# Russell on the Socratic question:

## a wisdom-lover at work?

In his chapter on Socrates in the *History of Western Philosophy*, Russell gives an incisive statement of one aspect of "the Socratic question". He says:

> Socrates is a very difficult subject for the historian. There are many men concerning whom it is certain that very little is known, and other men concerning whom it is certain that a great deal is known; but in the case of Socrates the uncertainty is as to whether we know very little or a great deal.... Two of his pupils, Xenophon and Plato, wrote voluminously about him, but they said very different things.... Where they disagree, some believe one, some the other, some neither.[1]

He then says: "In such a dangerous dispute, I shall not venture to take sides, but I will set out briefly the various points of view."

As what Russell has to say on Xenophon as a reliable source of knowledge regarding the historical Socrates is rather brief, a direct quotation will prove useful.

> Let us begin with Xenophon, a military man, not very liberally endowed with brains, and on the whole conventional in his outlook. Xenophon is pained that Socrates should have been accused of impiety and of corrupting the youth; he contends that, on the contrary, Socrates was eminently pious and had a thoroughly wholesome effect upon those who came under his influence. His ideas, it appears, so far from being subversive, were rather dull and commonplace. This defence goes too far, since it leaves the hostility to Socrates unexplained. As Burnet says (*Thales to Plato*, p. 149): "Xenophon's defence of Socrates is too successful. He would never have been put to death if he had been like that."
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> There has been a tendency to think that everything Xenophon says must be true, because he had not the wits to think of anything untrue. This is a very invalid line of argument. A stupid man's report of what a clever man says is never accurate, because he unconsciously translates what he hears into something that he can understand. I would rather be reported by my bitterest enemy among philosophers than by a friend innocent of philosophy. We cannot therefore accept what Xenophon says if it either involves any difficult point in philosophy or is part of an argument to prove that Socrates was unjustly condemned. (Pp. 101-2.)

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[1] *History of Western Philosophy*, 1st published 1945; new edition (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961), p. 101.

With respect to the reliability of Plato as a source of information regarding the historical Socrates, Russell says: "It is the excellence of Plato as a writer of fiction that throws doubt on him as a historian. His Socrates is a consistent and extraordinarily interesting character, far beyond the power of most men to invent; but I think Plato *could* have invented him. Whether he did so is of course another question" (p. 102).

In short, our two main sources disagree. Russell considers one unreliable due to his lack of intelligent imagination, and the other due to an abundance of the same quality. Paraphrasing a remark of C.D. Broad's, one can aptly describe Russell's view of the matter: "If only Plato *would*, if only Xenophon *could*."

These remarks illustrate several prominent features of much of Russell's writing on the history of philosophy. His writing is concise, witty, and seemingly detached and impartial with respect to controversies of interpretation. Russell's attitude toward previous philosophers is, however, rarely as detached as he would have his readers believe. And, perhaps in consequence, his interpretations are not always without significant distortion. I therefore propose to show both that Russell's remarks on the reliability of Xenophon are not entirely accurate, and that Russell's seeming neutrality is not real.

To begin with, Russell's claim of not venturing to "take sides" seems hardly justified, when he goes on to say of Xenophon that

(1) he is unreliable when reporting philosophical views and/or defending the innocence of Socrates (two categories that nearly exhaust Xenophon's writings about Socrates);
(2) the "tendency" (presumably among other historians of Greek thought) to place total reliance on Xenophon is unjustified.

Irrespective of the accuracy of these claims, it seems a little odd to describe as not venturing to take sides in the dispute, someone who says that virtually all of Xenophon's Socratic writings are unreliable and who implies that his own views on the reliability of Xenophon differ from those of numerous other writers (the "tendency"). With respect to the accuracy of (2), it should be noted that Russell's claim to impartiality fails (at the least) to the extent that (2) is justified: one does not impartially disagree with a group of scholars without citing any of their names or works as evidence.

