sion which the figure of Socrates, and the way he carried out his discussions with his fellow citizens, produced on his contemporaries, especially on his disciples. In the case of the Socratic dialogues written by Plato, the originality of literary form consists not so much in the use of a discourse divided into questions and answers (dialectical discourse existed long before Socrates) as in the assigning of the central role to Socrates. The result is a unique relationship: between the author and his work, on the one hand, and, on the other, between the author and Socrates. The author pretends not to be involved in his work, apparently content merely to reproduce a debate which once opposed conflicting theses; at most, we can presume that he prefers the thesis which he makes Socrates defend. In a sense, then, he takes on the mask of Socrates.

Such is the situation we find in Plato's dialogues. Plato in his own individuality never appears in them. The author doesn't even intervene to say that it was he who composed the dialogues, and he does not include himself in the discussions which take place between the interlocutors. On the other hand, neither does he specify what, in the remarks which are recorded, belongs to Socrates and what belongs to him. In some dialogues, it is therefore often extremely difficult to distinguish what is Socratic from what is Platonic.

Thus, shortly after his death, Socrates appears as a mythical figure. And it is precisely this myth of Socrates which has indelibly marked the whole history of philosophy.

SOCRATIC IGNORANCE AND THE CRITIQUE OF SOPHISTIC KNOWLEDGE

In the *Apology,* Plato reconstructs, in his own way, the speech which Socrates gave before his judges in the trial in which he was condemned to death. Plato tells how Chaerephon, one of Socrates'

friends, had asked the Delphic oracle if there was anyone wiser *(sophos)* than Socrates.[4] The oracle had replied that no one was wiser than Socrates. Socrates wondered what the oracle could possibly have meant, and began a long search among politicians, poets, and artisans—people who, according to the Greek tradition discussed in the previous chapter, possessed wisdom or know-how—in order to find someone wiser than he. He noticed that all these people thought they knew everything, whereas in fact they knew nothing. Socrates then concluded that if in fact he was the wisest person, it was because he did *not* think he knew that which he did not know. What the oracle meant, therefore, was that the wisest human being was "he who knows that he is worth nothing as far as knowledge is concerned."[5] This is precisely the Platonic definition of the philosopher in the dialogue entitled the *Symposium:* the philosopher knows nothing, but he is conscious of his ignorance.

Socrates' task—entrusted to him, says the *Apology,* by the Delphic oracle (in other words, the god Apollo)—was therefore to make other people recognize their lack of knowledge and of wisdom. In order to accomplish this mission, Socrates himself adopted the attitude of someone who knew nothing—an attitude of naiveté. This is the well-known Socratic irony: the feigned ignorance and candid air with which, for instance, he asked questions in order to find out whether someone was wiser than he. In the words of a character from the *Republic:*[6] "That's certainly Socrates' old familiar irony! I knew it. I predicted to everyone present, Socrates, that you'd refuse to reply, that you'd feign ignorance, and that you'd do anything but reply if someone asked you a question."

This is why Socrates is always the questioner in his discussions. As Aristotle remarked, "He admits that he knows nothing."[7] According to Cicero, "Socrates used to denigrate himself, and conceded more than was necessary to the interlocutors he wanted to refute. Thus, thinking one thing and saying another, he took plea-

sure in that dissimulation which the Greeks call 'irony.'"[8] In fact, however, such an attitude is not a form of artifice or intentional dissimulation. Rather, it is a kind of humor which refuses to take oneself or other people entirely seriously; for everything human, and even everything philosophical, is highly uncertain, and we have no right to be proud of it. Socrates' mission, then, was to make people aware of their lack of knowledge.

