

Part II

From Socrates to Plato: the Search for Justice

Chapter 4

The Definition of Philosophy by Socrates

4.1 Readings and Homework

4.1.1 Readings

- Plato, *Symposium* RAPG p.282
- Plato, *Theatetus*, 148e-151d

4.1.2 Further Readings

- Cohen, "Plato", RAGP, p. 89-96
- Nails, "Socrates", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N.Zalta(ed.)
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/socrates>
- Sarah Broadie, "The Sophists and Socrates", CCGRP p.73-97

4.1.3 Homework

Give a short answer (three or four sentences) to the following questions on the basis of the readings:

1. How do we know what we know about Socrates? Did Socrates ever write anything?
2. Look closely at Alcibiades' portrait of Socrates: to what does he compare Socrates? Why?
3. Explain why Socrates rejected Alcibiades.
4. Explain why Socrates compares himself to a midwife.
5. Explain in what sense the philosopher cannot be wise while still being the wisest of all men.

4.2 Socrates's figure

4.2.1 Socrates (469-399 B.C.), history and myth

- Poor information about the historical Socrates: he has not written anything. What we know is from eyewitnesses – Above all Plato, but also Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Aristotle.
- That said, very different philosophical schools (from Plato to the Cynics) are presented by their founders as following Socrates's philosophy. Socrates's message was thus interpreted in very different ways.
- We know Socrates' figure through the *Socratic dialogues*, which were written not only by Plato but by many disciples of Socrates. Socrates is usually represented there as playing the role of the questioner in a dialog with some interlocutor.
- Plato and Socrates: it is very difficult, in Plato's dialogues, to distinguish between the two. Plato never intervenes in his own name, nor does he pretend to give a true account of any dialog that the historical Socrates has actually led.

4.2.2 Socrates' *atopia*

Socrates was *atopos* : unclassifiable, strange, unsettling, someone who neither is nor does what he is expected to. His behavior is completely at odds with the expected behavior of a good citizen of Athens, or even a human.

See **Alcibiades' story** in the *Symposium*

- Socrates turns down Alcibiades, although was probably the most handsome young man in Athens (On Alcibiades, see Diogenes Laertius, and also the description by Plutarch: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/alcibiad.html>)
- Neither quite of this world, nor quite outside the world: see Alcibiades' description of Socrates behavior during the Portitea expedition.
 - Alcibiades describes him as standing an entire day and night, “glued at the same spot”, trying to figure out some problem (220c).
 - Also, deals with the cold, the lack of food or too much to drink like nobody else
- Note also Socrates' behavior at the beginning and at the end of the *Symposium*. He stays on a porch, which is the symbol of what is intermediary or “in-between”: he is never at one single, definite place, just like a daemon, just like love.
- Discusses with everybody (man or woman, rich and poor, slave or citizen) everywhere (market, gym...), seemingly about trivial topics – most of them seemed quite ridiculous to the lay Athenian, in comparison to the more noble subjects than sophists and politics would deal with.
- Socrates was ugly, and always of poor appearance. He is always wearing the same old gray coat and going bare feet.

See Alcibiades' reference to Socrates' face.

In the *Symposium*, see Diotima's description of Love as a beggar (203c-e). Also, Alcibiades likens Socrates to a Satyr (215b-c). Finally, note that it is said at the beginning that Socrates is clean and wears shoes, “both very unusual events” (174a, 174d-175b, RAPG p.284).

This is important not only because pretty much as in our societies, people were judged by their appearance, but also because in the Greek way of thinking, beauty is linked with intellectual brightness and goodness.

Socrates thus certainly had a very strange, almost non human appearance:

He had wide-set, bulging eyes that darted sideways and enabled him, like a crab, to see not only what was straight ahead, but what was beside him as well; a flat, upturned nose with flaring nostrils; and large fleshy lips like an ass. (Debra Nails, [?])

- Never worked for money, never participates to civil affairs (both were very uncommon), and constantly refused the physical advances of his favorites from whom he required a real conversion to philosophy and improvement of soul and behavior.
- Seems to have better opinion of women than most Athenians (see in the *Symposium*: it is a woman, Diotima, who finally says something worth about what is love). In the *Symposium*, it is finally a woman who gives the truth about what is love.

