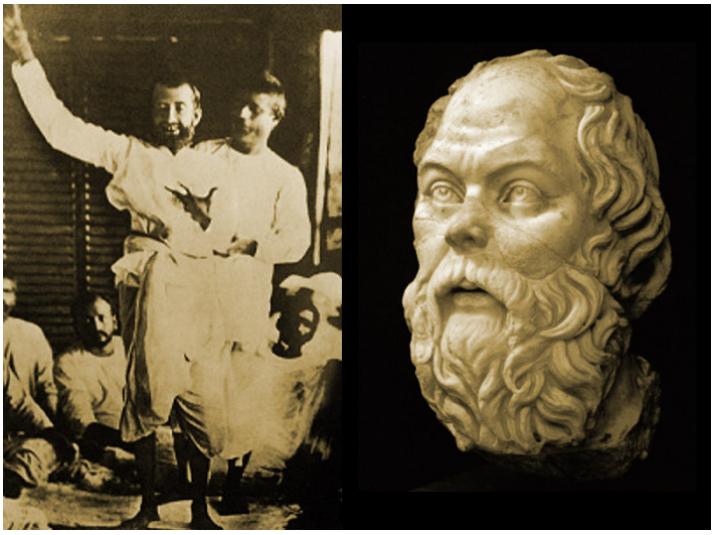
Was Socrates a Mystic?

Mike King, 2018 (1996)



Abstract

This dissertation sets out to examine the evidence for Socrates as a mystic of a certain type. In Part 1 a view of mysticism is put forward proposing a crucial distinction between devotional and non-devotional mysticism (*bhakti* and *jnani*), and stressing the importance of the 'proximity text.' The *jnani* type of mysticism is then elaborated on in detail, using three well-known mystics to arrive at a composite portrait. In Part 2 this portrait of a *jnani* is used as model against which evidence for the status of Socrates as mystic is assessed. Part 2 starts out with an overview of evidence for the historical person of Socrates, examines the Platonic canon (firstly in a broad-brush manner, and then in detail with four dialogues), and finally weighs this picture of Socrates against that portrayed by Xenophon. It is then concluded that the evidence for Socrates as mystic is substantial, though the weak status of Plato's Socratic dialogues as 'proximity texts' means that the evidence is not conclusive.

Keywords: Socrates, mysticism, Plato, *bhakti*, *jnani*.

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Part 1. Mysticism

1.1. History, Antiquity, and the Weight of Authority

As this investigation spans many eras and cultures it is important to be explicit about some of the premises used. One premise that I shall employ is that human nature is essentially similar across these eras and cultures, and that we can compare speech and actions between individuals from differing eras and cultures in a meaningful way. There may be many reasons for disagreeing with this premise, one of which is the evolutionary/devolutionary standpoint. Those who believe in the evolution (over the two and a half thousand years spanning the texts discussed here) of culture would say that we cannot 'return' to the simplicity of mind of the Athenian or of the 5th century BC setting for the Buddha's life; those who believe in devolution (such as the Hindus with their 'Kali Yuga', or the Traditionalists) would say that we are so 'fallen' as to make it almost impossible to understand the lofty heights of the ancients. Rudolf Steiner argues for a different kind of change over this time-scale: we have become progressively more 'materialised' and less aware of our spirit-natures[1]. Cultural theorists place less emphasis on the passage of time as on ethnic, national and cultural identities, all of which make relatively inaccessible the minds of those designated as 'other'.

I believe that mysticism involves the study of the deepest and most essential of human experiences, and hence the cultural argument is invalid in this context. The evolution/devolution argument is more difficult to reason about, probably arising from the optimism or pessimism of the individuals holding the view. The only evidence on this matter from mysticism itself is the weight given by so many mystics to the *present*, the eternal now, to *suchness* (Hinduism), or to *dasein* (Eckhart), all of which point to the insignificance of time, history, epoch.

My premise (that we should in essence ignore differences in time and culture) has implications concerning the kind of authority that we give to texts from different eras and cultures. In the introduction to his *Sword of Gnosis* Jacob Needleman is inclined to agree with Frithjof Schuon "that the appearance of a new and complete sacred teaching is an *impossibility*":

> It is quite out of the question that a "revelation," in the full sense of the word, should arrive in our time, one comparable, that is to say, to the imparting of one of the great sutras or any other primary scripture; the day of revelation is past on this globe and was so already long ago.[2]

Schuon believes in a "Divine Epoch" when revelation was possible, and finds support for this in all the major traditions; the current epoch is seen according to the Buddhist tradition, for example as "the latter times", the most corrupt.[3] While much of Schuon's writings are insightful into mysticism, this premise that underlies his work and of the Traditionalist group of thinkers means that iconoclast and contemporary mystics are ruled out of consideration. He says:

> If things were otherwise or if spiritual values were to be found outside the sacred traditions, the functions of the saints would have been, not to enliven their religion, but rather to abolish it, and there would no longer be any religion left on earth, ...[4]

Yet the Buddha, Christ, Kabir, Nanak, Eckhart, and countless others can be seen as iconoclasts, and either founded new religions or 'enlivened' their own. The Traditionalists seem to wish that 'revelation' ended with Mohammed, but this reduces the status for example of two almost universally accepted 19th and 29th century saints, Ramakrishana and Ramana Maharshi. The manner of their 'revelation' suggests in both cases that while they illuminated their tradition, they were not dependent on it. The 'revelations' of other 20th century luminaries like Gurdjieff and Krishnamurti or mystics alive at the time of writing (Douglas Harding, Andrew Cohen, and Mother Meera, to name just a few) are also ignored. Schuon argues that "only traditional metaphysics does justice both to the rigour of objectivity and to the rights of subjectivity; it alone is able to explain the unanimity of the sacred doctrines as well as the meaning of their formal divergences.[5]" But the works of our contemporary Douglas Harding[6] do exactly this, locating themselves in all the traditions, and yet providing a revelation that is genuinely new and appropriate to a democratic era.

In opposition to the Traditionalist view is the Perennialist (which is closer to the one I wish to adopt), but to argue between them is too difficult in a short space. The problem that I encounter with the Traditionalist view is that it leads to a form of authoritarianism: the scriptures and sutras from the sixth century backwards are 'frozen' both in their form and their interpretation, whereas if we accept that revelation is continuous we have a much larger pool of texts to draw on in reaching an understanding of the mystical and sacred. Also, recent mystics are well-documented, and we can be much surer, or even certain as to what they said. What, for example, if Jesus never said that the only path to God was through him? So many assumptions rest on a text whose origin is doubtful, whose transcription and translation are open to error, and to centuries of stultifying scholarly and theological activity. The argument that the 'traditions' are sanctioned by God, and therefore nothing more recent has authority, is a circular one. On what basis do we give authority to a revelation just because it is ancient?

In connection, then, with our inquiry into Socrates, I shall draw on mystics of all eras and cultures for comparison, and, unlike the Traditionalists, I will, where ap-

propriate, draw on more recent (and hence better-documented) mystics to illuminate the more ancient.

1.2. The 'Proximity Text'

In considering texts in mysticism I would like to argue for a new category of text, called the 'proximity text', which is a category probably not relevant to other areas of scholarship. If we can consider a text written or dictated by the mystic as a *primary* text, then it would be a common scholarly idea to call texts by non-mystics such as William James and Evelyn Underhill as *secondary* texts, where they draw on primary texts as just defined. A *tertiary* text would then be one written by a scholar concerning secondary texts, probably in order to pursue the methodology and epistemology of studies in mysticism. The boundaries between primary, secondary, and tertiary texts is always blurred; for example both James and Underhill have mystical sensitivities which come from personal experience (though James denied any explicitly religious experiences); tertiary texts might cite primary texts in their arguments; and secondary texts may pursue methodological and epistemological themes.

My category of *proximity* text is needed in addition to these other categories to describe a mystical text written by a non-mystic who was a close associate of the mystic, and with the deliberate intention of conveying the ideas of the mystic. It is not the same as a secondary text because it is drawn from direct contact, rather than the writings of the mystic, though we need to change the definition of secondary texts to include scholarly writings on primary *and* proximity texts.

Clearly, a primary text normally carries more weight than a proximity text as evidence regarding a particular mystic, and for the understanding of mysticism in general. By definition, the writer of the proximity text is not a mystic, otherwise it would be a primary text. In the rare case that a mystic wrote about another mystic one would have the difficult job of deciding whether the evidence found in it was to be used in constructing a picture of the writer or the subject (in fact we might find ourselves in this position with Plato), where there was no other reliable evidence.

However, the proximity text suffers from two major problems: firstly it may be unduly sycophantic or apologetic, or secondly it may be deliberately distorted to serve the interests of its author. A third problem, implicit in its nature, is that it somehow adumbrates the original. At its best however a proximity text gives us a clear picture of the mystic's teaching and manner, and can add valuable supporting and biographical detail. Very often the 'proximity' here will be the closeness of a disciple to his or her Master, and this closeness can tell us a lot about transmission, putting in proportion the twin phenomena of *darshan* and *dharma* (presence and

teachings). In fact our knowledge about many of the mystics comes almost entirely from proximity texts.

In connection with our enquiry into Socrates, we will be asking if either or both of Plato's and Xenophon's Socratic Dialogues are proximity texts as defined here. The oral traditions that preceded writing in both the West and East are another factor in considering texts, and are a form of proximity text at some remove.

1.3. Types of Mystic

In the study of mysticism since William James' seminal work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* the emphasis has been on mystical experience, rather than on the teachings of the mystic, or the person of the mystic, though the latter are also important. The emphasis on mystical experience probably has two origins; firstly in the widespread feeling that it is the 'core data' of mysticism (as dreams might be for psychoanalysis) and secondly because it counters the Church tradition of placing the weight on authority rather than personal experience. *The Variety of Religious Experience* followed Richard Maurice Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* and was undoubtedly influenced by it, but Bucke placed the emphasis on transformation rather than experience. He gives the following criteria for the 'cosmic sense' of the mystic which is a state or continuum, rather than an experience:

1. The subjective light
2. The moral elevation
3. The intellectual illumination
4. The sense of immortality
5. The loss of the fear of death
6. The loss of the sense of sin
7. The suddenness, instantaneousness of the awakening
8. The previous character of the man – intellectual, moral and physical
9. The age of illumination
10. The added charm to the personality so that men and women are always (?) (sic) strongly attracted to the person.
11. The transfiguration of the subject of change as seen by others when the cosmic sense is actually present.[7]

Later scholars, from Underhill to Happold, have followed James' emphasis rather than Bucke's, but in this investigation of Socrates I will revert to Bucke's priorities. In fact I prefer to place *transmission* first, teachings second, and mystical experience third, where the term 'transmission' is intended to convey something of the Eastern term *darshan* — sitting with the Master. However this is not mean to be a radical departure from current scholarship on mysticism, but just a slight changing of priorities. It means for example placing slightly more weight on a proximity text

written by an author in direct contact with the mystic than on texts coming out of an oral tradition, however reliable we believe that tradition to be.

The late Oxford scholar R. C. Zaehner used three terms to distinguish different types of mysticism: *panenhenic*, *monistic*, and *theistic*.[8] Zaehner as a Catholic prioritised these terms, so that theistic mysticism (a God-oriented mysticism) was 'sacred', and the other two 'profane'. Panenhenic mysticism is, broadly speaking, nature mysticism, while monistic mysticism is the form in which the mystic finds union, but no 'other', i.e. no God. In this dissertation I will use, instead of Zaehner's terms, two Indian words *bhakti* and *jnani*, which correspond roughly to theistic and monistic respectively.[1] I am proposing that this binary divide, while recognising that other forms of mysticism exist, will be the most useful in examining Socrates. They will be given equal weight, unlike in Zaehner's system, and shown to be mutually interdependent.

1.3.1. Devotional and Non-Devotional

The best English translations of the terms *bhakti* and *jnani* are probably 'devotional' and 'non-devotional', and in suggesting this I am highlighting early on the difficulty for understanding *jnani* in the West. The devotional is well-understood, and the word 'piety' (important in Plato and the trial of Socrates) generally has a devotional implication. Through the history of the dominant religion in the West, Christianity, we are presented with saints and mystics as examples of the devotional: Teresa of Avila, Richard Rolle, Mother Julian of Norwich are just a few. It appears to the Western mind to make little sense to have a complementary list of saints and mystics who are categorised as non-devotional, because what else is there? In the East, *jnani* is well-understood, and to the list of devotional (*bhakti*) mystics and saints such as Ramakrishna, Chaitanya, Rumi, and Kabir, one can run a complementary list of *jnani* mystics and saints such as Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, Patanjali, and of course, the Buddha. While Buddhism is essentially a *jnani* religion, as Christianity is essentially a *bhakti* religion, Hinduism seems, remarkably, to embrace both polarities. Ramakrishna, as one of the great Hindus of more recent times used this invocation:

> Greeting to the feet of the Jnani [seeker on the path of awareness (knowledge)]! Greeting to the feet of the Bhakta [seeker on the path of devotion]! Greeting to the devout who believe in the formless God! Greeting to those who believe in God with form! Greeting to the men of old who knew Brahman! Greeting to the modern knowers of Truth. ...[9]

Ramakrishna, in discussion with disciples, continuously probed the question of 'God with or without form'; a recognition that the religious seeker could equally express

[1] Since I wrote this I have developed a more nuanced account of *bhakti* and *jnani*. Also, as in the Ramakrishna quote, I have learned that it should be *bhakta* and *jnani*.

their search and conclusions in theistic or non-theistic terms. This is not widely understood in the West. His great disciple, Vivekananda, said this of Ramakrishna: "Outwardly he was all Bhakta, but inwardly all Jnani.... I am the exact opposite."[10] Hinduism had evolved a *language* that could deal with the polarities of *bhakti* and *jnani*, while recognising at the same time that the two are inseparably linked.