This was a revolution in the concept of knowledge. To be sure, Socrates could and willingly did address himself to the common people, who had only conventional knowledge and acted only under the influence of prejudices without any basis in reflection, in order to show them that their so-called knowledge had no foundation. Above all, however, Socrates addressed himself to those who had been persuaded by their education that they possessed Knowledge. Prior to Socrates, there had been two types of such people. On the one hand, there had been the aristocrats of knowledge, or masters of wisdom and truth, such as Parmenides, Empedocles, and Heraclitus, who opposed their theories to the ignorance of the mob. On the other hand, there had been the democrats of knowledge, who claimed to be able to sell their knowledge to all comers; these were, of course, the Sophists. For Socrates, knowledge was not an ensemble of propositions and formulas which could be written, communicated, or sold ready-made. This is apparent at the beginning of the *Symposium.* Socrates arrives late because he has been outside meditating, standing motionless and "applying his mind to itself." When he enters the room, Agathon, who is the host, asks him to come sit next to him, so that "by contact with you . . . I may profit from this windfall of wisdom which you have just stumbled across." "How nice it would be," replies Socrates, "if wisdom were the kind of thing that could flow from what is more full into what is more empty."[9] This means that knowledge is not a prefabricated object, or a finished content

which can be directly transmitted by writing or by just any discourse.

When Socrates claims that he knows only one thing—namely, that he does not know anything—he is repudiating the traditional concept of knowledge. His philosophical method consists not in transmitting knowledge (which would mean *responding* to his disciples' questions) but in *questioning* his disciples, for he himself has nothing to say to them or teach them, so far as the theoretical content of knowledge is concerned. Socratic irony consists in pretending that one wants to learn something from one's interlocutor, in order to bring him to the point of discovering that he knows nothing of the area in which he claims to be wise.

Yet this critique of knowledge, although it seems entirely negative, has a double meaning. On the one hand, it presupposes that knowledge and truth, as we have already seen, cannot be received ready-made, but must be engendered by the individual himself. This is why Socrates says in the *Theaetetus* that when he talks with other people, he contents himself with the role of midwife. He himself knows nothing and teaches nothing,[10] but is content to ask questions; and it is Socrates' questions and interrogations which help his interlocutors to give birth to "their" truth. Such an image shows that knowledge is found within the soul itself and it is up to the individual to discover it, once he has discovered, thanks to Socrates, that his own knowledge was empty. From the point of view of his own thought, Plato expressed this idea mythically, by saying that all knowledge is the remembrance of a vision which the soul has had in a previous existence. We thus have to learn how to remember.

On the other hand, in Socrates the point of view is wholly different. Socrates' questions do not lead his interlocutor to know something, or to wind up with conclusions which could be formulated in the form of propositions on a given subject. Rather, it

is *because* the interlocutor discovers the vanity of his knowledge that he will at the same time discover his truth. In other words, by passing from knowledge to himself, he will begin to place himself in question. In the Socratic dialogue, the real question is less what is being talked about than who is doing the talking. This is made explicit by Nicias, one of Plato's characters:

> Don't you know that whoever approaches Socrates closely and begins a dialogue with him, even if he begins by talking about something entirely different, nevertheless finds himself forcibly carried around in a circle by this discourse, until he gets to the point of having to give an account of himself—as much with regard to the way he is living now, as to the way he has lived his past existence. When that point is reached, Socrates doesn't let you leave until he has submitted all that to the test of his control, well and thoroughly . . . It is a pleasure for me to keep company with him. I see no harm in being reminded that I have acted or am acting in a way that is not good. He who does not run away from this will necessarily be more prudent in the rest of his life.[11]

Thus, Socrates brought his interlocutors to examine and become aware of themselves. "Like a gadfly," Socrates harassed his interlocutors with questions which placed them in question, and obliged them to pay attention to themselves and to take care of themselves: "What? Dear friend, you are an Athenian, citizen of a city greater and more famous than any other for its science and its power, and you do not blush at the fact that you give care to your fortune, in order to increase it as much as possible, and to your reputation and your honors; but when it comes to your thought, to your truth, to your soul, which you ought to be improving, you have no care for it, and you don't think of it!" (*Apology*, 29d–e).

The point was thus no so much to question the apparent knowledge we think we have, as to question *ourselves* and the values which guide our own lives. In the last analysis, Socrates' interlocutor, after carrying on a dialogue with him, no longer has any idea of why he acts. He becomes aware of the contradictions in his discourse, and of his own internal contradictions. He doubts himself; and, like Socrates, he comes to know that he knows nothing. As he does this, however, he assumes a distance with regard to himself. He splits into two parts, one of which henceforth identifies itself with Socrates, in the mutual accord which Socrates demands from his interlocutor at each stage of the discussion. The interlocutor thus acquires awareness and begins to question himself.

