

PLATONIC QUESTIONS

QUESTION I

1. WHYEVER did god, as is stated in the *Theaetetus*,^a bid Socrates act as midwife to others but prevent him from himself begetting? Certainly he would not have used the name of god in irony or jest^b; and besides in the *Theaetetus* Socrates has been made to say many arrogant and haughty things, among them this^c: "For a great many men, my excellent friend, have got into such a state of mind towards me as practically to bite when I remove some silliness of theirs; and they do not believe that I am doing this out of benevolence, for they are a long way from knowing that no god is malevolent towards men and that neither do I do any such deed out of malevolence but that it is quite illicit for me to admit falsehood and suppress truth."

Is it then his own nature, as being more dis-

cerning than fertile,^a that he called god,^b as Menander said "for our intelligence is god"^c and Heraclitus "the character of a man is his guardian spirit"^d; or did some truly divine and spiritual cause^e guide Socrates to this kind of philosophy with which by continually subjecting others to examination he made them free of humbug and error and pretentiousness and of being burdensome first to themselves and then to their companions also?^f For at that time as if by chance there happened also to have sprung up in Greece a crop of sophists; and the young men, paying these persons a large amount of money, were getting themselves filled full of self-conceit and sham-wisdom and were zealous for dis-

cussion of arguments and for disputations futile in wranglings and ambitious rivalries but not for anything fair and serviceable at all. So Socrates with his refutatory discourse like a purgative medicine^a by maintaining nothing^b claimed the credence of others when he refuted them, and he got the greater hold on them because he seemed to be seeking the truth along with them, not himself to be defending an opinion of his own.^c

2. In the second place, while the exercise of judgment is beneficial, begetting is an obstacle to it, for what loves is blinded about the thing it loves^d and nothing of one's own is so beloved as is an opinion or an argument by its parent. For the distribution of offspring that is proverbially most just^e is most unjust when applied to arguments, for in the former case one must take what is one's own but in the latter what is best even if it be another's.^f For this reason the man who begets his own becomes a poorer judge of others; and just as one of the sages said that Eleans would be better directors of the Olympic games if not a single Eleian were entered in the contest,^g so one who is going to be an upright moderator

and umpire in arguments is bound not to crave the palm himself or to vie with the contenders. For even the generals of the Greeks when casting their ballot for the award of excellence all gave judgment for themselves as best^a; and of philosophers there is none to whom this has not happened apart from those who like Socrates admit that they say nothing original, and these alone show themselves to be sound and incorruptible judges of the truth. For as the air in the ears does not accurately perceive utterances if it be not still and free from sound of its own but full of ringing and buzzing,^b so what judges arguments in philosophy will have poor understanding of statements coming from without if they are muffled by the clatter and noise <of something> from within.^c For personal opinion to which one is wedded will not accept what disagrees with her, as the multitude of systems testifies, of which philosophy, if she is faring her best, involves a single one being right and all the others guessing and being in conflict with the truth.

3. Furthermore, if nothing is apprehensible and knowable to man,^d it was reasonable for god to have

prevented Socrates from begetting inane and false and baseless notions and to compel him to refute the others who were forming such opinions.^a For the discourse that liberates from the greatest of evils, deception and vanity, was not a slight but a very great help—

This gift god didn't grant even Asclepius' sons.^b

For the treatment given by Socrates was not of the body but was a purgation of the ulcerous and corrupted soul.^c If, however, there is knowledge of what is true and what is true is single,^d he who has learned it from the discoverer does not possess it less than he who discovered it^e; but the one who acquires it is rather he who is not sure that he possesses it,^f and he acquires what is best of all, just as he who is not a parent himself adopts the child that is best.

4. Consider too that, while the other things, poetry and mathematics and rhetorical speeches and sophistic doctrines, which the spiritual power^a prevented Socrates from begetting, were worth no serious concern, what Socrates held to be alone wisdom, <that> which he called passion for the

divine and intelligible,^a is for human beings a matter not of generation or of discovery but of reminiscence.^b For this reason Socrates was not engaged in teaching anything, but by exciting perplexities as if inducing the inception of labour-pains in young men he would arouse and quicken and help to deliver their innate conceptions^c; and his name for this was obstetric skill,^d since it does not, as other men pretended to do, implant in those who come upon it intelligence from without but shows that they have it native within themselves but undeveloped and confused and in need of nurture and stabilization.