In psychology a distinction is drawn between the heart-oriented and the head-oriented person, though this is often used rather crassly. Despite this I think that the distinction is tremendously useful if we see it as a disposition rather than a complete description: the heart-oriented person tends to *initially* react to situations through feeling, while the head-oriented person tends to *initially* react to situations through thinking. The crass view that the thinking person does not feel and vice versa is not sustainable or useful, and in *bhakti* and *jnani* similar assumptions also do not work. However the distinction, and its parallel in psychology, is too important to lose just because it has been caricatured.

1.3.2. Other Types of Mystic

We have seen that Zaehner proposed a third type of mystic, the panenhenic or nature mystic (and he included drug-induced experiences in this category), while the tradition in India is that in addition to *jnani* and *bhakti* there is a third path, *karma yoga,* the path of action or good works. Gurdjieff proposed that a third path was in fact the path of the *fakir*, "the way of the struggle with the body ... physical will over the body."[11] While recognising these possibilities, they are not particularly relevant to what we know of Socrates.

1.3.3. The Two Practices

Practice and teachings in *jnani* mysticism can be said to centre around *meditation*, while practice and teachings in *bhakti* mysticism centre around *prayer*. I have chosen the terms meditation and prayer as a shorthand for the practices within the two paths, and, because of the widely differing uses of these terms, they need careful definition for the purposes of this dissertation. The term meditation is often used synonymously with contemplation, and there is no generally accepted definition across academicians, religious traditions and cultures. Hence I will give a precise definition in the recognition that the reader may disagree with it, but I would ask that the reader either accept it for now, or translate it mentally into their preferred equivalent.

meditation: an inward-oriented stilling of the mind with no object
contemplation: an inward- or outward-oriented stilling of the mind focusing on an object.

The Chambers dictionary reflects the general confusion between these terms, defining them in terms of each other, and also in terms of 'deep thought'. However, I have followed etymology as far as possible: the root of meditation is (probably) the Latin *mederi* to heal, so meditation has connotations of healing and wholeness, consonant with the absence of the fragmenting and splintering effect of discursive thought. The etymology of contemplation indicates both completeness and the marking out of a temple or place of worship, indicating perhaps that the activity has more of an *object* than meditation. Clearly, however, the distinction made here between meditation and contemplation is not widely supported, but its temporary adoption will make subsequent debate more clear.

I want to define another term, cogitation, in clear distinction to the other two:

> **cogitation**: deep or profound thinking in a discursive manner, involving language

The root of cogitation is the Latin *cogitare* to think deeply, and is quite distinct from the Latin root *cognitum* from which comes cognition, cognitive etc. The definition of cogitation is not as problematic as the other two, and is usefully associated for most people with Descartes famous 'cogito ergo sum'. All three terms, with the specialised meaning given here, are associated with *jnani*, though the confusion between meditation and cogitation is prevalent in the West and makes for difficulty in understanding *jnani*. The term 'ratiocination' is also used as an alternative to cogitation, and has an implication of logic or rationality.

In the same way that I have made a distinction in the practice of *jnani* between meditation and contemplation, based on whether or not there is an object, I would like to do the same for the practice of *bhakti*. The *bhakti's* whole orientation and meaning is to love the divine, rather than to know it; to be penetrated by it, rather than to penetrate it; to be passive rather than active. Yet within this intense love there are clearly those who insist on an object, either God or one of His prophets (in Otto the 'wholly other'), and those who (having merged with this object) have remaining only an objectless love. I will use the terms worship and prayer to distinguish these two states or activities, in the full awareness that the definitions used here have little or no wider currency:

> **prayer**: the state or action of divine love without an object
> **worship**: the state or action of divine love with an object

It is implicit in the definitions here that meditation is a more advanced form than contemplation, and prayer a more advanced form than worship. This is a contentious point, but as later arguments do not hinge on any prioritisation of the terms, we can leave the question open. For now I wish to use *meditation* to stand for the

practice of the *jnani* and *prayer* to stand for the practice of the *bhakti*, asking merely that the reader accept this as just a form of shorthand.

1.3.4. The Fully Evolved *Bhakti* and *Jnani*

There is some evidence that the fully evolved mystic, while having travelled either of our two major paths, is then equally conversant with both, thought it is probably fair to suppose that the initial predilection which predisposed the individual to one or other major path is still intact (Ramakrishna is a good example of this). If we accept Patanjali as a mystic for the sake of argument (his identity is not, in keeping with Indian tradition, well-documented), then he merely makes a nod at the devotional: a single statement: *Ihwarapranidhanatwa*, meaning "Success is also attained by those who surrender to God[12]," is included in his *Yoga Sutras* for the sake of completeness, otherwise they comprise a classic Indian treatise on the *jnani* path of awareness and will.

1.3.5. Via Positiva and Via Negativa

It is worth introducing at this point another distinction, widely held to be useful, between *via positiva* and *via negativa*. *Via negativa* is the more easily defined of the two: it is the path to mystical union via the denying of all manifest things. The work of Dyonisius the Areopagite is perhaps the best example in a Western context, but the same principles are found as far afield as in branches of Hinduism ('neti, neti' — meaning 'not this, not that' is its Indian formulation); in Buddhism (in the very concept of *nirvana* or nothingness); and in modern sages like Krishnamurti and Douglas Harding. *Via negativa* carries with it associations of withdrawal, solitude, contemplation, silence, simplicity, and renunciation, though these are often caricatured, as in the supposed Christian 'heresy' of quietism.

Via positiva is the path of expansion, a growing capacity to lose boundaries and temporality until one becomes the Whole. Perhaps the best exponent of this path is Walt Whitman (though this may be an unfamiliar proposition). One might more readily recognise *via positiva* in an ecstatic like Rumi or Kabir. Because of the *expansiveness* of love, and of spiritual love in particular, one tends to associate *bhakti* with *via positiva* and *jnani* with *via negativa*, but I believe that one should be wary of an automatic link.

1.3.6. Theistic and non-Theistic Spirituality

The West has some difficulty with the concept of a non-theistic spirituality in the same way that it has difficulty with a non-devotional spirituality. 'Religion without God — isn't that a contradiction in terms?' asks Gail Vines in a recent article in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. The article discusses the *Sea of Faith* Christian movement sparked recently by the Cambridge priest Don Cupitt in connection with

a MORI poll that showed that while only 43% of Britons believe in God 67% believe themselves to be religious.[13] In the East the idea of a non-theistic religiousness is more widespread, and is at the heart of Buddhism, for example.

It might seem that a *bhakti* would automatically speak in terms of God, or gods, while a *jnani* would not, but it may not always be so. The Sea of Faith group, including the Church of England vicar Anthony Freeman, has a parallel in the Jewish faith: Reconstructionist Judaism, which also does not believe in God. These groups probably represent the *jnani* instinct within Christianity and Judaism, and are groping towards a non-theistic language that their tradition does not readily provide. Eckhart, as far back as the thirteenth century, was a *jnani* who had to bend the devotional language of Christianity to his purposes, as we shall see.

1.3.7. The Occult

Before looking in more detail at the *jnani* type of mystic, I would like to delineate the territories of the occult from that of the mystical. Again we find little agreement on the precise meaning of these terms, but for the purposes of this dissertation it will be useful to make a temporary distinction at least. I would like to use the term occult for to cover the world of disembodied beings such as the spirits of the departed, angels and ghosts, and for the paranormal. It also includes astrology, alchemy, and all cosmologies and cosmogenies that lie outside of conventional science. By this definition Rudolf Steiner, for example, is an occultist *par excellence*, though he is not a mystic, for his concern is not with union, or transcendence. However, the territories overlap considerably, as some occultists *are* concerned with union or transcendence, and many mystics show an interest in occult matters. I believe however that most genuine mystics are wary of the occult, and advise against an involvement with it. Reincarnation is a subject that is essentially an occult one, but some mystics make it part of their teachings or cosmogenies. It is not essential to mysticism, but, as it occurs widely in Plato, it will be discussed.

1.4. Profile of a *Jnani*

It can be quickly shown that if Socrates is a mystic, then he falls into the *jnani* category, and hence it will be useful to examine some *jnani* mystics for characteristics that we can be on the lookout for with Socrates. I have chosen Jiddu Krishnamurti, Ramana Maharshi, and Meister Eckhart as representing respectively the modern iconoclast, an element of the Hindu tradition, and an element of the Christian tradition. Although one would need to take many more examples to make a rounded portrait of the *jnani*, most of the salient features emerge from these three. They are will documented in that we have substantial primary texts from each, and, with the first two, many proximity texts.

1.4.1. Krishnamurti

Krishnamurti was born in 1895 to a poor Brahmin family in India. Krishnamurti's mother had some presentiment about her future child: she chose, against the explicit religious and caste instructions regarding birth, to deliver Krishnamurti in the puja room (shrine room) of her small house. As a child Krishnamurti was not considered unusual in any way, but was discovered in 1909 by Charles Leadbeater, a leading member of the Theosophical Society. The Theosophical Society had as its stated goal the preparation for a new World Leader, and before long it declared that it had found it in the person of Jiddu Krishnamurti. He was prepared for this role through occult initiations at the hands of Leadbeater and Annie Besant, a process that involved communications with so-called disembodied 'Masters', and ultimately the excruciatingly painful preparation of his body to become the vessel for the (Buddha) Maitreya. Krishnamurti in later life had no recollection of most of these experiences, and vigorously denied that they contributed to his illumination. He gradually shook off the ministrations of the Theosophical Society, and in a dramatic gesture dissolved the Order of the Star, which was the organisation founded to support his work. He then entered a life of teaching that lasted fifty years. The teachings were his, however, and could be summed up in one phrase: *choiceless awareness*.

Krishnamurti jettisoned the whole of Indian religious history (as well as all other religious apparatus) and talked for fifty years on the pristine state of a silent mind that lives with choiceless awareness. His emphasis on no-mind borrows nothing from the Zen Buddhists, and he seems to have taken no interest in any mystical figure or teaching, however similar to his own. But his being was illuminated and silent; others made Christ-comparisons throughout his life. Here are some comments from contemporary figures:

> George Bernard Shaw called Krishnamurti "a religious figure of the greatest distinction," and added, "He is the most beautiful human being I have ever seen."
>
> Henry Miller wrote, "There is no man I would consider it a greater privilege to meet ..."
>
> Aldous Huxley, after attending one of Krishnamurti's lectures, confided in a letter, "... the most impressive thing I have listened to. It was like listening to the discourse of the Buddha — such power, such intrinsic authority ... "
>
> Kahlil Gibran wrote, "When he entered my room I said to myself, 'Surely the Lord of Love has come.'" [14]

In August 1922 Krishnamurti underwent three days of a very intense and painful experience the most intense parts of which had no later recollection of. He wrote afterwards of the period:

> On the first day while I was in that state and more conscious of the things around me, I had the first most extraordinary experience. There was a man mending the road; that man was myself; the pickaxe he held was myself; the very stone which he was breaking up was a part of me; the tender blade of grass was my very being, and the tree beside the man was myself. I also could feel and think like the roadmender and I could feel the wind passing through the tree, and the little ant on the blade of grass I could feel. The birds, the dust, and the very noise were a part of me. Just then there was a car passing by at some distance; I was the driver, the engine, and the tyres; as the car went further away from me, I was going away from myself. I was in everything, or rather everything was in me, inanimate and animate, the mountain, the worm and all breathing things. All day long I remained in this happy condition.
>
> (later in the same account:)
>
> I was supremely happy, for I had seen. Nothing could ever be the same. I have drunk of the clear and pure waters at the source of the fountain of life and my thirst was appeased. Nevermore could I be thirsty. Never more could I be in darkness; I have seen the Light, I have touched compassion which heals all sorrow and suffering; it is not for myself, but for the world. I have stood on the mountain top and gazed at the mighty Beings. I have seen the glorious and healing Light. The fountain of Truth has been revealed to me and the darkness has been dispersed, Love in all its glory has intoxicated my heart; my heart can never be closed. I have drunk of the fountain of Joy and eternal Beauty. I am God-intoxicated.[15]

This is one of the rare passages where Krishnamurti talks about himself, and is typical of how mystics describe their illumination, but it is in contrast to his later writings.

Krishnamurti is a good example of a *jnani*, and in connection with Socrates useful in another way: his conversations or dialogues bear some resemblance to the Socratic ones. Here are some extracts from a conversation between Krishnamurti and Jacob Needleman in March of 1971 (some five years after the publication of Needleman's *Sword of Gnosis*). Needleman has asked a question about the cosmic dimension that is missing in a humanistic psychology, and this has led to a discussion of space, from which Krishnamurti has steered a course towards the 'centre of consciousness':

> KRISHNAMURTI: There is no house if there are no walls and no roof. The content is consciousness but we like to separate them, theorise about it, measure the yardage of our consciousness. Whereas the centre is consciousness, the content of consciousness, and the content is consciousness. Without the content, where is consciousness? And that is the space.
> *Needleman*: I follow a little bit of what you say. I find myself wanting to say: well, what do you value here? What is the important thing here?

KRISHNAMURTI: I'll put that question after I have found out whether the mind can be empty of content.

Needleman: All right.

KRISHNAMURTI: Then there is something else that will operate, which will function within the field of the known. But without finding that merely to say ...

Needleman: No, no, this is so.

KRISHNAMURTI: Let's proceed. Space is between two thoughts, between two factors of time, two periods of time, because thought is time. Yes?

Needleman: All right, yes.

KRISHNAMURTI: You can have a dozen periods of time but it is still thought, there is that space. Then there is the space round the centre, and the space beyond the self, beyond the barbed-wire, beyond the wall of the centre. The space between the observer and the observed is the space which thought has created as the image of my wife and the image which she has about me. You follow, Sir?

Needleman: Yes.

KRISHNAMURTI: All that is manufactured by the centre. To speculate about what is beyond all that has no meaning to me personally, it's the philosopher's amusement.

Needleman: The philosopher's amusement ...

KRISHNAMURTI: I am not interested.

Needleman: I agree. I am not interested sometimes, at my better moments, but nevertheless ...

KRISHNAMURTI: I am sorry, because you are a philosopher!

Needleman: No, no, why should you remember that, please.

