepared, but manly and forceful speech, refuting, without bitterness, all the slanders and malicious rumors which had been spread against him, shamed his accusers, and showed contradictions and absurdities in their own accusations. He met his judges with the necessary respect, but spoke in such a confident and his distinctively deliberate tone, that his speech occasionally was interrupted by discontented murmurs. He concluded with the following words:

"Don't be indignant, Athenians, that I, contrary to the defendant's custom, don't speak to you in tears, or have my children, relatives, and friends appear in a pathetic parade, in order to arouse your sympathy. I have refrained from this, not from arrogance or defiance; but, because I consider it ill-mannered to implore a judge, and to want to win him over, otherwise than through the legitimacy of the affair. The judge took an oath to decide according to law and equity, and to give expression, as little to his sympathy, as to his anger.

"Therefore, we defendants act against law and equity, if we try to make you break your oaths through our laments, and against the respect that we owe to you, if we think you capable of doing it, I will, in no way whatsoever, owe my deliverance to such means, which are neither just, nor fair, nor god-fearing; since, I would, thereby, be guilty of the godlessness, of which Melitus accused me just now. If I try to make you perjure yourself through my entreaty, this would be the most convincing evidence that I don't believe in God; therefore,

this defense itself would convict me of atheism. But, no! I am more convinced, than all my prosecutors, of the existence of God, and surrender myself here to God and you, to be judged according to truth, and to impose on myself, what you regard as good for you as the best for me."

The judges were extremely dissatisfied by his composed and fearless manner, and interrupted Plato, who stepped forward after him, and began to speak. "Although I am the youngest, Athenians," began Plato, "of those who climbed up to this place—"

"Climb down!" they shouted out to him, and would not let him continue his speech. Socrates was found guilty by a majority of 33 votes.

It was the custom in Athens, that a condemned person must impose some punishment upon himself: such as a fine, imprisonment, or banishment, to ratify the equity of the verdict, or rather to confess their crimes. Socrates was supposed to choose; but he wanted in no way to be so unjust as to find himself guilty.

"If I am supposed to say frankly, what I would believe I deserve, so know, Athenians, I would believe, through the service I provided the Republic, to be of good value, that I should be supported from public funds in the Prytaneum."

He agreed, on the urging of his friends, nevertheless, to a small fine, but wouldn't concede to their pooling together a vast sum. The judges deliberated over which penalty they should impose on him, and the malice of his enemies brought it to pass, that he would be condemned to death:

"You were very hasty in your judgment, Athenians," said Socrates, "and, thereby, have given the slanderers of this state the material to reproach you, that you took wise Socrates' life, for they shall call me wise, even if I am not, in order to be able to criticize you all the more. You would not have needed to wait long, and I would be dead, without your help. You see, how close I am to death already. I guess you hereby have rewarded me with death!

"Do you possibly believe, men of Athens, that words to charm and persuade you, would fail me, if I would be of the opinion, that one must do and say anything, to receive a favorable judgment? Certainly not! If I succumb, it is not from lack of words and ideas, but from lack of insolence and malicious behavior, to allow you to hear such a thing, which would be pleasant to you, but, unbecoming for a righteous man to say.

"Howls, cries, and other such grovelling means of persuasion, to which you are accustomed from others, are to me utterly repulsive. I had resolved to myself, at the very beginning, to lose my life, rather than save it through ignoble means. Because I consider, that neither I, nor another, be any more entitled to do everything before the court, in order to escape death, than in war. How often does a man in battle have an opportunity to save his life, if he throws away his weapon and begs for mercy, from the one who pursues him? And so, there are in life, many occasions, where death, indeed, can be avoided, if only, one be shameless enough to do and say anything, which is required for it.

"To escape death, men of Athens, is not so difficult, but to escape disgrace, is more so, because it is quicker than death. Hence, it also follows, that I, a slow, old man, am seized by the slowest; there, on the other hand, my accusers, who are quite sprightly and brisk, will be overtaken by a very sudden shame. I go to death, to which you have sentenced me, and you to shame and dishonor, to which truth and justice condemn you. I am satisfied with the verdict; presumably, you are also. Therefore, things go just as they should, and I, for my part, find the ways of destiny also just and worthy of admiration."

After he had spoken these truths, frankly, but without anger, to those who convicted him, he turned to those who had voted for his acquittal, and talked to them with a kind of contemplation about life, death, and immortality, which might have been suitable to the mental capacity of the general public at that time. But, when he was alone with his students and trusted friends, he allowed himself to go over this material with manifold thoroughness. Accordingly, we shall here spare our readers from the more mature thoughts of this philosopher, which they may become conversant with in the *Phaedon* dialogue.

Socrates in Prison

He was led into prison, which, as Seneca says, lost its shame thorough the presence of this man, in that there can be no jail, where a Socrates is. On the way, he met a few of his students, who were completely inconsolable over that which had befallen him. "Why do you weep?" the wise one asked them. "Has nature not sentenced me likewise by my birth to death? If death snatched me from a true and beneficial good, then I and those who love me would have cause to regret my death. Since I, however, leave behind nothing here below but misery and suffering, so, on the contrary, my friends should wish me luck on my trip."

Apollodorus, who is described as a very kind-hearted man of somewhat weak understanding, could not accept that his teacher and friend must die so innocently.

"Good Apollodorus," said Socrates, laughing, while he laid his hand on his head, "would you rather that I should die guilty?"