The real problem is therefore not the problem of knowing this or that, but of *being* in this or that way: "I have no concern at all for what most people are concerned about: financial affairs, administration of property, appointments to generalships, oratorical triumphs in public, magistracies, coalitions, political factions. I did not take this path . . . but rather the one where I could do the most good to each one of you in particular, by persuading you to be less concerned with what you *have* than with what you *are*; so that you may make yourselves as excellent and as rational as possible." Socrates practiced this call to being not only by means of his interrogations and his irony, but above all by means of his way of being, by his way of life, and by his very being.

THE CALL FROM "INDIVIDUAL" TO "INDIVIDUAL"

Doing philosophy no longer meant, as the Sophists had it, acquiring knowledge, know-how, or *sophia;* it meant questioning ourselves, because we have the feeling that we are not what we ought to be. This was to be the defining role of the *philosopher*—the person who desires wisdom—in Plato's *Symposium*. In turn, this feeling comes from the fact that, in the person of Socrates, we have encountered a personality which, by its mere presence, obliges

those who approach it to question themselves. This is what Alcibiades allows us to understand at the end of the *Symposium*. It is in Alcibiades' speech in praise of Socrates that the representation of the Individual appears, perhaps for the first time in history. This is the Individual dear to Kierkegaard—the Individual as unique and unclassifiable personality. Normally, says Alcibiades, there are different types or classifications of individuals. For instance, there is the "great general, noble and courageous," like Achilles in Homeric times; or, among contemporaries, Brasidas, the Spartan leader. There is also the "clever and eloquent statesman": Nestor in Homeric times, and nowadays Pericles. Socrates, by contrast, is impossible to classify; he cannot be compared with any other man. At most, he could be compared with Silenoi or Satyrs. He is *atopos*, meaning strange, extravagant, absurd, unclassifiable, disturbing. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates says of himself: "I am utterly disturbing [*atopos*], and I create only perplexity [*aporia*]."[12]

There is something fascinating about this unique personality, which exerts a kind of magical attraction. According to Alcibiades, Socrates' philosophical discourse bites the heart like a viper, and provokes in the soul a state of philosophical possession, delirium, and drunkenness; in other words, the listener's soul is completely bowled over.[13] It is important to emphasize that Socrates acts upon his listeners in an irrational way, by the emotions he provokes and the love he inspires. In a dialogue written by Socrates' disciple Aeschines of Sphettos, Socrates says with regard to Alcibiades that although he (Socrates) is not able to teach Alcibiades anything useful—which is not surprising, since Socrates does not know anything—he nevertheless thinks he can make him a better person, thanks to the love he feels for him, and because he lives with him.[14] In the *Theages*—a dialogue wrongly attributed to Plato but actually written between 369 and 345 B.C., and thus probably during Plato's lifetime[15]—a disciple tells Socrates that,

although he has not received any instruction from Socrates, he still makes progress when he is near him and touches him. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades says again and again that Socrates' incantations have a disturbing effect on him: "I was in such a state that it did not seem possible to live while behaving as I was behaving. . . . He forces me to admit to myself that I do not take care for myself."[16]

It is not that Socrates is more eloquent or more brilliant than others. On the contrary, says Alcibiades, one's first impression is that his discourses seem utterly ridiculous: "He talks about packsaddled asses, blacksmiths, shoemakers, and tanners; he always seems to repeat the same phrases on the same subjects."[17] Here Alcibiades seems to be alluding to Socrates' habitual argument (which we find in the Socratic reminiscences written by Xenophon)[18] according to which he is astonished at the fact that in order to learn the trade of a shoemaker, a carpenter, a blacksmith, or an equerry, or even to learn how to train a horse or an ox, people know where to go to find a master. When it comes to justice, however, they don't know where to go. In Xenophon's text, the Sophist Hippias remarks to Socrates that he always repeats "the same phrases on the same subjects." Socrates admits this willingly, to which his interlocutor replies that he, Hippias, quite to the contrary, always tries to say something new, even if it is about justice. Socrates very much wants to know what Hippias could say that was new on a subject which ought not to change; but Hippias refuses to respond until Socrates gives his opinion on justice: "You have been making fun of others long enough, by always questioning and refuting them, without ever wanting to explain yourself to anybody or to set forth your opinion." Socrates replies: "I never stop showing what I think is just. If not in words, I show it by my actions." This means, in the last analysis, that it is the just person's life and existence which best determine what justice is.