KRISHNAMURTI: So my question is: "Can the centre be still, or can the centre fade away?" Because if it doesn't fade away, or lie very quiet, then the content of consciousness is going to create space within consciousness and call it the vast space. In there lies deception and I don't want to deceive myself. ...

...

KRISHNAMURTI: We are asking: "Can consciousness empty itself of its content?" Not somebody else do it.

Needleman: That is the question, yes.

KRISHNAMURTI: Not divine grace, the super-self, some fictitious outside agency. Can the consciousness empty itself of all this content? First see the beauty of it, Sir.

Needleman: I see it.

KRISHNAMURTI: Because it must empty itself without an effort. The moment there is an effort, there is the observer who is making the effort to change the content, which is part of consciousness. I don't know if you see that?

Needleman: I follow. The emptying has to be effortless, instantaneous.

KRISHNAMURTI: It must be without an agent who is operating on it, whether an outside agent, or an inner agent. Now can this be done without any effort, any directive — which says, "I will change the content"? This means the emptying of the consciousness of all will, "to be" or "not to be". Sir, look what takes place.

Needleman: I am watching.

KRISHNAMURTI: I have put that question to myself. Nobody has put it to me. Because it is a problem of life, a problem of existence in this world. It is a problem which my mind has to solve. Can the mind, with all its content, empty itself and yet remain mind — not just float about?

Needleman: It is not suicide.

KRISHNAMURTI: No.

Needleman: There is some kind of subtle ...

KRISHNAMURTI: No, Sir, that is too immature. I have put the question. My answer is: I really don't know.

Needleman: That is the truth.

KRISHNAMURTI: I really don't know. But I am going to find out, in the sense of not waiting to find out. The content of my consciousness is my unhappiness, my misery, my struggles, my sorrows, the images which I have collected through life, my gods, the frustrations, the pleasures, the fears, the agonies, the hatreds — that is my consciousness. Can all that be completely emptied? Not only at the superficial level but right through? — the so-called unconscious. If it is not possible, then I must live a life of misery, I must live in endless, unending sorrow. There is neither hope, nor despair, I am in prison. So the mind must find out how to empty itself of all the content of itself, and yet live in this world, not become a moron, but have a brain that functions efficiently. Now how is this to be done? Can it ever be done? Or is there no escape for man?

Needleman: I follow.

KRISHNAMURTI: Because I don't see how to get beyond this I invent all the gods, the temples, philosophies, rituals — you understand?

Needleman: I understand.

KRISHNAMURTI: This is meditation, real meditation, not all the phoney stuff. To see whether the mind — with the brain which has evolved through time, which is the result of thousands of experiences, the brain that functions efficiently only in complete security — whether the mind can empty itself and yet have a brain that functions as a marvellous machine. Also, it sees love is not pleasure; love is not desire. When there is love there is no image; but I don't know what that love is. I only want love as pleasure, sex and all the rest of it. There must be a relationship between the emptying of consciousness and the thing called love; between the unknown and the known, which is the content of consciousness.

Needleman: I am following you. There must be this relationship.

KRISHNAMURTI: The two must be in harmony. The emptying and love must be in harmony. And it may be only love that is necessary and nothing else.

Needleman: This emptying is another word for love, is that what you are saying?

KRISHNAMURTI: I am only asking what is love. Is love within the field of consciousness?

Needleman: No, it couldn't be.

KRISHNAMURTI: Don't stipulate. Don't ever say yes or no; find out! ...[16]

This rather long extract may baffle those unfamiliar with Krishnamurti's thought, but it does introduce many of the important elements. We also see that Needleman, despite being a professor of religion and author of many learned book, is somewhat at a disadvantage. In terms of a Socratic dialogue some aspects are similar, some are not. Krishnamurti manipulates the conversation in the direction that interests him regardless of the questioner, who is often left to agree rather impotently, quite possibly lost as to his meaning. He also poses his own questions, and professes ignorance as to their answer. What is also striking towards the end of the passage is how Krishnamurti suddenly introduces love — yes, it is secondary, as

Krishnamurti is not concerned with the devotional, but it is immediately associated with silence of the mind, or the process of reaching that state. He even hints that one might need nothing else, as Patanjali does.

1.4.2. Ramana Maharshi

Let us look now at another Indian mystic whose life and teachings are clearly *jnani*: Ramana Maharshi. He was born in 1889 to a middle-class Brahmin family in South India, showed no special aptitude for religion and had no training in spiritual philosophy, but, at the age of seventeen underwent a spontaneous transformation. Ramana described the awakening in his own words.

> It was about six weeks before I left Madura [Maharshi's home town] for good that the great change in my life took place. It was quite sudden. I was sitting alone in a room on the first floor of my uncle's house. I seldom had any sickness, and on that day there was nothing wrong with my health, but a sudden violent fear of death overtook me. There was nothing in my state of health to account for it, and I did not try to account for it or find out whether there was any reason for the fear. I just felt "I am going to die" and began thinking what to do about it. It did not occur to me to consult a doctor or my elders or friends; I felt that I had to solve the problem myself, there and then.
>
> The shock of the fear of death drove my mind inwards and I said to myself mentally, without actually framing the words: "Now death has come; what does it mean? What is it that is dying? This body dies." And at once I dramatised the occurrence of death. I lay with my limbs stretched out stiff as though *rigor mortis* had set in and imitated a corpse so as to give greater reality to the enquiry. I held my breath and kept my lips tightly closed so that no sound could escape, so that neither the word "I" nor any other word could be uttered. "Well then," I said to myself, "this body is dead. It will be carried stiff to the burning ground and there burnt and reduced to ashes. But with the death of this body am I dead? Is the body I? It is silent and inert but I feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of the 'I' within me, apart from it. So I am Spirit transcending the body. The body dies but the Spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death. That means I am deathless Spirit." All this was not dull thought; it flashed through me vividly as living truth which I perceived directly, almost without thought-process. "I" was something very real, the only real thing about my present state, and all the conscious activity connected with my body was centred on that "I". From that moment onwards the "I" or Self focused attention on itself by a powerful fascination. Fear of death had vanished once and for all. Absorption in the Self continued unbroken from that time on. Other thoughts might come and go like the various notes of music, but the "I" continued like the fundamental *sruti* note that underlies and blends with all the other notes. Whether the body was engaged in talking, reading, or anything else, I was still centred on "I". Previous to that crisis I had no clear perception of my Self and was not consciously attracted to it. I felt no perceptible or direct interest in it, much less any inclination to dwell permanently in it.[17]

Ramana had entered into a state of pure consciousness. His description of it, generally uncluttered with technical terms, is useful for the understanding of *jnani*: he is describing an unbroken awareness of the centre of his being, capable of existing as the ground to all his sensations and not overwhelmed by them. Any aspirant on the path of awareness will know that attempts to maintain such awareness in the supposedly ideal circumstances of formal meditation practice, where distractions are at a minimum, is hard enough, but to do so while reading or talking is nothing short of miraculous. Ramana had a maturity at seventeen that was remarkable, for the onset of his experience would have been simply frightening even for most adults. Instead, he turned the experience into an *enquiry* into his nature, an approach that became the core of his pedagogy for the rest of his life.

Ramana's change of orientation was so sudden and so complete that we see him becoming quite indifferent to the manifest world, to the point where he might have died of disease or starvation. This initial period, where he displayed no interest in disciples or teaching, gradually gave way to a more normal religious life and led to a fifty-year spell of teaching the path to self-realisation. Ramana did not advocate renunciation in his pedagogy however, teaching that the challenges of every-day life were to be used as raw material for the quest for one's true identity. Although by temperament his teachings were not explicitly devotional, he exhorted his disciples to rest in the 'cave of the heart', an ancient expression that implies both love and silence. He also recognised that contact with genuine Masters, as opposed to mere 'gurus' (let us be cautious about his terminology while recognising the distinction), could bring the disciple to self-realisation more effectively than any practice. Ramana prefers the more neutral term *association* (which we also find used in connection with Socrates) than *darshan*:

> 1. Association with Sages who have realized the Truth removes material attachments; on these attachments being removed the attachments of the mind are also destroyed. Those whose attachments of mind are thus destroyed become one with That which is Motionless. They attain Liberation while yet alive. Cherish association with such Sages.
> 2. That Supreme State which is obtained here and now as a result of association with Sages, and realized through the deep meditation of Self-enquiry in contact with the Heart, cannot be gained with the aid of a Guru or through knowledge of the scriptures, or by spiritual merit, or by any other means.[2]
> 3. If association with Sages is obtained, to what purpose are all the methods of self-discipline? Tell me, of what use is a fan when the cool, gentle, south wind is blowing?[18]

[2] Note that Maharshi is making a distinction between Sages and Gurus here. In general I believe these term are usually interchangeable.

Ramana was the cool wind and who am I? was his pedagogy. His own transformation can be seen in terms of a radical shift of identity, from body to Spirit. The lack of any peak experiences, visions, or manifest ecstasies in Ramana's case is a good argument for reducing the emphasis on mystical experience, as mentioned above.

1.4.3. Meister Eckhart

Johanne Eckhart was born in Germany in 1260 and died in 1328; his title 'Meister' comes from the award of 'Master in Sacred Theology' which he earned in Paris. That Eckhart was a *jnani* has been clearly established by Rudolf Otto in his *Mysticism East and West*, a comparison between Eckhart and the 9th century Indian writer Sankara. Otto makes many useful comparisons between Eckhart's major work, the *Opus Tripartitum* and Sankara's commentaries (principally on the *Brahma Sutras*), showing that many passages are almost interchangeable. Otto's work is flawed however, because his Christian background requires that in the end he finds vital elements that are present in Eckhart missing in Sankara; these elements, unsurprisingly, are to do with the personal God, love, and ethics. Yet Otto has no sympathy for *bhakti*, which he dismisses early in his work as excited emotionalism and intoxicated eroticism[19] and later on as 'pathological love[20]' (a description due to Kant), and hence has to invent two types of *jnani* so that in the end he can dismiss Sankara (and Plotinus while he is at it) while praising Eckhart. Despite all this, Otto is on the right track with Eckhart as *jnani*.

Let us look at a few passages from Eckhart that demonstrate this. First of all, he speaks of union with God in the manner of *via negativa*:

> As the soul becomes more pure and bare and poor, and possesses less of created things, and is emptied of all things that are not God, it receives God more purely, and is more completely in Him; and it truly becomes one with God, and it looks into God and God into it, face to face as it were; two images transformed into one. … Some people think that they will see God as if he were standing there and they here. It is not so. God and I, we are one. … I am converted into Him in such a way that He makes me one Being with Himself — not a *similar* being. By the living God, it is true that there is no distinction! … The eye by which I see God is the same as the eye by which God sees me. My eye and God's eye are one and the same — one in seeing, one in knowing, and one in loving.[21]

I find it significant that Eckhart presents us with *seeing, knowing* and *loving* in that order: they indicate that his first priority is not love, as it is to a *bhakti*. Love is essential, we are in no doubt, but it follows seeing and knowing (significant *jnani* terms) in Eckhart, rather than leads. This is confirmed in part by his clear explanation of how *detachment* for him is higher than *love*.

> The teachers praise love most highly, as St Paul does when he says: "In whatever tribulation I may find myself, if I have not love, I am nothing."[I Corinthians xiii, 2, 3]

> But I praise detachment more than all love. First because the best thing about love is that it forces me to love God. On the other hand, detachment forces God to love me. Now it is much nobler that I should force God to myself than that I should force myself to God. And the reason is that God can join Himself to me more closely unite Himself with me better than I could unite myself with God.[22]

This is *jnani* because it emphasises the effort of the individual to reach God, rather than the ecstatic, devotional love that comes from complete surrender of effort or will. But Eckhart is not arrogant here, either: his humility is demonstrated by his idea that God can effect the union better than the lover in his supplication. To a *bhakti* the language is completely foreign however: the idea of *forcing* God is absurd; the *bhakti* waits for the lover to come (to use the language of Rumi or Kabir); impatient, yes, longing, yes, but never forcing. For Eckhart love always comes second as this passage shows again:

> A man should not be afraid of anything as long as his will is good, nor should he be at all depressed if he cannot achieve his aim in all his works. But he should not consider himself to be far from virtue when he find real good will in himself because virtue and everything depend on good will. You can lack nothing if you have true good will, neither love, nor humility nor any other virtue. But what you desire strongly and with all your will is yours. God and all the creatures cannot take it away from you, provided that the will is entire and is a real godly desire, and that it is directed to the present.[23]

Love is secondary to the *will* here, but a will carefully defined: it is 'good', 'godly', and directed to the present. It is also something that even God cannot take away!

Eckhart, from an Indian perspective, labours under two disadvantages: firstly he has not the language of *jnani* so well-established in India (though knew the works of Dionysius the Areopagite and Plotinus), and secondly, which is irrespective of *jnani* and *bhakti*, he is constrained even further by the permissible range of expression within the Roman Catholic Church (his views eventually led to excommunication, and was saved from burning only by his death just prior to the issue of the Papal Bull that found him guilty of heresy.)

1.4.4. The *Jnani* Checklist

A picture of a *jnani* emerges from the brief sketches above of Krishnamurti, Ramana Maharshi, and Eckhart. The *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, Buddhist texts, Dionysius the Areopagite and the works of Douglas Harding could help refine this picture, though there is not space here to cite them at length. We have characterised a *jnani* as non-devotional, but we must soften this initial definition by saying that the devotional aspect is *secondary* rather than *non-existent*. We see that Krishnamurti cannot speak of the meditation that he is trying to define without bringing in love; that Ramana's path of self-inquiry exhorts one to rest in the 'cave of the heart', and

that Eckhart also talks continuously of love, as did Paul. But in each case the primary focus is on knowing, seeing, enquiry, and the will. And in other cases of the well-developed *jnani* one may find it hard to come across any references to love at all.