To the extent that there actually existed a "tendency to think that everything Xenophon says must be true", Russell is taking sides in a dispute. Just how many make a tendency, and who might be involved, we



are not told. E.C. Marchant, in the Introduction to his translation of Xenophon's *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus*, published in the Loeb Classical Library series in 1923, clearly disqualifies for membership.[2] So too do many other major scholars to whom Russell is likely to have had access when writing the *History of Western Philosophy*.[3]

Russell alludes to the tendency not in order to set out impartially the point of view, but rather so it can serve as an extreme position when compared with his own seemingly moderate and impartial one. His position is, however, one of the most extreme that can be taken on this issue, since it rules out nearly everything Xenophon has to say of importance regarding the historical Socrates. The two key concerns are precisely: "what were the *philosophical* views of Socrates?", and "what sort of *citizen* was he?". Russell would have us discount everything Xenophon says on just these issues, thereby depriving us of the main source by which to test the accuracy of Plato's account, which Russell himself says is not necessarily reliable. Let us, therefore, examine rather closely his reasoning on this point. (His entire argument is contained in the long quotation above.)

His argument may be stated more schematically as follows. Xenophon's remarks in defence of the innocence of Socrates cannot be accepted, since if they were true, Socrates would never have been convicted. And Xenophon's reports of Socrates' philosophical views cannot be accepted, since "a stupid man's report of what a clever man says is never accurate, because he unconsciously translates what he hears into something that he can

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[2]See the remarks, e.g., on p. xi and p. xx.

[3]The issue raised here is of some importance in assessing Russell's work as an historian of philosophy. A work as vast in scope as the *History of Western Philosophy* requires the omission of many things. What is *not* required is a cavalier attitude toward questions of scholarship. Nor does the need of brevity require raising complicated issues on which much has been written by careful researchers, only to then take an arbitrary and carelessly thought out position.

Just whom is Russell referring to as the opposition here? Burnet is the only name cited, and Burnet does *not* hold that what Xenophon said is probably true since he (Xenophon) was too stupid to invent anything.

Some questions that might be answered by an examination of some material in the Archives are:
(1) whom was Russell referring to when he wrote of "a tendency"?
(2) when was Chapter XI on Socrates of the *History of Western Philosophy* written?
(3) if Chapter XI was written during the period when Russell was unable either to leave the U.S. or obtain a job at a large university, what materials on the Socratic question that were then likely to be available to him *could* he have been referring to?

understand." (This sentence expresses what I shall refer to as Russell's *principle of competence.*) Therefore, we cannot believe what Xenophon says if it falls into either of these categories.

What are we to make of Russell's principle of competence? Is a "stupid" man's report of what a "clever" man says "never" accurate? Reports of the philosophical doctrines of philosophers by reporters having less philosophical ability than is required to master the doctrines of the philosopher being reported are likely to be distorted for just the reasons stated by Russell, *unless* the report is verbatim. The differences between Russell's statement of this point and the version just formulated here deserve notice. Russell's version is much more readable, but it is also false due to its lack of proper qualification. Russell's version ignores the case of the "stupid" man reporting without significant distortion a series of remarks made by the "clever" man. If the "stupid" man has a memory capable of total recall or takes thorough notes, it is possible for his account to be, in general, reliable.[4] The "stupid" man *need not* do any "translating" at all.

With respect to Xenophon, it should be remembered that he was a well-educated Athenian, and that a primary skill acquired by educated Athenians in his day was the ability to recite at great length passages from the poets, dramatists, etc. It is not inconceivable, therefore, that some of Xenophon's reported "conversations" of Socrates with others bear close resemblance to fact, even when the subject under discussion is too deep for Xenophon.

Russell's use of the terms "stupid" and "clever" serve to confuse the issue. Relative to Plato (or to Russell), Xenophon can reasonably be said to be a stupid man. But so can nearly everyone (of the proper age and sex). Compared to philosophers of the calibre of Plato and Russell, Xenophon *is* stupid, but then so is most everyone. The real question here is: how "clever" would Xenophon have to have been before we can assume he understood Socrates' philosophical views? Several points seem worthy of mention:

(1) Xenophon need not have been clever enough to *invent* Socrates' theories in order to have been clever enough to understand and report them accurately.

[4]Such cases occur often enough in the history of philosophy: Xenophon's Socratic writings, students' notes of Hegel's lectures, students' notes of Wittgenstein's lectures, Russell's "Philosophy of Logical Atomism," Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia*, etc.



(2) Xenophon need not have been clever enough to understand and report the involved epistemological and ontological views found in the middle and late dialogues of Plato in order to have accurately understood and reported the moral and political theories of the historical Socrates, *even if* these views in Plato's later works were also held by Socrates.

(3) Xenophon need not have been a genius in order to have been clever enough to have accurately reported on various factual matters regarding the life of Socrates which are relevant to his responsibility for the crimes for which he was executed.