Socrates' powerful individuality was able to awaken the individ-

uality of his interlocutors, yet their reactions vary tremendously. We have seen the joy which Nicias felt when Socrates subjected him to questioning; Alcibiades, for his part, tried to resist his influence. He felt nothing but shame before Socrates, and in order to escape his attraction, he sometimes wished for his death. Socrates could only urge his interlocutor to examine himself and put himself to the test. In order for a dialogue to be established which, as Nicias says, can lead the individual to give an account of himself and of his life, the person who talks with Socrates must submit, along with Socrates, to the demands of rational discourse—that is, to the demands of reason. In other words, caring for ourselves and questioning ourselves occur only when our individuality is transcended and we rise to the level of universality, which is represented by what the two interlocutors have in common.

SOCRATES' KNOWLEDGE, OR THE ABSOLUTE VALUE OF MORAL INTENT

We have glimpsed what Socrates' knowledge can be, over and above his lack of knowledge. Socrates says again and again that he knows nothing, that he has nothing to teach to others, and that others must think for themselves and discover their truth by themselves. Yet we can at least wonder whether there wasn't also knowledge that Socrates himself had discovered, by himself and in himself. A passage from the *Apology*, in which knowledge is opposed to lack of knowledge, allows us to hazard this conjecture.[19] In the passage, Socrates imagines that other people might say to him, "Aren't you ashamed to have lived the kind of life which now is placing you in mortal danger?" Socrates claims he would respond as follows: "You do not speak well, my friend, if you think that a man who is worth something ought to calculate the risks of living and dying, instead of considering only, when he acts,

whether he is acting justly or unjustly, and whether his deeds are those of a good man or a bad one." From this point of view, what appears as lack of knowledge is the fear of death: "For to fear death, Gentlemen, is nothing other than to think one is wise when one is not, for it means to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death might not be the greatest of goods for man, but people fear it as if they were perfectly certain it is the greatest of evils. Yet how could it be anything but the most shameful ignorance to think one knows what one does not know?"[20] Socrates, for his part, knows that he knows nothing about death. Nevertheless, he does claim to know something concerning an entirely different subject: "I do, however, know that committing injustice and disobeying my betters, whether God or man, is bad and shameful. Therefore, I shall never fear or flee something whose badness or goodness I am ignorant of, as opposed to those evils which I know are bad."

It is most interesting to note that here knowledge and lack-of-knowledge have to do not with concepts, but with values: on the one hand, the value of death; on the other, the value of moral good and moral evil. Socrates knows nothing about the value which ought to be attributed to death, because it is not in his power, and because the experience of his own death escapes him by definition. Yet he does know the value of moral action and intention, for they do depend upon his choice, his decision, and his engagement. They therefore have their origin within him. Here again, knowledge is not a series of propositions or an abstract theory, but the certainty of choice, decision, and initiative. Knowledge is not just plain knowing, but knowing-what-ought-to-be-preferred, and hence knowing how to live. And it is this knowledge of value which guides him in his discussions with his interlocutors: "And if some one of you objects and claims that he does care (for intelligence, for truth, and for the best state of his soul), then I will not release him on the spot and go away, but I will question him, ex-

amine him, and refute him; and if he does not seem to me to have acquired virtue, but says that he has, I will reproach him with attributing the least importance to what is worth the most, and the most importance to what is most base."[21]

This knowledge of value is taken from Socrates' inner experience—the experience of a choice which implicates him entirely. Here once more, then, the only knowledge consists in a personal discovery which comes from within. Such interiority is reinforced in Socrates by the idea of the *daimōn,* that divine voice which, he says, speaks to him and stops him from doing certain things. Was this a mystical experience or a mythical image? It is difficult to say. In any case, we can see in it a kind of figure of what later was called moral conscience.