If we take some of history's great devotional mystics, such as Teresa of Avila, Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, Ramakrishna, Rumi and Kabir, then whatever knowing, seeing, enquiry and will is present, they are subordinate to love, or even derided. For them divine love is enough unto itself. Most of us may know or remember the extraordinary happiness of falling in love with a person (usually in the sexual context of courting) and the cooling or sobering that follows either through disappointment or the long years of marriage. This love is *caused* and like all caused things has to end, but the divine love is uncaused, and does not end; hence the value placed on it by the mystic beyond anything whatsoever. This is not however the orientation or preoccupation of the *jnani*.

The *jnani* may or may not speak in theistic terms, as we have seen. Krishnamurti only does so extremely rarely, Maharshi does so as part of an ancient spiritual language, that of Hinduism, and Eckhart does so as part of the Christian spiritual language. The Buddha simply refused to comment on any direct question about the existence of God. What, however is the relationship between *jnani* and *via positiva / via negativa*? Again, while the *jnani* may tend towards the *via negativa* it is not a direct corollary: Krishnamurti showed a strong nature mysticism in his writings, and Walt Whitman (if I can dare to put him forward as a great *jnani*) was *via positiva* par excellence.

Hence, if we are on the lookout for a *jnani*, as we are with Socrates, we will be looking for an emphasis on knowing rather than loving, on enquiry rather than surrender, on will rather than abandonment; possibly non-theistic rather than theistic, and possibly *via negativa* rather than *via positiva*.

Part 2. Socrates in Plato and Xenophon

2.1. The Problem of the Historic Socrates

Scholars and historians generally accept that Socrates was a historical figure, and that he was tried and executed for impiety and corrupting the young. However, over two thousand years of debate has been conducted about the 'real' Socrates behind the literary pictures we have of him. Scholars have been divided over Plato and Xenophon as giving the most reliable picture of Socrates, with other sources (Aristophanes and Polycrates) having been more or less discounted by the eighteenth century.[24] Current scholarly interest in Socrates has been "stimulated to a large degree" by Gregory Vlastos, who considers Plato's Socrates in the early dialogues to be the historical one,[25] and that the *Apology* in particular can be considered the touchstone for Socrates in the other dialogues.[26] Mario Montuori, on the other hand, while citing Horneffer as confirming in 1922 the *Apology* "to be the most reliable source of an historical reconstruction of the Socratic personality"[27], devotes the larger part of his book *Socrates—Physiology of a Myth* to disproving this. He does this by an appeal to *authority*; placing crucial importance on the pronouncement of the Delphic Oracle on the status of Socrates: "... the Socratic image drawn by Plato rests entirely on the reply made by the Delphic god, and Socrates' mission among men and his tragic destiny are both indissolubly tied to and derived from it"[28]. He shows that this must have been an invention of Plato (despite the independent confirmation of the oracle by Xenophon[29]) and concludes that this destroys the *Apology*'s reliability and shows that Socrates set himself above the law and was justly condemned (even though an otherwise virtuous man). Montuori's view are not widely taken up, as far as I can see, but his account is both useful from the historical summaries that he makes, and as an illustration of how *authority* is so often seen as central in Western analyses of religious ideas. If Socrates' status depends on the authority of an oracle, why is it we don't then examine all the human agencies involved in the oracle; if Jesus' authority depends on the Bible as the word of God, why don't we do the same for that?

Clearly this dissertation cannot settle age-old disputes regarding the historical picture of Socrates, but by approaching him from the perspective of mysticism different questions may be asked, and these will emerge as we examine Plato and Xenophon. The approach here will be not so much on reconstructing a historical figure as to reconstruct a *consistent mystical personality*, as one might for example if one had only fragments of Krishnamurti's dialogues. This is fraught with difficulties of course, and we have been warned off this course by the great Platonist and early translator of the dialogues, Thomas Taylor:

> Perhaps, however, some one may here object to us, that we do not in a proper manner exhibit the everywhere dispersed theology of Plato, and that we endeavour to heap together different particulars from different dialogues, as if we were studious of collecting together many things into one mixture, instead of deriving them all from one and the same fountain.[30]

For Taylor the "one and the same fountain" is the *Parminides*, a dialogue by Plato purporting to show Socrates as a young man on the receiving end of a discourse by the aged Parminides, a Greek philosopher concerned with such topics as the one and the many, the like and the unlike, and so on. Central to the discussion, for Taylor, is the concept of the One, to be elaborated on much later by Plotinus. Taylor is in fact a neoplatonist, a tradition whose philosophy starts with Plato but is deeply indebted to Plotinus, and for this reason Taylor's assertion that the *Parminides* is the 'fountain' of all Platonic theology has to be treated with caution. In fact, I shall attempt what Taylor argues against: the collecting of evidence scattered through Plato's Socratic dialogues.

What of other scholars who may have examined the evidence for Socrates as mystic? Richard Maurice Bucke, whose criteria were listed above, places Socrates in the category of "lesser, imperfect, and doubtful instances." While considering that Socrates meets many of his criteria he uses his "fits of abstraction" (preferring in fact the term 'catalepsy') as a counter-indication.[31] I suggest, below, that this is positive evidence in fact, but, given that Bucke was an alienist (a psychologist in charge of a large sanatorium), his only encounter with such states would have been in the context of pathology. William James does not mention Socrates or Plato in the *Varieties*, even in the chapter on Philosophy. Evelyn Underhill, third of this early triumvirate of writers on mysticism, does make a number of references to Plato (though not Socrates) placing him as one of the lesser mystics along with Heraclitus, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Walt Whitman.[32] (Incidentally, though I think she deserves great respect for her seminal work on mysticism, I don't agree with her in connection with Heraclitus or Whitman.)

S. Abhayananda, in his *History of Mysticism* is more certain of Socrates as mystic, and casts his net much wider than Underhill in examples of the mystical type. He even mentions evidence in Aristoxenus (c. 330 BC) that Socrates met a number of Brahmins in the Athens of his day, though unfortunately gives no reference for this[33]. His discussion has some similarities with that presented here, but would be found by some to have pre-judged the case as this passage shows:

> To many, the figure of Socrates remains a mystery, but to the knowers of God, his teaching and manner of his life are clear as crystal, and he is dearly beloved; for only those who have trod the same path and realized the same Truth can know how pure was his soul and how wonderful his task in life and death.[34]

Let us take a more dispassionate view of the evidence.

2.2. Evidence in Plato

2.2.1. The Nature of the Texts

Apart from Plato's *Letters* all of his works consist of dialogues, most of which have Socrates as the main or at least an important protagonist. In examining these dialogues we are attempting to establish whether they can be seen as *proximity texts* as defined above; that is, do they suggest to us the reports, however adumbrated, from a disciple about the life and teachings of his spiritual Master, a mystic? Or, are they the reports by a philosopher concerning the life and philosophy of another philosopher? Or was Plato himself the mystic? I will start by assuming that the dialogues are a reliable portrait of Socrates, build this portrait from a series of extracts, and only then consider the vital role of Plato.

2.2.2. General Evidence in Plato

It is now time to state the broad case behind the intuition that we can view Socrates as a mystic of the *jnani* type. The evidence for this in Plato is scattered throughout the dialogues, though some of the strongest claims can be made from just three of them: the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Symposium*. Before looking at these in detail I will summarise the evidence that crops up more generally, though in each case the type of evidence taken singly may not carry much weight: I am suggesting that it is the accumulation of these indicators that is significant.

2.2.2.1. The Trial and Execution

The trial and execution of Socrates has parallels, in religion and mysticism, with that of Jesus and Mansur (a 10th century Muslim martyred in Baghdad), to give just two examples. Eckhart could easily have been a third parallel. It seems that Socrates was indicted on two counts: impiety, and corrupting the morals of the young. Plato devotes four dialogues, *Euthyphro, The Apology, Crito, and Phaedo*, to the events leading up to his trial and execution. The charge of impiety is not easily refuted, according to the evidence in Plato: Socrates was not readily inclined to accept the common views held on the gods and their activities, preferring to draw on his own inner resources in moral and religious questions. Plato does however show us that the idea that Socrates had a detrimental effect on the morals of the young was absurd, and essentially a trumped-up charge.

That a man in ancient times was executed for blasphemy of some kind or another is no proof of course that he was a mystic. However the way in which Socrates defended himself (in the *Apology*), and the way in which he faced death (in the *Phaedo*) are remarkable, and suggestive of the mystic. His defence was remark-

able, for he made no attempt to counter the charges in a manner that would have led the court to leniency; his offer of a counter-punishment likewise calculated more to irritate than to ameliorate the death-sentence, and his calm, even joyful, acceptance of his sentence was compounded by refusals of offers to escape. Even the manner in which he took the hemlock was remarkable, and was commented upon by the executioner (who generally faced understandable hostility and complaints from those he delivered the hemlock to).

2.2.2.2. Fits of Abstraction

Another, entirely different, piece of evidence for Socrates' status as mystic lies in the several accounts of his 'fits of abstraction'. I have put this term in quotation marks because I believe that we have come to use it in connection with Socrates without any clear idea of what it means, or what alternative terms we could use. In the West this term could mean anything from what was intended by the old-fashioned 'brown study' (an absent-minded state that required perhaps a vigorous interruption to recall its owner to his or her surroundings) to 'catatonic schizophrenia' (a state of complete unresponsiveness lasting for days, months or years, as with Nietzsche in his latter days). Bertrand Russell uses the term 'cataleptic trance,'[35] while Bucke, as we saw, preferred 'catalepsy.' However, in the context of mysticism it might easily be that his states are better described by the terms *samadhi* (Indian) or *satori* (Japanese) both of which mean a state of ecstatic union.

If Socrates' states were short in duration, and it was relatively easy to bring him out of them (snapping one's fingers, shouting, or even, as legend has it, the emptying of a chamber-pot over him by his wife) then the former terms, 'fits of abstraction' or 'brown study' might be appropriate. If the length of these states were longer and accompanied by a clear deterioration in mental health, then 'catatonic schizophrenia' might be appropriate. However, what the reports tell us are of states lasting from several hours to a day, where *all* attempts to reach him failed, followed by no adverse mental or physical effects. These reports have more similarities, I would suggest, with the spontaneous *samadhis* so well-documented (for example) of Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi (see cover page for the well-known photograph of Ramakrishna in *samadhi*: he is supported by a disciple because he was liable to fall and hurt himself).

Plato assumes that Socrates was either lost in thought, or needing to solve a problem during these states: we never hear however of the particular train of thought or solved problem resulting from a specific episode.

2.2.2.3. Voices

A related phenomenon in Socrates' life seems to have been his hearing of a 'divine voice' or *daimon*. Oddly, Plato does not report these as directly linked to his 'fits of

abstraction', and indeed they may have been a quite separate phenomenon. The lives of mystics are full of reports of divine voices, and this seems another not insubstantial piece of evidence. Socrates tells us that he heard this voice since childhood, and also mentions, in the *Phaedrus* that it only tells him to desist from something, never telling him what to do. This is problematic as evidence for mysticism, in that it might fall into the occult category. If the voice were that of an independent, autonomous, disembodied being such those posited by Steiner, or of an 'angel' as described in most traditions, then it would be an occult phenomenon. On the other hand it may have been Socrates' own intuition, and related more to the way that he also took note of his dreams (as in the case of those that prompted him to write poetry while awaiting execution).

2.2.2.4. Socrates' Teachings on Immortality

Socrates' teachings, scattered throughout the dialogues, vary in character, that is in their mood or mode, in such a way as to leave some uncertainty about the whole picture. However, he is relatively consistent in his teachings on the immortality of the soul, presenting a system in fact that is almost a standard model of reincarnation with karmic consequences. Little adjustment is required for this model to fit Hindu or Buddhist thinking, and it is possible, given Abhayananda's assertion that Socrates met wandering Brahmins, that it came from the East (though Pythagoras is a more likely source). As mentioned earlier, however, reincarnation is essentially an occult topic, and not direct evidence of mysticism, other than it might inform the mystic's understanding of immortality. The clear *conviction* of the sense of immortality is evidence however, if we accept Bucke's criteria.

2.2.2.5. Socrates as Spiritual Master

That Socrates was a Master of some kind or other is in little doubt, in the sense that Athenians of a certain type were drawn to him, and in some cases were practically devotees. More usually the picture presented of him is as a Master in the sense of an academic, a philosopher, or a rhetorician whose grasp of his subject was so profound and so compelling as to draw those to him who wished to learn these subjects. We have an image in the West of such an individual, quite divorced from a religious context, for whom it is right and proper to give such an extreme respect. The key quality of such an individual is *intelligence*, so a figure like Einstein, Marx, Freud or Jung fit the picture, or even perhaps Sartre when his young philosophy students would pester him in the local cafe.

The Eastern concept of the Master with whom one seeks to be present is hallowed by the concept of *darshan*, and the key quality of the target individual is not intelligence but spirituality. To be in the presence of the Master is a quite understandable ambition in the Indian tradition, though if taken too far the convention for

most families is to put up a struggle before allowing the devotee to enter a full initiation into the religious life (through the Master).

2.2.2.6. Socrates as Spiritual Midwife

Closely connected to the possibility of interpreting the actions of Socrates and his associates as that of Master with disciples is the image handed down through antiquity of Socrates as 'midwife'. Crombie in his shorter work on Plato subtitles it 'The Midwife's Apprentice'[36] and relates the midwife image to the important Platonic doctrine of *anamnesis* or recollection, while Burnyeat devotes a whole essay to the subject.[37] Burnyeat makes a typically Western assumption in this comment: 'The necessary background to the picture of Socrates as midwife, without which the whole elaborate fancy would lose its sense, is of course the metaphor of the mind giving birth to ideas it has conceived.'[38] In the context of Socrates as mystic a quite different interpretation can be put on the metaphor: Socrates is midwife to the spiritual birth of his disciples. In this case it is not concepts that are born in the minds of the disciples (though these will naturally arise) but a spiritual awakening more properly associated with a silence of the mind.