The rest of what happened in jail, and in the last hours of the dying Socrates, the reader will learn in the following dialogues. But we ought not disregard a discussion with Crito, from which Plato made a separate dialogue. Some days before the execution of Socrates, Crito came to him in prison before the break of day, found him in sweet sleep, and quietly sat himself next to his bed, so as not to disturb him. When Socrates awoke, he asked him, "Why so early today, friend Crito?" Crito informed him, he had a report that the next day, the death sentence would be carried out. "If it is the will of God," answered Socrates with his usual composure, "so be it. However, I don't believe that it will happen tomorrow. Just now, as you came to me, I was having a pleasant dream. A woman of uncommon beauty appeared to me, in a long white robe, called me by name, and said: In three days, you will arrive in your fertile Pythia."

A graceful allusion, by means of which he intimated that he longed for the life to come, as in Homer, the angry Achilles longed for a way out of the camp, and to Pythia, his fatherland. But Crito, who had an entirely different intention, revealed to his friend that he had bribed the guard, and arranged everything necessary, to abduct him at night from jail; and that it depended at this point only on Socrates, if he wanted to escape a disgraceful death. He also

sought to convince him, through the strongest exhortations, that this was his responsibility and duty. Since he knew of Socrates' love for his native land, he pointed out to him how he should be obliged to prevent the Athenians from shedding innocent blood; he further reasoned, that he must want to do this for his friends. Besides the pain of his loss, they would also remain exposed to the shameful reproach, that they had neglected his liberation.

Finally, he did not refrain from painting a very moving picture of the misfortune of his helpless children, who would be robbed of his fatherly lessons, example, and protection.

Socrates answered: "My dear Crito, your friendly intentions are laudable, and would be accepted with thanks, if they were in agreement with sound reason. But if they were, however, to the contrary, then we must guard ourselves so much the more against them. We should first consider, if your proposal be just, and in agreement with reason, or not. I have always been accustomed to let myself be convinced of nothing, except what I, after thorough consideration, regarded as the best, and I see no reason, why I should deviate from what have been my lifelong rules until now, just because I am now in the situation in which you see me: They still appear to me in precisely the same light, and therefore, I cannot do otherwise, than to continue to treasure and honor them."

After he refuted Crito's false premises, and showed him the duty that a reasonable man owed to his country and the law, he continued, "If I now were of a mind to escape, and together, the laws and the republic would appear, in order to ask me: 'Tell us, Socrates, what you want to do. Don't you realize, that because of you, the laws and the city-states are called to their destruction? Or, do you believe that a city could continue to exist, and not necessarily be destroyed, where the court's judgment has no power, and could be thwarted by any private person?' What can I answer, my worthy one? Perhaps, that an injustice is done to me, and I don't deserve the judgment that was issued against me? Should I answer in this way?"

Crito: "By Jupiter, yes, O Socrates!"

Socrates: "But if the laws retort: 'How Socrates, have you not taken it upon yourself to approve all verdicts of the republic?' I would be startled by this proposition; but they would continue: 'Don't let this astonish you, Socrates! But only answer; you are, indeed, a friend of question and answer; declare what displeases you about us and the republic, that you want to throw us to the ground? Are you displeased about the laws of marriage, through which your father married your mother, and brought you to the world; are you displeased with these?'

" 'In no way!' I would answer.

" 'So, perhaps you object to our ways of educating and bringing up the children? Is the institution not laudable, which we made to this end, and which caused your father to educate you in music and gymnastics?'

" 'Very laudable!' must I reply.

" 'You acknowledge therefore, that you have us to thank for your birth, your upbringing, and your education; and consequently, we can consider you, as well as each of your forefathers, as our son and subordinate. Therefore, we ask: Do you have an equal right, and are you justified, to do everything to us, that we do to you, to pay with the same coins? You would not presume to have the same right as your father, nor the same right as your commander, if you have one, to make them undergo everything which you endured from them, to offend them with words and deeds, if they had affronted you somehow; and with the fatherland, and with the laws, will you have the same right? Will you regard yourself as justified to revolt against us, as soon as we decide something against you? Is it for you to decide, to cause the downfall of the laws and the fatherland? And do you believe yourself to act justly? You, who would earnestly devote yourself to virtue? Does your wisdom run thus, such that you do not even see, that father and mother and ancestors are far from being as venerated, stand in no such honor, are not treasured as highly, are not as holy, both to the gods as well as to all men who are in their right mind, as the fatherland?'

"They continue in these tones, and finally add: 'Consider, Socrates, if you don't proceed against us unreasonably? We have fathered, trained, and educated you;

we have allowed you, and each Athenian citizen, as far as it stood in our power, to participate in all benefits which social life can provide, and nonetheless, we granted you, and everyone who settles in Athens, permission to depart with his belongings, and repair to wherever he wants, if, after an adequate examination, our national constitution is not suitable to him. The gates of Athens stand open to anyone, who doesn't like the city, and he can take his belongings with him unhindered. But, whoever has seen how things are with us, and how we administer justice and law, and nevertheless remains with us, tacitly entered into an agreement, to consent to everything that we command him; and if he is disobedient, then he commits a threefold injustice: He is disobedient to his parents, disobedient to his training and teachers, and he violated the agreement, which he entered into with us.'

"Dearest friend Crito! I believe I hear this speech, as the Corybantes imagine they hear the sound of the flutes, and the voice rings so loudly in my ears, that I can hear nothing else over it."

Crito went away convinced, although reluctantly, that reason disapproved of his proposal.