Socrates seems to have admitted implicitly that an innate desire for the good exists in all human beings. This is the sense in which he presented himself as a simple midwife whose role was limited to making his interlocutors discover their inner possibilities. We can now better understand the meaning of the Socratic paradox according to which no one is evil willingly;[22] or, in another formulation, virtue is knowledge.[23] He means that if human beings commit moral evil, it is because they think they will thereby find good. If they are virtuous, it is because they know, with all their soul and all their being, where the true good lies. The philosopher's entire role will therefore consist in permitting his interlocutor to "realize," in the strongest sense of the word, what the true good is and what true value is. At the basis of Socratic knowledge is love of the good.[24]

The content of Socratic knowledge is thus essentially "the absolute value of moral intent," and the certainty provided by the choice of this value. This expression is, of course, modern, and Socrates would not have used it. It can, however, help underscore the entire range of the Socratic message. Indeed, we can say that a value is absolute for a person when that person is ready to die for

that value. This is Socrates' attitude concerning "that which is best"—meaning justice, duty, and moral purity. As Socrates repeats several times in the *Apology,* he prefers death and danger to renouncing his duty and his mission.[25] In the *Crito,* Plato imagines that Socrates makes the Laws of Athens speak: they make him understand that if he tries to flee and escape his condemnation, he will do wrong to the city by giving an example of disobedience to the laws; he must not place his own life above what is just.[26] As Socrates says in the *Phaedo:* "If I had not thought that it was more just and more beautiful to leave up to the City the penalty which she may decide to impose upon me, rather than to flee and escape, my bones and my muscles would have been in Megara or Boeotia a long time ago, having been carried there by my judgment about what was 'best.'"[27]

This absolute value of moral choice also appears in another perspective, when Socrates declares that "for the good man, there is no evil, neither during his life, nor after he is dead."[28] This means that all those things that seem to people to be evil—death, sickness, poverty—are not evils for him. In his eyes, there is only one evil thing: moral fault. And there is only one good and one value: the will to do good. This implies that we must not avoid constantly and rigorously examining the way we live, in order to see if it is always guided and inspired by this will to do good. To a certain extent, we can say that what interests Socrates is not to define the theoretical and objective contents of morality—that is, what we ought to do—but to know if we really, concretely *want* to do what we consider just and good—in other words, how we must act. In the *Apology,* Socrates gives no theoretical explanation for why he forces himself to examine his own life and that of others. Instead, he contents himself with saying, on the one hand, that this is the mission with which the deity has entrusted him; and on the other hand, that only such lucidity and rigor with regard to ourselves can give meaning to life: "An unexamined life is not liv-

able for man."[29] Here we find a kind of sketch—still confused and indistinct—of an idea which would be developed later, in the context of a wholly different problematic, by Kant: morality hinges on the purity of the intent which guides action. Such purity consists precisely in giving absolute value to the moral good, and totally renouncing one's individual interest.

There is, moreover, every indication that such wisdom is never acquired once and for all. It is not only others that Socrates never stops testing, but also himself. The purity of moral intent must be constantly renewed and reestablished. Self-transformation is never definitive, but demands perpetual reconquest.

CARE OF THE SELF AND CARE OF OTHERS

Speaking of the strangeness of philosophy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty said that philosophy is "never entirely within the world, yet never outside the world."[30] The same holds true of strange, unclassifiable Socrates. He, too, was neither in the world nor outside it.

On the one hand, in the view of his fellow citizens he proposed a complete reversal of values, which seemed incomprehensible to them: "Again, if I say that the greatest good for man happens to be the following: to spend time every day talking about virtue, as well as the other things you hear me discussing when I examine myself and others, and that an unexamined life is not livable for man—then you will believe me even less."[31]

Socrates' fellow citizens could not help perceiving his invitation to question all their values and their entire way of acting, and to take care for themselves, as a radical break with daily life, with the habits and conventions of everyday life, and with the world which they were familiar. What is more, this invitation to take care for themselves seemed like a call to detach themselves from the city,

coming from man a who was himself somehow outside the world, who was *atopos*, disturbing, unclassifiable, and unsettling. Might not Socrates be the prototype for that image of the philosopher—so widespread, yet so false—who flees the difficulties of life in order to take refuge within his good conscience?