Plato has Socrates expound at length (over four pages in fact) on the midwife image in the *Theatetus*, and it is a strikingly bold and outrageous passage concluding with: 'It is quite clear that they have never learned anything from me; the many fine discoveries to which they give birth are of their own making. But to me and the god they owe their delivery.'[39] The spiritual Master generally makes the same claim, that the disciple has not in fact learned from them, but they were instrumental in the 'birth'.

2.2.2.7. The Socratic 'Method' as Zen Koan

In Plato and Xenophon's Socratic dialogues we are invited to see a 'method' of question and answer that leads Socrates' partner to see the truth. The nature of these dialogues will be examined later on, but the parallels with the Zen *koan*, also a form of question and answer are again possible evidence that Socrates was a mystic. The Socratic 'method' is traditionally presented as an exercise in reason or logic, whereas the Zen *koan* seems to be an exercise in the opposite: their (or rather the Zen Master's) operation is eminently unreasonable and illogical. The end result in Zen is to bring the student to a point of confusion or impasse in which sudden insight can occur as a mystical phenomenon. Typical Zen *koans* may be the questions, "what is the sound of one hand clapping", or "what is your original face". Socrates' questioning takes a very different form, following a programme of questions, though in both cases a dialogue of sorts may ensue. Evidence in favour of viewing the Socratic questioning as similar to the *koan* is this: they often leave the recipient stultified or confused. In the *Meno* the analogy with a stingray is used to describe this numbing or perplexing effect,[40] though with typical Socratic involu-

tion he accepts the analogy only if he is also numbed (rendered ignorant). In the *Symposium* Alcibiades tells us that the conversation of Socrates is 'utterly ridiculous' to the uninitiated.

2.2.2.8. No Small-Talk ...

Agehananda Bharati points out in his *Light at the Centre*[41] that mystics have little small-talk, and my own experience of living mystics confirms this. The type of mystic who is an active teacher or Master seems to enjoy the company of disciples (we see this to a great degree in Ramakrishna for example), and he or she will to a limited degree engage in normal conversation with them, but generally this is used as a spring-board to delve into mystical issues. They steer almost any conversation round to their teachings, and, I would suggest, if any other kind of teacher were to do this, they would be regarded as a boor, and avoided. True, I have given the example of Sartre in his cafe, attended by students hopeful of some insights from him, but I suspect this is a particularly French phenomenon; one cannot imagine a similar situation with Bertrand Russell for example. We shall see that Socrates conforms to Bharati's dictum, as he turns any and all conversations to the 'good'.

2.2.3. The *Phaedo*

It is time to take a detailed look at evidence to support the general points made above. I have chosen the *Phaedo* to concentrate on first, as it paints the clearest picture of Socrates as a mystic of the *jnani* type. This dialogue is the second of two dialogues portraying Socrates in prison awaiting his death sentence, the first being the *Crito*. Let us start with a report by Phaedo on how he encountered Socrates:

> The Master seemed quite happy, Echecrates, both in his manner and in what he said; he met his death so fearlessly and nobly. I could not help feeling that even on his way to the other world he would be under the providence of God. and that when he arrived there all would be well with him, if it ever has been so with anybody. So I felt no sorrow at all, as you might have expected on such a solemn occasion; and at the same time I felt no pleasure at being occupied in our usual philosophical discussions — that was the form that our conversation took — ; I felt an absolutely incomprehensible emotion, a sort of curious blend of pleasure and pain, as my mind took it in that in a little while my friend was going to die.[42]

This passage is consistent with Socrates as Master (the very word is used in fact), and not only at ease with his impending death, but able to transmit some of this equanimity to Phaedo, who, as a close friend one might expect to be distraught. That they regard him as a Master is supported by this passage:

> 'What you should do,' said Socrates, 'is to say a magic spell over him every day until you have charmed his fears away.'
>
> 'But, Socrates,' said Simmias, 'Where shall we find a magician who understands these spells now that you — are leaving us?'

> 'Greece is a large country, Cebes,' he replied, 'which must have good men in it; and there are many foreign races too. You must ransack all of them in your search for this magician, without sparing money or trouble; because you could not spend your money more opportunely on any other object. And you must search also by your own united efforts; because it is probable that you would not easily find anyone better fitted for the task.'[43]

We can read this as Socrates acknowledging his role as Master, and encouraging them to seek another once he has been executed. One would not necessarily expect a non-spiritual Master (as profiled earlier) to face death so calmly: mere intelligence has never been an insurance against the fear of death; neither any guarantee of the kind of happiness that Socrates possessed (Bertrand Russell for example is considered to have been intensely unhappy most of his life). Socrates comments on the right attitude to death as being part of *philosophy*. He has dismissed his jailer's concerns that all their talking would excite him and make the administration of a second or third dose of poison necessary:

> 'Never mind him,' said Socrates. 'Now for you, my jury. I want to explain to you how it seems to me natural that a man who has really devoted his life to philosophy should be cheerful in the face of death, and confident of finding the greatest blessing in the next world when his life is finished. I will try to make clear to you, Simmias and Cebes how this can be so.
>
> 'Ordinary people seem not to realize that those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death. If this is true, and they have actually been looking forward to death all their lives, it would of course be absurd to be troubled when the thing comes for which they have been so long preparing and looking forward.[44]

The first point to make about this extract is that Socrates is making a very odd definition of *philosophy*: a preparation for death. As far as I can tell this claim is made nowhere else in Plato, and elicits laughter from Simmias (one of those present) who points out that most of his fellow-countryman would think it a 'good hit' (i.e. fair criticism) of philosophers that they were half dead, and in fact that 'they, the normal people, are quite aware that death would serve the philosophers right.' Socrates responds that they were quite right 'except in thinking that they are "quite aware". They are not at all aware in what sense true philosophers are half dead, or in what sense they deserve death, or what sort of death they deserve.' In all likelihood Simmias is referring not to the type of philosopher that we know today, or even the type that Socrates was portraying, but the Sophists, who were teachers of rhetoric, and had a bad reputation for their supposed ability to argue a case regardless of its merits.

What follows in the *Phaedo* makes it clear in what sense Socrates sees his 'philosophy' as a preparation for death: it is a form of renunciation. He is 'half-dead' to the *sensible* world in order to be more greatly alive to the divine order:

> 'So it is clear first of all in the case of physical pleasures that the philosopher frees his soul from association with the body (so far as it is possible) to a greater extent than other men?'
>
> 'It seems so'.
>
> 'And most people think, do they not, Simmias, that a man who finds no pleasure and takes no part in these things does not deserve to live, and than anyone who thinks nothing of physical pleasures has one foot in the grave?'
>
> 'That is perfectly true.'
>
> 'Now take the acquisition of knowledge; is the body a hindrance or not, if one takes it into partnership to share an investigation? What I mean is this: is there any certainty in human sight and hearing, or is it true, as the poets are always dinning into our ears, that we neither hear nor see anything accurately? Yet if these senses are not clear and accurate, the rest can hardly be so, because they are all inferior to the first two. Don't you agree?'
>
> 'Certainly.'
>
> 'Then when is it that the soul attains to truth? When it tries to investigate anything with the help of the body, it is obviously led astray.'
>
> 'Quite so.'
>
> 'Is it not in the course of reflection, if at all, that the soul gets a clear view of facts?'
>
> 'Yes'
>
> 'Surely the soul can best reflect when it is free of all distractions such as hearing or sight or pain or pleasure of any kind — that is, when it ignores the body and becomes as far as possible independent, avoiding all physical contacts and associations as much as it can, in its search for reality.'
>
> 'That is so.'
>
> 'The here too — in despising the body and avoiding it, and endeavouring to become independent — the philosopher's soul is ahead of the all the rest.'[45]

In this long extract we have most of essential evidence (though not in the necessary bulk for a final verdict) to construct Socrates as a mystic of the *jnani* type, whose orientation is to *via negativa*. We should first of all notice that Socrates is concerned with an inquiry into truth, but not into the truth *about* anything in particular, more a Truth that the soul attains to, i.e. a state. The body is seen as a hindrance to this inquiry, and the senses of no use. It is in the course of *reflection* that Truth is attained. Our difficulty, as throughout, is what interpretation we should put on the word reflection. I have proposed earlier that it is usually taken to be a form of cogitation (as defined above) though possibly a highly refined sort. What happens if we read it as *meditation* (as defined above)? My suggestion is that it makes the passage more intelligible, rather than less. However, we need to examine more of Plato to see if this interpretation is reasonable. For now it is worth noting that the body is not just an inconvenience, it is to be *despised*. Let us look at a Buddhist text for a similar attitude to the body — Sutra 11 of the *Dhammapada*, 'Age':

> Why is there laughter, why merriment, when this world is on fire? When you are living in darkness, why don't you look for light?
>
> This body is a painted image, subject to disease, decay and death, activated by thoughts that come and go. What joy can there be for him who sees that his white bones will be cast away like gourds in the autumn?
>
> Around the bones is built a house, plastered over with flesh and blood, in which dwell pride and pretence, old age and death. Even the chariot of a king loses its glitter in the course of time; so too the body loses its health and strength. But goodness does not grow old with the passage of time.
>
> A man who does not learn from life grows old like an ox: his body grows, but not his wisdom.
>
> I have gone through many rounds of birth and death, looking in vain for the builder of this body. Heavy indeed is birth and death again and again! But now I have seen you, house-builder, you shall not build this house again. Its beams are broken; its dome is shattered: self-will is extinguished; nirvana is attained.
>
> Those who have not practised spiritual discipline in their youth pine away like old cranes in a lake without fish. Like worn-out bows they lie in old age, sighing over the past.[46]

This sutra is laden with many images and metaphors for which there is insufficient space here to expand upon, but the attitude to the body is clear enough, as is the sense of liberation that is possible through 'goodness', 'wisdom', 'spiritual discipline' and so on — all of which are implicit in Socrates' 'philosophy'. A simple correspondence between the thought of the Buddha and that of Socrates is not being suggested here; merely that both share the chief concerns of a renunciate *jnani*, and both neglect the chief concerns of the *bhakti*. The fact that Socrates was an accomplished professional soldier and had a legendary capacity for drink are just two examples of personal characteristics quite at odds with what we know of the life of the Buddha, and would lead to differing articulations of the *jnani* concept.

Let us pursue another issue raised by the above sutra: the Buddha talks of the body "activated by thoughts that come and go": this is a shorthand reference to the Buddhist attitude to thought, that it is in itself the great obstacle. (In Zen this doctrine becomes 'no-mind'.) Granted that we should not make this a simplistic either/or issue regarding meditation and cogitation, let us return to the *Phaedo* to a passage where the same issue is at stake:

> 'Don't you think that the person who is likely to succeed in the attempt most perfectly is the one who approaches each object, as far as possible, with the unaided intellect, without taking account of any sense of sight in his thinking, or dragging

> in any other sense into his reckoning — the man who pursues the truth by applying his pure and unadulterated thought to the pure and unadulterated object, cutting himself off as much as possible from his eyes and ears and virtually all the rest of his body as an impediment which by its presence prevents the soul from attaining the truth and clear thinking? Is not this the person, Simmias, who will reach the goal of reality, if anybody can?'[47]

We have in this passage 'intellect', 'thinking', 'reckoning', 'pure and unadulterated thought' and finally 'clear thinking'. Socrates is reiterating the need to cut oneself of from the senses (one of the Buddhist metaphors for this makes the comparison with a turtle withdrawing its limbs), but can we really make a case for meditation ('no mind') here against a form of cogitation? In particular as he now talks of 'each object' as if we were now to investigate the truth about a range of objects (or perhaps propositions) rather than attaining to the (single) Truth? This passage probably epitomises our difficulties with Socrates, from the perspective of mysticism. However, two things should be born in mind. Firstly the translation of the ancient Greek words may not be accurate *in this context*, and of course there is the possibility of transcription errors over the two and a half thousand years since Plato wrote his dialogues. Secondly, if we are to withdraw from the senses and the body, what kind of 'objects' can we encounter? The trite answer to this of course is Plato's famous 'forms'; however, we cannot necessarily understand the forms to be in the plural, despite the use of the plural noun. There are sufficient passages in Plato to suggest that they can be subsumed into a single form, that of the 'good', but this becomes nothing more than a vague philosophical ultimate.

If one attempts an explanation independent of the 'forms', then various, similarly unsatisfactory, possibilities arise. If one withdraws from the conventional five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch then one is left with thoughts and feelings. The Buddha proposed that 'mind' was in fact a sixth sense with thoughts (he was not clear about feelings) as the objects appropriate to it like sights were to the sense of sight. (I have long suggested that the 'heart' be the seventh sense with feelings as the objects appropriate to it, but I have found no support in the literature for this position.) For the Buddha it was clear that withdrawal from the senses meant also withdrawal from thought, and that meditation, if it had an object at all, was on emptiness. If Socrates means us to withdraw only from the five senses, then clearly one could find a myriad of objects for his recollection: the contents of his thoughts. But, and this is the crux: *all* thoughts derive originally from the senses. Surely he cannot dismiss the senses on the one hand, and yet invite us to cogitate *ad nauseam* on our memories, derived from those very senses?

Socrates continues from the previous extract by returning to the singular: "So long as we keep to the body and our soul is contaminated with this imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily to our object, which we assert to be Truth." Whether the capitalisation of truth is a vagary of the translation I don't

know, but Plato scholars do point out that Plato is rather vague on all these technical terms. It may well be, therefore, that the rather crucial difference (to us) between the singular and plural may not be resolved, and that we shall have to rely on the cumulative weight of evidence to answer our main question. Socrates, in the immediately subsequent passage, also confides the following: "It seems, to judge from the argument, that the wisdom which we desire and upon which we profess to have set our hearts will be attainable only when we are dead, and not in our lifetime." This is reminiscent of the Manichean and Gnostic tradition, also known as radical dualism, where all matter is regarded as corrupt, and liberation can only take place on death (of the body). The Buddhists on the other hand regard liberation as possible while in the body, though there is the sense of a more final liberation at death.

Much of the rest of the *Phaedo* is spent on discussion about reincarnation and immortality, but before dealing with this I would like to quote a passage that helps complete our profile of a *jnani*.