(4) Xenophon was not, in an absolute sense, an idiot or stupid man. He had had as good an education as could be had by upper-class Athenian citizens of his time, had travelled extensively, had had considerable experience as a "man of affairs" and military leader, had written a number of books on philosophy, history, and practical affairs, etc.

(5) The characterization of Xenophon's ability will vary with the temperament of the characterizer. Xenophon was in some ways analogous to a late nineteenth-century British country gentleman, hardly the type one would expect Russell to admire or describe with full justice!

Properly qualified, Russell's principle regarding the unreliability of interpretations of philosophical theories by non-philosophers (or bad philosophers) seems correct. But when so qualified, it fails to rule out most of Xenophon's writings about the historical Socrates.

In line with his principle of competence, Russell comments that he would rather be reported by his "bitterest enemy among philosophers" than by a friend "innocent of philosophy". Russell is, of course, somewhat exaggerating the alternatives. But if his principle of competence (as opposed to the restricted version given here) were true, one would have to recommend to students seeking knowledge of Russell's philosophy Warnock's *English Philosophy Since 1900* or Lewis's *Bertrand Russell: Philosopher and Humanist* in preference to Wood's *Bertrand Russell: The Passionate Sceptic*. I consider this implication a sufficient *reductio ad absurdum* of Russell's version of the principle. Hence Russell's general conclusion ("We cannot therefore accept ...") is not justified.

It is interesting to note, with respect to Russell's general conclusion, that it is disjunctive in form, and that the second part of it would not be justified even if the unqualified principle just discussed were wholly true. Even if Xenophon were wholly incapable of accurately understanding and reporting *any* of Socrates' philosophical statements

or discussions, it would *not* be true that "we cannot therefore accept what Xenophon says if it ... is part of an argument to prove that Socrates was unjustly condemned." If a report of a philosophical doctrine is used as part of an argument to show that Socrates was a victim of injustice, then Russell's principle of competence (if applicable) would apply because of the *nature* of the doctrine and not because of its use in such a context. If a report of a non-technical doctrine, statement, event or character trait is used in an argument for the defence, Xenophon's alleged "stupidity" has no *prima facie* bearing on the admissability of his evidence. What Russell is really assuming here is that Xenophon was distorting the facts (perhaps in his own mind) in order to justify his belief in Socrates' innocence. Such may have been the case, but knowing it to be the case requires independent evidence that contradicts the testimony of Xenophon, thereby showing that Xenophon lied (to himself or to us). Russell's exclusionary principle does not entail the rejection of any and all statements Xenophon makes in defence of Socrates' innocence.

Russell's reason for rejecting Xenophon's remarks in defence of Socrates' character is neither an appeal to his principle of competence, nor an appeal to some other historical source. He bases his rejection on an appeal to Burnet's thesis: Xenophon's defence fails by its success, it makes Socrates too harmless a person to have been convicted by the jury.[5] This is rather an odd view for Russell to take, as he himself is convinced, *on the basis* of examples of Socrates' conduct reported by Xenophon, that Socrates was sufficiently a nuisance to provoke his trial and execution. Immediately after setting out "the various points of view" (i.e., his own rather extreme views), Russell goes on to say (p. 102) "Nevertheless, some of Xenophon's reminiscences are very convincing." He then summarizes a few stories reported by Xenophon, at the conclusion of which he says that "it was easier to silence [Socrates] by means of the hemlock than to cure the evils of which he complained" (p. 102).

Whatever the merits of this or that passage of Xenophon's Socratic writings, Russell's wholesale condemnation is not based on reasons sufficient to justify it. His position on the question of Xenophon's reliability is an extreme one, and he does anything but impartially "set out briefly the various points of view". His principle of competence,

[5]That Xenophon thought Socrates a good citizen is one thing, that most Athenian citizens shared Xenophon's political views is another. It is perhaps worth remembering that Xenophon himself found it "wise" to not reside in Athens.



as he states it, is quite absurd, even though sound when properly qualified. And he himself demonstrates the weakness of the Burnet thesis, after accepting it. In sum, his conclusion is extreme yet his evidence doesn't stand examination. Russell may *seem* to be always impartial in interpreting and expounding philosophical positions, but sometimes he is not.

This, then, may be a reasonable corollary to the qualified principle of competence: a "clever" man's report of what a "stupid" man says can often be inaccurate, because he will unconsciously translate what he hears into something that he can ridicule. Perhaps "it is the excellence of Russell as a writer that throws doubt on him as a historian."

Houston, Texas B.J. Lucas