On the other hand, the portrait of Socrates as sketched by Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium*—and also by Xenophon—reveals a man who participated fully in the life of the city around him. This Socrates was almost an ordinary or everyday man: he had a wife and children, and he talked with everybody—in the streets, in the shops, in the gymnasiums. He was also a *bon vivant* who could drink more than anyone else without getting drunk, and a brave, tough soldier.

Care for the self is thus not opposed to care for the city. In the *Apology* and the *Crito*, what Socrates proclaims, in a remarkable way, as his duty and that to which he must sacrifice everything, even his life, is obedience to the laws of the city. In the *Crito*, these personified "Laws" exhort Socrates not to give in to the temptation to escape from prison and flee far from Athens, by making him understand that his egoistic salvation would be an injustice with regard to Athens. This attitude is not one of conformity, for Xenophon makes Socrates say that it is quite possible to "obey the laws while hoping that they change, just as one serves in war while hoping for peace." As Merleau-Ponty has emphasized, "Socrates has a way of obeying which is a way of resisting."[32] He submits to the laws in order to prove, from within the city itself, the truth of his philosophical attitude and the absolute value of moral intention. Hegel was thus wrong to say that "Socrates flees within himself, in order to find the just and good there." Instead, we shall agree with Merleau-Ponty, who wrote: "He thought that it was impossible to be just by oneself. If one is just all by oneself, one ceases to be just."[33]

Care for the self is thus, indissolubly, care for the city and care

for others. We can see this from the example of Socrates himself, whose entire reason for living was to concern himself with others. Socrates had both a missionary and a popular aspect, which we will encounter again in some philosophies of the Hellenistic period: "I am available both to the poor and to the rich, without distinction. . . . That I happen to be like a being that the deity has given to the city, you might conclude from the following considerations. After all, it does not seem human for me to have neglected all my own affairs and to have kept neglecting my own affairs for so many years now, and always to concern myself with your interests, going up to each one of you individually like a father or an elder brother and persuading you to care for virtue."[34]

Thus, Socrates is simultaneously in the world and outside it. He transcends both people and things by his moral demands and the engagement they require; yet he is involved with people and with things because the only true philosophy lies in the everyday. Throughout antiquity, Socrates was the model of the ideal philosopher, whose philosophical work is none other than his life and his death.[35] As Plutarch wrote at the beginning of the second century A.D.:

> Most people imagine that philosophy consists in delivering discourses from the heights of a chair, and in giving classes based on texts. But what these people utterly miss is the uninterrupted philosophy which we see being practiced every day in a way which is perfectly equal to itself. . . . Socrates did not set up grandstands for his audience and did not sit upon a professorial chair; he had no fixed timetable for talking or walking with his friends. Rather, he did philosophy sometimes by joking with them, or by drinking or going to war or to the market with them, and finally by going to prison and drinking poison. He was the first to show that at all times and in every place, in everything that happens to us, daily life gives us the opportunity to do philosophy.[36]

CHAPTER FOUR

The Definition of "Philosopher" in Plato's *Symposium*

We do not know if Socrates used the word *philosophia* in his discussions with his interlocutors. If he did, it is likely he would have intended the word in the sense which was current at the time. In other words, he would have used it, as was common in those days, to designate the general culture which the Sophists and others dispensed to their students. This is the meaning we find, for example, in the rare occurrences of the word *philosophia* in the *Memorabilia*—recollections of Socrates which were collected by his disciple Xenophon. Nevertheless, it was under the influence of the personality and teaching of Socrates that Plato, in the *Symposium*, gave new meaning to the word "philosopher," and therefore also to the word "philosophy."

PLATO'S SYMPOSIUM

Like the *Apology*, the *Symposium* is a literary monument erected to the memory of Socrates. It is constructed with wonderful skill, as only Plato could do. Philosophical themes and mythical symbols