> Well, surely we can see now that the soul works in just the opposite way. It directs all the elements of which it is said to consist, opposing them in almost everything all through life, and exercising every form of control; sometimes by severe and unpleasant methods like those of physical training and medicine, and sometimes by milder ones; sometimes scolding, sometimes encouraging; and conversing with the desires and passions and fears as though it were quite separate and distinct from them.[48]

This is a reminder that the development of the will is important in *jnani*.

Let us look now at how reincarnation is dealt with in the *Phaedo*. In itself, a belief in reincarnation itself is little indication as to mysticism: millions if not billions of people in the Orient formally ascribe to religious systems predicated on reincarnation, and with which they probably have little or no engagement. Many *occultists* in the West also hold beliefs in reincarnation, and in some instances (as with occult 'scientists' Rudolf Steiner and Papus) it is central to their teachings. It is commonly held that Pythagoras also believed in reincarnation. I would suggest, however, that reincarnation is only of significance to the mystic if (a) they personally recall previous incarnations, and (b) this has an impact on their orientation to the eternal within them. The sutra from the *Dhammapada* above gives a clear indication that for the Buddha both these aspects are true: he remembers former lives, and as a result has come to know the 'house-builder' (the causes of incarnation). Let us look at a passages in the *Phaedo* regarding reincarnation:

> Because every pleasure or pain has a sort of rivet with which it fastens the soul to the body and pins it down and makes it corporeal, accepting as true whatever the body certifies. The result of agreeing with the body and finding pleasure in the same things is, I imagine, that it cannot help becoming like it in character and

> training, so that it can never get clean away to the unseen world, but is always saturated with the body when it sets out [i.e. at death], and so soon falls back again into another body, where it takes root and grows. Consequently it is excluded from all fellowship with the pure and uniform and divine.[49]

Taken with the many other references to reincarnation in Plato, we learn of a conventional idea (in comparison with the Buddhist and Hindu systems at least) of reincarnation: the soul departs from the body at death and 'takes root and grows' in another body soon after, *if 'contaminated' by the rivets of pleasures or pains*. Do we have here the 'house-builder' of the Buddha? In all likelihood yes, because the Buddha's account stresses desire and the 'karma' engendered by it as the causes of incarnation. In fact the Socratic/Platonic view of reincarnation that we gather from the dialogues differs only in these respects from the Oriental view: (a) there is no developed concept of 'karma', though it is present in a nascent form; (b) reincarnation is seen as a 'fall', which is not the same as the Hindu concept of *ages* (where we have degenerated from a golden age to the present Kali Yuga). In the *Timaeus* the soul is created in a kind of mixing-bowl and placed on a star; the first incarnation (as a man, not a woman as that would be a form of punishment) tests the soul, and if found wanting it degenerates in sequence to woman, higher animal, and lower animal.[50] This account is not to be taken too seriously I think, as it is part of a longer and speculative cosmogeny (though it is similar to that in the Gnostic tradition). The idea of incarnation as a progressive *fall* is found in a slightly different form in Rudolf Steiner: he even speaks of the melancholy of Adam and the progressive materialisation of the spirit.

What evidence however does the treatment of reincarnation in the Platonic dialogues give us for the status of Socrates as mystic? Only this, I would suggest: that it was part of what gave Socrates his equanimity and dignity in the face of death. We have no direct evidence however that his relation to reincarnation fulfilled the conditions above, that he remembered past lives and from the memories (as opposed to the theory) came to his position regarding death and incarnation. In fact the remaining discussion in the *Phaedo* is concerned with how one reaches the higher knowledge by a form of recollection, and, it is logically a recollection of knowledge gained while *disincarnate* and hence does not require a continuous cycle of rebirths. Socrates says: "The theory that our soul exists even before it enters the body surely stands or falls with the soul's possession of the ultimate standard of reality; a view which I have, to the best of my belief, fully and rightly accepted."[51] Socrates is insistent in many of the dialogues that this kind of knowledge (unlike that of the craftsmen or artisans) is a *recollection*, but (I would argue) this cannot be from a previous embodiment because of the infinite regress that this implies. Hence reincarnation per se is not vital to his teachings.

The *Phaedo* finishes with perhaps the most moving of all scenes from Plato: an account of Socrates' last moments. Crito asks how they shall bury him.

> He [Socrates] laughed gently as he spoke, and turning to us went on: 'I can't persuade Crito that I am this Socrates here who is talking to you now and marshalling all the arguments; he thinks that I am the one whom he will see presently lying dead; and he asks how he is to bury me![52]

Socrates is reminding us of one of the profoundest messages of the mystics: one is not one's body. Yes, the physical body is about to die; as a composite thing (to use a terminology that Socrates introduces earlier in the *Phaedo*) it must disintegrate at some point, but the part of Socrates that is not composite (his soul) cannot disintegrate nor die. The calmness, even joyfulness of Socrates' acceptance of the hemlock, and his general demeanour, bring even the remaining brave souls to tears — the jailer, finding Socrates to be 'the noblest and gentlest and bravest of all the men that have ever come here,' — and Phaedo and Appolodorus. Socrates chides them that he had sent the women away to avoid exactly this, takes the hemlock, and dies.

2.2.4. The *Phaedrus*, and the *Symposium*

If the *Phaedo* gives us a base from which to draw a recognisable portrait of a *jnani* mystic, then the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* add the love-element that must lurk close to the surface (as discussed above). Quite early in the *Phaedrus* we have a confirmation that for Socrates his mysticism is an *inquiry*:

> Now I have no time for such work, and the reason is, my friend, that I've not yet succeeded in obeying the Delphic injunction to 'know myself,' and it seems to me absurd to consider problems about other [mythical] beings while I am still in ignorance about my own nature. So I let these things alone and acquiesce in the popular attitude towards them; as I've already said I make myself rather than them the object of my investigations, and I try to discover whether I am a more complicated and puffed-up sort of animal than Typho [father of the winds] or whether I am a gentler and simpler creature, endowed by heaven with a nature altogether less typhonic.[53]

This passage is preceded by a discussion of legend, and it is this 'work' that Socrates has no time for. At the start of the *Euthyphro* we have a similar admission by Socrates that he is not that interested in stories about civil war amongst the gods and other myths and legends; he ponders on it:

> Do you thing that is the reason why I am being called to trial, Euthyphro, because when I hear anyone telling stories like these about the gods I somehow find it difficult to accept them?[54]

The *Phaedrus* complicates our sketch of the *jnani* because it suggests that Socrates is in favour of a kind of divine possession or madness, not just as a basis for the arts, but for love. In the opening section Socrates tells Phaedrus that the wooded

river-bank outside the city that they have chosen for their conversation seems full of spirits, "so do not be surprised if, as my speech goes on, the nymphs take possession of me."[55] The speeches that follow are about love, and in so far as they are about the love between two human beings they are not relevant to our inquiry. However, in the later discussion on possession and madness Socrates hints that he is interested in its broader effects:

> If it were true without qualification that madness is an evil, that would be all very well, but in fact madness, provided it comes as the gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings. Take the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona, for example, and consider all the benefits which individuals and states in Greece have received from them when they were in a state of frenzy, though their usefulness in their sober senses amounts to little or nothing.[56]

(Note that a modern equivalent is the trance state in which the radio prophet Edgar Cacey gave his 'readings'; he only learned about what he had said afterwards through tape-recordings.[57]) Socrates also says that "this type of madness is the greatest benefit that heaven can confer on us."[58] Socrates then goes on to show that the soul is uncreated and immortal, and then makes a long detour with metaphors of charioteer and horses, and the wings of the soul. Reincarnation (i.e. being incarnated again) is the losing of the 'wings of the soul' through ignorance, but "These souls, if they choose the life of the philosopher three times successively, regain their wings in the third period of a thousand years, and in the three-thousandth year win their release."[59] This contradicts the passage in the *Phaedo* quoted earlier that indicates reincarnation takes place 'soon'. This issue is not important however: across the world's literature on reincarnation the time intervals posited between incarnations varies tremendously. Socrates elaborates on the relationship between the 'wings' and a fourth type of madness:

> This then is the fourth type of madness, which befalls when a man, reminded by the sight of beauty on earth of the true beauty, grows his wings and endeavours to fly upward, but in vain, exposing himself to the reproach of insanity because like a bird he fixes his gaze on the heights to the neglect of things below; and the conclusion to which our whole discourse points is that in itself and in its origin this is the best of all forms of divine possession, both for the subject himself and for his associate, and it is when he is touched with this madness that the man whose love is aroused by beauty in others is called a lover.[60]

This passage is useful for pointing up the confusion of interpretation that is possible: is Socrates talking about a divine love that reaches to the Union of the *bhakti* mystics, or is he talking about a homosexual or homoerotic love between 'subject and associate'? Either way it is in the context of two men, and we have on the one hand a master-disciple spiritual relationship and on the other an older-younger homosexual one. In the more normal context of philosophy it is usually assumed in the

West that the relationship was a homosexual one (though possibly not consummated) between an older man teaching philosophy or wisdom to a younger one. In the context of mysticism we have parallels with at least three other cases where the same question has been asked but the evidence is strongly in favour of the master-disciple relationship: between Rumi and Shamsi Tabriz, between Ramakrishna and his disciples, and between Whitman and his male companions (e.g. Peter Doyle). In Iran today it is a common belief that Tabriz was Rumi's homosexual lover; a recent volume has been entirely devoted to Ramakrishna's possible homosexuality with his disciples[61], and Whitman's alleged homosexuality is a key biographical question for all Whitman scholars. We live in a culture where it is assumed that male signs of affection (Socrates fondled Phaedo's curls for example, regretting that they would be shorn after his execution as a sign of mourning[62]) indicate homosexuality, and that to sleep with another man is proof. But we will see that Alcibiades slept with Socrates as if with a 'father or older brother', and we know that Whitman slept with the naturalist John Burroughs, 'by no stretch of imagination his sexual lover.'[63] This topic is worthy I think of a whole investigation, but for now let us just note that modern interpretations of behaviour may lead to the wrong conclusions in this area.

Where is Socrates leading us with his possession, madness and beauty in the *Phaedrus*? A form of madness befalls a man who sees beauty; this leads to his 'wings'; the following passage then sums up Socrates' views:

> It is impossible for a soul that has never seen the truth to enter into our human shape; it takes a man to understand by the use of universals, and to collect out of the multiplicity of sense-impressions a unity arrived at by a process of reason. Such a process is simply the recollection of the things which our soul once perceived when it took its journey with a god, looking down from above on the things to which we now ascribe reality and gazing upwards towards what is truly real. That is why it is right that the soul of the philosopher alone should regain its wings; for it is always dwelling in memory as best it may upon those things which a god owes his divinity to dwelling upon. It is only by the right use of such aids to recollection, which form a continual initiation into the perfect mystic vision that a man can become perfect in the true sense of the word. Because he stands apart from the common objects of human ambition and applies himself to the divine, he is reproached by most men for being out of his wits; they do not realize that he is in fact possessed by a god.[64]

It may be a coincidence that the translator has used the word 'mystic' in this passage, but it stands anyhow alongside any classical mystical text. The introduction into our picture of Socrates of the phenomenon of possession is of interest.

Let us turn now to the *Symposium* (symposium means a 'drinking-together', or drinks party). It is interesting because it reinforces some of the love-aspects of Socrates' possible mysticism, and also because it starts with Socrates getting lost on

his way to the party. He is in one of his 'fits of abstraction' (discussed earlier), and this event is reinforced by Alcibiades' later description of a full day's such abstraction, so remarkable as to cause some Ionians to take their bedding out to observe him in the cool of the evening.[65] The bulk of the *Symposium* is taken up with speeches on the subject of love, again to be seen in the context of either a homosexual love, or that between master and disciple. Unusually, for Socrates, he calls on the authority of another in his own speech on love; this other is the priestess Diotima. Her most important statement in the context of mysticism is that love is "the desire for the perpetual possession of the good."[66] The homosexual interpretation would be one of continuously possessing (in the carnal sense) young men, while the mystical interpretation would be to arrive at the eternal within one. Perhaps the most useful testimony for us in the *Symposium* is that of Alcibiades. He is a young and handsome man who is later to become a ruthless tyrant, and is often cited as a evidence against Socrates in his trial; there are several mentions in the Platonic Dialogues of Socrates 'chasing after him'. Alcibiades own (rueful) evidence suggests the opposite: that he sought Socrates' physical love, and received only a lecture in philosophy: "I swear by all the gods in heaven that for anything that had happened between us when I got up after sleeping with Socrates, I might have been sleeping with my father or elder brother. … On the one hand I realized that I had been slighted, but on the other I felt a reverence for Socrates' character, his self-control and courage; I had met a man whose like for wisdom and fortitude I could never have expected to encounter."[67] Alcibiades tells us also: "Whenever I listen to him my heart beats faster than if I were in a religious frenzy, and tears run down my face, and I observe that numbers of other people have the same experience."[68] Socrates has a shaming effect on him:

> He is the only person in whose presence I experienced a sensation of which I might be thought incapable, a sensation of shame; he, and he alone, positively makes me ashamed of myself. … The Socrates whom you see has a tendency to fall in love with good-looking young men, and is always in their society and in an ecstasy about them. … , but once you see beneath the surface you will discover a degree of self-control of which you can hardly form a notion, gentlemen. Believe me, it makes no difference to him whether a person is good-looking — he despises good looks to an almost inconceivable extent — nor whether he is rich nor whether he possesses any of the other advantages that rank high in popular esteem; to him all these things are worthless, and we ourselves of no account, be sure of that. He spends his whole life pretending and playing with people, and I doubt whether anyone has ever seen the treasures which are revealed when he grows serious and exposes what he keeps inside. However, I once saw them, and found them so divine and precious and beautiful and marvellous that, to put the matter briefly, I had no choice but to do whatever Socrates bade me.[69]

Jacob Needleman comments in connection with this passage that "the impact of Socrates is to produce upon man a specific sort of suffering that involves seeing oneself against a very high criterion of what man should be"[70]. Needleman is influ-

enced in this comment by the teachings of G.I.Gurdjieff, who often said that the purpose of a Master was to induce this specific form of suffering in the disciple (he referred to the process of creating it as 'friction'). The following passage reinforces this impression of Socrates as spiritual Master (Alcibiades is speaking again):

> But our friend here is so extraordinary, both in his person and in his conversation, that you will never be able to find anyone remotely resembling him either in antiquity of in the present generation, unless you go beyond humanity altogether, and have recourse to the images of Silenus and satyr which I am using myself in this speech. ... Anyone who sets out to listen to Socrates talking will probably find his conversation utterly ridiculous at first, it is clothed in such curious words and phrases, the hide, so to speak of a hectoring satyr. He will talk of pack-asses and blacksmiths, cobblers and tanners, and appear to express the same ideas in the same language over and over again, so that any inexperienced or foolish person is bound to laugh at his way of speaking. But if a man penetrates within and sees the content of Socrates' talk exposed, he will find that there is nothing but sound sense inside, and that this talk is almost the talk of a god, and enshrines countless representations of ideal excellence, and is of the widest possible application; in fact that it extends over all the subjects with which a man who means to turn out a gentleman needs to concern himself.[71]

Alcibiades concludes his speech with another useful clue to Socrates' behaviour, and the wider problems of homosexual implication discussed earlier: "I may add that I am not the only sufferer in this way; Charmides the son of Glaucon and Euthydemus the son of Diocles and many others have had the same treatment; he has pretended to be in love with them, when in fact he is himself the beloved rather than the lover."[72] *He himself is the beloved* — an indication that Socrates as spiritual Master is loved, though as a *device* he pretends the opposite (not that the Master's love is not genuine, but it is not of the familiar sort). Bucke's criteria of attractiveness seems met in this description of Socrates.

2.2.5. The Evidence so Far

With the general evidence earlier presented, and the detailed evidence from the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Symposium*, I believe we have a plausible case that the Socrates presented by Plato was a mystic, of the *jnani* type, engaged with the *via negativa* (though not by any means in an extreme way) and generally non-theistic. The love-aspects are there in just the proportion one might expect in a *jnani*: absence of these indications would actually weaken the case for Socrates as a mystic. Furthermore, Socrates appears as a Master devoted to teaching his disciples, who loved him.

If we step back from this thesis for a moment, we can consider other possibilities. What of the possibility that it was *Plato himself* that was the mystic, and that the image of Socrates we have so far discovered was entirely his invention, plastered over the bare historic facts of an Athenian trouble-maker sentenced to death? Or

that both were equally mystics? We need to look further into the Platonic canon to answer these questions.

2.2.6. The Republic

Plato's *Republic* presents us with a different picture of Socrates than the one we have drawn from the previous three dialogues. Many elements of this picture *are* consistent with our portrait of Socrates as *jnani*, but the *Republic* taken as a whole introduces a jarring note. The *Republic* is unusual amongst Socratic dialogues for placing Socrates in the first person, so one might suspect that it would provide the more reliable evidence about him. However, the essential problem with it, from the perspective of mysticism, is that it is Utopian. In fact it is one of the earliest Utopian works and highly influential through Western political history. The central proposition is the foundation of a State based on 'philosopher-kings', where the term 'philosopher' here easily translates to mystic, as the following statement from Socrates shows:

> Because the true philosopher, as you know, Adeimantus, whose mind is on higher realities, has no time to look at the affairs of men, or to take part in their quarrels with all the jealousy and bitterness they involve. His eyes are turned to contemplate fixed and immutable realities, a realm where there is no injustice done or suffered, but all is reason and order, and which is the model which he imitates and to which he assimilates himself as far as he can. For is there any way to stop a man assimilating himself to anything with which he enjoys dealing?[73]

The description of a philosopher, whose mind is on higher realities and whose eyes are turned to contemplate fixed and immutable realities is consistent with mysticism, but the thrust of the *Republic*, that such individuals should head the State is unusual in mysticism. Krishna, according to the *Gita* and the *Mahabharata* played an active role in the great war of Kurukshetra (though his actions were certainly not that of the average local king), and Mohammed led his tribe to military victory in the Middle East. Socrates himself was a foot-soldier. But a philosopher-king? He even admits that most philosophers 'are rogues',[74] and that the 'divine sign' is too rare to save most of them from corruption: 'My own divine sign, I think, hardly counts, as hardly anyone before me has had it.'[75]

The picture we have of Socrates' character, independent of mysticism and philosophy, is that of a frugal and hardy nature, at home in the army or in discussion with citizens from the humblest cobbler to the statesmen of the time, a welcome guest at a drinking party, and always *with* people (there is nothing in Plato to suggest that Socrates was any kind of recluse). None of this fits well with a man who "has no time to look at the affairs of men"; on the contrary he is passionately interested in men, and even mentions in the *Phaedrus*: "Now the people in the city have something to teach me, but the fields and trees won't teach me anything."[76] But the last thing that his involvement with the citizens of Athens seems to be about in his

actual life is to (a) rule them and (b) withdraw to solitary contemplation to achieve that.

The Utopian nature of *The Republic* would be an odd note for any mystic to strike, because of their insistence on the 'other world' (or non-material reality) if *via negativa* (and this is Socrates' theme in the *Phaedo*) or their insistence on the natural world *as it is* if *via positiva*. A more typical response to politics is Jesus' "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" (and incidentally the source of much popular criticism, from Martin Scorcese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* to Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*). Socrates tells us in the *Apology* that he quit politics in fact because he wanted a long life. So is *The Republic* a musing by a mystic on an ideal society? If so, then why make the assumption: "So philosophy is impossible among the common people."?[77] Surely the ideal society for a mystic is one where everyone is lead to 'philosophy' (read mysticism for now)? But the ideal state we learn of is strictly stratiated into the philosopher-kings, the auxiliaries (those who are not full philosophers but carry out the running of the state and its defence) and the common people, farmers, tradesmen and so on.

But worse is to come. The ideal state as described in *The Republic* is quite clearly totalitarian, in fact differing from historical examples only by the replacement of a fascist dictator with one or more philosopher-kings. The rulers in Socrates' version are of course benign, but the instruments they use are recognisably totalitarian: the strict control over education (especially reading material), the issue of propaganda in the form of suitable 'myths', the censorship of the arts and its subordination to the goals of the state, and the practice of eugenics, including infanticide. Even enthusiastic Plato scholars admit that these elements are problematic, but since the second world war a number of commentators have focused in more depth on the totalitarianism in *The Republic* (though not from the perspective of mysticism). These include Toynbee's *A Study of History*, R.H.S. Crossman's *Plato Today*, and Bertrand Russell's *Philosophy and Politics*. However, Sir Karl Popper has been the most vociferous critic, in his *The Open Society and its Enemies*. He examines the views of a number of Plato apologists and comes to this conclusion: "In spite of such arguments, I believe that Plato's political programme, far from being morally superior to totalitarianism, is fundamentally identical to it."[78] Popper believes that Plato was reacting to the Heraclitean philosophy of *flux*, and was seeking the "possibility of arresting all political change".[79] I. M. Crombie, on the other hand, suggests that Plato was trying to find an accommodation between "the theories of Heraclitus and the practice of Socrates."[80]

A good coverage of the arguments for and against Plato as a totalitarian are to be found in *Plato, Popper, and Politics*, a collection of fifteen essays by scholars across the spectrum of opinion, including Popper.[81] In one of these essays G. R. Morrow makes this point: "Now the heart and centre of the Nazi and Communist admiration for Plato, and of the American liberal's repudiation of him, is of course,

the idealization of absolutism in the *Republic*, the doctrine that government is a high art that can only be entrusted to an elite group, who must not be hampered by the rules that men call laws."[82] Morrow goes on to defend Plato by pointing out that in *Laws* (a much later work) Plato modifies this stance by saying "There is no mortal soul that can bear supreme and irresponsible power without losing his wisdom and integrity," (*Laws* 691c), and providing a whole system of laws that would provide the necessary checks and balances. Where this defence falls down, I think, is that in real life laws arise out of the affairs of men, rather than from the Gods, as Plato states at the outset of the *Laws* (624a). However, this argument is not central to our enquiry, and I wish only to make one more comment on the *Laws*: that by the very laws on impiety that Plato proposes in this late work (*Laws* 909) Socrates would have been condemned to death, despite the defence by Plato in the early work the *Apology*. (I challenge anyone to prove otherwise, except in the case that Plato himself is the prosecutor.)

Returning to eugenics (the science of improving the human stock, according to Sir Francis Galton, coiner of the term in 1883[83]), we find that in the post-Nazi era the term has thankfully a negative connotation, but it is easy to forget that for many so-called liberals in the early part of the twentieth century it was seen as an answer to many of society's ills. Huxley and Orwell subscribed to it and so did Sir Winston Churchill, and it is only due to the veto of his cabinet that he failed to implement policies of selective sterilisation of criminals and gypsies. Oddly enough, despite the substantial section of the *Republic* devoted to eugenic ideas, Galton makes no mention of the *Republic*, and neither do any of the other texts I have consulted on the subject.

2.2.7. Preliminary Conclusions on Plato's Socrates

As stated earlier, *The Republic* gives us many elements that contribute to the portrait of Socrates as mystic (and the famous analogies of the Sun, the Line, and the Cave in *The Republic* are good examples), but the overall picture of its intent is anti-mystical. For while it may be possible to find another mystic with a Utopian outlook (I don't know of one), I don't believe it possible to find one with a totalitarian outlook. From this perspective it seems more likely that Plato himself was not a mystic, but reported at times with sensitivity on Socrates who was. Plato's intentions change throughout his works; as the direct influence of his master waned (Plato's Academy was founded about fourteen years after Socrates' death for example) Plato's concerns became more political. Before drawing any final conclusions however we should look at the other major source on Socrates' life, Xenophon.

2.3. Xenophon

Xenophon was an exact contemporary of Plato, being aged 29 when Socrates died (at the age of 70); Plato was 28. Xenophon was a country gentleman, a military

man, and a historian, and provides us with a quite detailed portrait of Socrates through four dialogues, known in the Penguin translation as *Socrates' Defence*, *Memoirs of Socrates, The Dinner-Party,* and *The Estate Manager*. *Socrates' Defence* is the equivalent of Plato's *Apology,* and *The Dinner-Party* is the equivalent of Plato's *Symposium* (the differences in translation of the titles seem arbitrary but are useful in distinguishing the works of the two authors). The portrait of Socrates from Xenophon has none of the contradictions of Plato, none of the totalitarianism, and little indication of mysticism. Xenophon was a pragmatist with a utilitarian approach, a doer rather than a thinker, but with a sensitivity to the *good* that he found so developed in Socrates, albeit a *good* that must translate into the affairs of men and whose worth is judged from that perspective. His agenda is seen most plainly in *The Estate Manager*, though it is present in all the dialogues. John Philips Potter considers that "The opinions and conduct of Socrates may be safely estimated from Xenophon … [he] respected his master too religiously to dare to interpolate any thing into his opinions."[84] This is probably a little optimistic; scholars down the ages have in fact argued for and against Xenophon's evidence, those arguing for (like Potter) on the basis that he was not independent enough of thought to interpolate, while those arguing against on the basis that he was not intelligent enough to understand Socrates. From the point of view of mysticism we learn little, not because Xenophon was not intelligent, but because he was clearly not mystically inclined. However, the consistency and pragmatism of Xenophon do give us a better picture of Socrates as a man than does Plato.

Xenophon's portrait shows us a Socrates who is *visible* (i.e. always amongst people), *temperate* (in all things, and in a highly considered manner), *humorous* (hilariously so at times, as when he calls himself a pimp[85], and when he engages in a beauty competition with Critobulus[86]), *engaging* (in the sense of reaching out to actual and potential disciples), *democratic* (despite his association with aristocrats and tyrants), *interested* (in human affairs), and *positive* (he teaches piety through gratitude for a munificent universe). This passage shows his liking for company:

> Moreover, he was always visible. For in the early morning he used to go on walks and to the gymnasium, and when the marketplace was full he was visible there, and for the remainder of the day he was always where he might be with the most people.[87]

Xenophon also shows a Socrates who is conventionally religious in his observances and obedience to religious law, though possessed in addition with the power of divination. Beyond this Xenophon does not speculate on areas we might consider mystical, and gives only a brief account of Socrates' philosophy:

> I shall now try to describe how Socrates made his associates better at philosophical discussion. He believed that those who understood the nature of any given thing would be able to explain it to others as well, whereas it was no wonder, he said, if those who did not understand made mistakes themselves and misled other.

> Consequently, he never stopped investigating with the help of his companions the meaning of every single term. It would be laborious task to describe fully all the distinctions he drew; I shall mention only a few examples, which I think will serve to illustrate his method of inquiry.[88]

It is clear that while Xenophon had enormous respect for Socrates he was not interested in the 'laborious task' of reproducing his teachings. The essence of Xenophon's respect is probably captured in the passage where Lycon says at the end of *The Dinner Party* "I swear, Socrates, it does seem to me that you are a truly good man."[89]

Given Xenophon's character, there is nothing in his testimony that works against Socrates as mystic: around every great Master there are always those who are devoted and loyal but whose temperament inclines them to the practical and away from the mystical. However, although there is little directly mystical in Xenophon's portrait there are some pointers here and there, beyond the obvious references to Socrates' *daimon*. Firstly, Socrates had an estranging effect (allegedly) on his followers from their parents and relatives, reminiscent of a similar charge against Jesus:

> Socrates' accuser said that he lowered the regard of his associates not only for their fathers, but also for their other relatives, by saying that it is not their relatives that help the victim of disease or litigation but doctors in the one case and competent advocates in the other.[90]

Socrates clearly believed that he offered something unique to his disciples that their relatives could not, and that it was as urgent as if they were facing disease or litigation. However he balances this elsewhere by praising the role of the parent, for example when remonstrating with his own son (who is indignant at his treatment from his mother Xanthippe).[91]

That the word 'disciple' may be better used for 'associates' (found in most translations) is illustrated by the way in which Euthydemus is shown by Socrates to have no 'real' knowledge, his initial dejection at this and abandonment of Socrates' company, only to return: "and from that time onwards, he never left him unless he was obliged to, and he even copied some of Socrates' practices."[92] In Xenophon, unlike in Plato, we find that Socrates uses what is known much later as the 'argument from design' to instil piety in his followers, and this is used on Euthydemus, taking up the whole of section 4.3 of the *Memoirs of Socrates*. This is too long to quote in full, but some of the positive and almost prayerful tone is captured in this passage:

> And what of the fact that they [the gods] have equipped us with senses appropriate to the different kinds of beautiful and beneficial objects that surround us, so that by means of these senses we can enjoy all good things? And the fact that they have implanted in us reason, which enables us to think about and remember

> our sensations, and so discover the beneficial effects of each class of objects and devise various means for enjoying what is good and avoiding what is bad for us?[93]

In another parallel with Jesus, we find Socrates visiting a prostitute (or so we are meant to assume from the fact that she maintained a large household solely from the favours of wealthy men; perhaps 'courtesan' would be a better word). This is described in section 3.11 of the *Memoirs*, and finishes with the following exchange:

> Theodote said, 'Why don't you help me in my hunt for friends, Socrates?
>
> 'I will, believe me', said Socrates, 'if you persuade me.'
>
> 'How can I persuade you?'
>
> 'You'll look to that yourself,' he said, 'and you'll find a way, if you need any help from me.'
>
> 'Then come and see me often,' she said.
>
> 'Well, Theodote,' replied Socrates, poking fun at his own avoidance of public life, 'it's not very easy for me to find the time for it. I have a great deal of public and private business that keeps me occupied and I have some girlfriends too, who will never let me leave them by day or night, because they are learning from me about love-charms and spells.'
>
> 'Do you really know about them too, Socrates?' she asked.
>
> 'Why do you suppose that Apollodorus here and Antisthenes never leave me? And that Cebes and Simmias come to visit me from Thebes? You may be sure that these things don't happen without a lot of love-charms and spells and magic wheels.'
>
> 'Lend me your magic wheel, then, so that I may spin it first for you.'
>
> 'Certainly not,' he said. 'I don't want to be drawn to you; I want you to come to me.'
>
> 'Very well, I will,' she declared. 'Only mind you let me in.'
>
> 'Yes, I'll let you in,' said Socrates, 'unless I have someone with me that I like better.'[94]

Socrates' 'girlfriends' are, of course, his disciples, and we can read this passage as the good-humoured 'fishing' for a new disciple that spiritual Masters are continuously engaged in. Socrates is clear that she must come to him and not the other way round though.

We also have a possible reference in Xenophon to one of Socrates' 'fits of abstraction', or, in our terms *samadhi*. Socrates is talking about dancing:

> '... Don't you know that the other day Charmides here caught me dancing at daybreak?'
>
> 'Yes, indeed I did,' said Charmides, 'and at first I was astonished and afraid that you were out of your mind, but, when I heard you explain it to me in the way that you are doing now, I went home myself and — well, I didn't dance, because I've never learned how, but I waved my arms about, because I knew how to do that!'[95]

If, and I grant that this is a big if, Socrates was prone to the kind of *samadhi* so well-documented in the case of Ramakrishna, then we can expect him to sometimes be still (as recorded in Plato) and sometimes to move in rapture, perhaps to 'wave' his arms about. Given that *samadhi* has not been widely understood in the West, and that it is rare occurrence anyway, we can expect both that witnesses may confuse it with dancing, and that Socrates may have encouraged this view because he had no other way of explaining it, or did not want to dwell on it.

None of the evidence from Xenophon is conclusive about Socrates' status as mystic of course, but we have seen that many passages can be read that way. What Xenophon gives us, and which I think is relatively reliable because of its consistency, is a quality of Socrates of *balance*. He is temperate, but does not approve of neglecting the body, he is humorous, but never at someone else's expense, he is curt if absolutely necessary (as with the entertainment manager at the *Dinner-Party*[96]), he is interested in human affairs to the degree that they can be made to embody the good, and above all seems *equal* to any situation (as we see with both the courtesan and at his trial).

3. Conclusions

3.1. Plato as Philosopher or Mystic

Having looked at the picture of Socrates drawn by Plato and Xenophon, we must come to a conclusion as to whether we can reasonably regard Socrates as a mystic. Because the main evidence for his mysticism comes from Plato, we need to carefully consider whether Plato himself was the mystic. While disagreeing with many of Bharati's claims, I think he has a valid point in saying that mystics are totally absorbed in mysticism (it was from this perspective that he made the comment on having no small-talk mentioned earlier). Plato, in his writings, certainly seems to show a mystical sensitivity in some passages, but these are mitigated against by his utopian, political, and totalitarian views in other passages. We can then propose two Platos; one is the mystic interested in immortality, the 'good', and the essence behind reality (the 'forms'), and the other is interested in a political solution to the problems of the contemporary State, based on 'philosopher-kings'. Conventionally these two Platos could be seen as complementary, and directly related, in the Western guise of 'philosopher', but from the history of mysticism this is not supportable. When a mystic expands the stage on which they teach or transmit their mystical wisdom, it is to give access to these teachings for the many, and not to create a constitution which limits this to a few and keeps the many in ignorance through the deliberate creation of myths and propaganda.

The Socratic dialogues of Plato, taken on their own, might leave us in doubt about the two Platos I propose here, but I think that if we add works such as the *Laws*, and, more importantly, his famous *Seventh Letter*, we are forced to choose Plato the politician. In the *Seventh Letter* he says: "When I was a young man I expected, like many others, to embark, as soon as I was my own master, on a political career."[97] We find that the political upheavals in Athens culminating in the execution of Socrates turned Plato to philosophy and formed his conviction that "the troubles of mankind will never cease until either true and genuine philosophers attain political power or the rulers of states by some dispensation of providence become genuine philosophers."[98] The *Seventh Letter* documents Plato's only, and disastrous, attempt to help put this into practice. Plato as a politician was then a failure, but as a political philosopher he ranks amongst those with the greatest and longest influence in the West. Bertrand Russell considers in fact that we are bequeathed five great philosophical contributions from Plato: (1) his Utopia, (2) his theory of ideas [forms], (3) his argument in favour of immortality, (4) his cosmogony, (5) his conception of knowledge as reminiscence rather than perception.[99] While philosophers (in the modern sense) clearly claim Plato to be of their own kind, others do claim Plato as mystic. Happold for example states that Plato is the 'Father of Christian Mysticism'[100], but this is hard to support: Eckhart (as *jnani*) may have drawn elements from Plato, but Rolle (as *bhakti*) did not. The evidence collected here does not support the view that Plato himself was a mystic.

3.2. Plato's Socratic Dialogues as a Proximity Text

If Plato is not himself a mystic, then we can consider his Socratic dialogues as constituting a proximity text as defined above. We know that Plato was only 28 when Socrates died, and that probably the bulk of his writings took place later than this, right into Plato's old age. Hence the early dialogues are probably the most reliable (as Vlastos points out in a slightly different context) as proximity texts. Do we find the contradictions, misunderstandings and adumbrations that we might expect in a proximity text in Plato? Of course we do. But, when we consider Plato's own genius, his mercurial mind (as shown in the great range of his subject matter, compared to say Xenophon), and the very definite evolving agenda of his own, we must say that it is not a proximity text of the first rank. While one might at first consider Plato' total absence as a character anywhere in his dialogues as the sort of modesty that led Mahendranath to give only the letter 'M' in authorship to his *Gospel of Ramakrishna*, one gradually realises that it is not due to modesty. Otherwise why should he use Socrates so barefacedly for his own evolving agenda? The absence of Plato is partly the style of the time (Xenophon, by contrast, appears several times in his dialogues, and gives his own opinions), but I find it a little dishonest.

A comparison has been made by Colin Wilson between the Plato/Socrates relationship and the Ouspensky/Gurdjieff one,[101] and commented upon by Georg Feuer-

stein[102] in the context of what he calls 'holy madness' or the rascal guru (Socrates as rascal guru is not so preposterous: think of his humorous claim to be a pimp). Ouspensky is very honest about his shortcomings with respect to the knowledge that Gurdjieff possesses, as this quote from *In Search of the Miraculous* shows (Gurdjieff is speaking):

> "A great deal can be found by reading. For instance, take yourself: you might already know a great deal if you *knew how to read*. I mean that, if you *understood* everything that you have read in your life, you would already know what you are looking for now. If you understood everything you have written in your book, what is it called?" — he made something altogether impossible out of the words "Tertium Organum" — "I should come and bow down to you and beg you to teach me. But *you do not understand* either what you read or what you write."[103]

Ouspensky was a noted, though not mainstream, philosopher at the turn of the century, and rather immodestly titled his first major work *Tertium Organum* after Bacon's *Novum Organum* and Aristotle's *Organum*. His encounter with Gurdjieff may well have something in common with that between Plato and Socrates. It is not impossible to imagine Socrates making a similar comment to the one above on Plato's writings. However, Ouspensky devoted his later life to Gurdjieff, who gave his blessing to *In Search of the Miraculous* as an accurate summary of his teachings. It stands therefore as one of the best examples of a proximity text, alongside *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*. Plato's dialogues, on the evidence here stated, are a lesser case: his agenda is much further from Socrates' than Ouspensky's was from Gurdjieff's.

3.3. Xenophon's Evidence

If Plato's dialogues are a lesser case of a proximity text, then what of Xenophon's? They are, for sure, more consistent, and Xenophon's agenda is less intrusive and variable than Plato's, but there is not a lot of evidence for mysticism there. What is valuable is a warm and breathing portrait of Socrates as a man, all of which is *consistent* with him as mystic, but not proof. Given that a proximity text should at least in part set out to show the subject as mystic, we cannot give this status to Xenophon's dialogues, because Xenophon plainly is not conversant with or interested in the essential elements of mysticism, as Plato is.

3.4. Socrates as Mystic

How then shall we answer our question, is Socrates a mystic? If forced to a straight yes or no, then a yes is probably required on the evidence presented here. On the other hand we see that our evidence from Plato constitutes a lesser proximity text (as defined in this dissertation) and that we cannot count Xenophon's dialogues as a proximity text, though a useful portrait of the man. Clearly then, while we can

add Socrates as a 'possible' to our roll-call of mystics, his is not the clear case that we derive where there are substantial first-order proximity texts or primary texts.

There are many useful issues that Socrates' case does raise for mysticism however. One of these is the whole concept of the *jnani* mystic in the West, and the relation of this to *bhakti*.

3.5. Socrates and Jesus

We can consider the relationship between *jnani* and *bhakti* in the context of comparisons made between Socrates and Jesus. In R. M. Wenley's *Socrates and Christ* he cites 'an extreme view' of R. W. Mackay: "To the truth already uttered in the Athenian prison, Christianity added little or nothing; except a few symbols, which though perhaps well calculated for popular acceptance, are more likely to perplex than instruct, and offer the best opportunity for priestly mystification."[104] Wenley's book attempts a refutation of this view, conceding the parallels, but concluding that they "hold of externals rather than essentials."[105] Montuori tells us that it was Justinius the Martyr who first established the parallels, and that reaction in Christian thought was generally divided between those who agreed and those who saw the teachings on immortality as pagan[106].

If we accept Socrates as *jnani* and perhaps the preceding mysticism of Heraclitus and Pythagoras as the same, then the impact of Christ on the West can be seen in terms of *bhakti*. There is no need then to see a rivalry between the two, or to labour over the parallels between the mens' lives and teachings (some of which we have pointed out here). From this perspective Christ brought to the Hellenic and Roman world a devotional outlook that took hold in a way that previous devotional practices had not. At the same time it could be said that it swept away the older *jnani* understandings, or rather forced them underground.

3.6. *Jnani*, Gnosis, and Philosophy in the West

But perhaps it was Plato that planted the seeds of the demise of *jnani*. If, as Popper claims, Plato was trying to find a bulwark against the Heraclitean flux, then it is in the philosophical element in Plato, not the mystical, that *jnani* became less understood. Brickhouse and Smith wish to make the dichotomy between divination and ratiocination, arguing against Vlastos that Socrates prioritised the former against the latter[107]. But I believe that the issue is much more subtle, and is better characterised as a dichotomy between philosophy (understood as ratiocination, or cogitation) and *jnani*. In James Beckman's *The Religious Dimension of Socrates' Thought* we find again that the dichotomy is between divination and ratiocination (expressed by Beckman as between religion and philosophy): he points out that "no philosopher, for instance, ever recommended praying to his philosophical ultimate."[108] If we accept the basis of *jnani* as non-devotional, then prayer does not

come into it; instead we are in the territory of meditation, a defined in this dissertation.

Plato is in fact the source, or a source, of two mystical traditions in the West with a *jnani* orientation; Neoplatonism, and the Gnostic tradition. I would suggest that the confusion in Plato between philosophy (as we now understand it) and *jnani* is one reason why these traditions are not widely understood today. The rise of the devotional religion of Christianity is another reason.

3.7. Further Research

I believe that this inquiry into the possible mystical status of Socrates has brought to light some important further questions for mysticism in the West, as outlined above. An examination of Buddhist thought would be useful in this context for the fine-grained distinctions between ratiocination (or cogitation) and meditation, and the role of thought in preparing the mind for silence of the mind. This would help place Western philosophy in context. A clearer picture of the Indian view on *jnani* would be useful, and the exploration of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism in terms of the Buddhist and Hindu concepts would be valuable. Finally it might be possible to better judge the true role of *jnani* in the development of the West (giving us a better understanding of Eckhart for example) and its relationship with devotional mysticism.

As I have argued both for a clear distinction between *jnani* and *bhakti* and for their inseparable intertwining, perhaps one could find a route to the devotional for our predominantly lay culture through a better understanding of *jnani*. Our understanding of Socrates is dependent on the distinction between *jnani* and *bhakti*, and I believe that it is central to all understanding of mysticism.

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