4.2.3 The Socrates' effect

A entire zoology is needed to describe Socrates' effect on people

Not only is Socrates acting strangely, but he also makes people with whom he discusses feel strange:

- Socrates as a silenus statue: ugly outside, but full of gold inside.
- Socrates as a satyr and a flute player: provokes a form of possession, delirium: Alcibiades, *Symposium*, 215d. Discussing with him makes one's mind and feelings upside down
- Silenoi and Satyroi are characterized by their need to satisfy their base instincts: sex, drink and food. They are half men, half animals: they represent the animal part of human beings.
- Socrates' effect as a bite snake right in the heart: in discussing with him, one ends up thinking that his life is "no better than the most miserable slave's" (Alcibiades, *Symposium*, 215d-216c, 217e-218a)
- Socrates as a torpedo fish: *Meno*, 80 a-d, RAPG p.211-212: paralyzing effect

All in all, the Socrates' effect does not seem very pleasant. So, what is the point of Socrates' method?

4.3 Socrates's puzzling ways of teaching philosophy

4.3.1 Socrates' irony

- Compare Socrates' discourse to the others'. What is the difference? What is Socrates saying about the rules of discourse that he wants to follow? Socrates' aims at seeking the truth.
- See Socrates's discussion with Agathon (student of Sophists), in *Symposium*, 198b-201b, RAPG p.306-309. (we'll see more of it in the *Euthyphro*)
 - Even if Agathon's discourse was both impressive and sophisticated, Socrates shows that he simply did not know what he was talking about, at all.
 - he shows this by a logical reasoning, showing that Agathon holds inconsistent claims (Love is a desire of what is beautiful and good / God is beautiful and good)
- *Socratic irony is a way to feign ignorance in order to question someone else's supposed knowledge so that the interlocutor finally become aware of his own ignorance.*
- He examines people's beliefs. When discussing with someone, his aim seems primarily to have his interlocutors realize their lack own of knowledge, whatever their former pretension to possess knowledge and wisdom.
- Note that the rest of Socrates's speech consists in transmitting another person's, Diotima's knowledge, not his own of course.

Thus, practising philosophy for Socrates seems to consists primarily in *elenchus*, that is, refutation.

4.3.2 The method: Socrates' *elenchus*(refutation)

- Feigns ignorance about a given topic (typically conventionally recognized virtues: courage, justice....)

- Ask a question (Typically of "What is X" form)
- Finds agreement on the demands of rational dialog
- Examine the answer given by his interlocutor
- Shows that the answer given by the interlocutor is inconsistent with other beliefs he has.
- Thus tests and assesses other's pretension to any kind of knowledge
 - Proves that conventional knowledge, generally based on custom, prejudices or obedience, is no knowledge at all.
 - Proves that even well educated people lack the knowledge and wisdom which they are convinced to possess.

4.3.3 Socrates' ignorance, the ignorance of a philosopher

Even if the participants's discourses are about what is love, the *Symposium* turns out to give a definition of the philo-sopher. Eros (Love) and Socrates tend to fuse through the dialog.

The status of the philosopher in the *Symposium* seems largely devaluated and demystified. The most astonishing feature of the definition of the philosopher is that *the philosopher is not wise*. This is why Socrates cannot be a teacher: he has no possession of any ready-made knowledge which he could transmit to students. Looking more closely at the definition of the philosopher in the *Symposium*, we find a paradox: *the philosopher is the wiser of all men even if he is not a wise man*. How can we understand such a paradox?

The description of Eros-Socrates in *Symposium* Diotima discourse

- "as a philo-sopher, he must be midway between the wise and the senseless". Only someone in between ignorance and wisdom can be a philosopher:
 - It is sufficient to be wise to not seeking wisdom : gods are wise are not philosopher

4.3. SOCRATES'S PUZZLING WAYS OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY 61

- It is necessary to be aware of one's own deficiency for seeking wisdom: ordinary men are not philosopher. They are even ignorant of their own ignorance. They believe to have knowledge and wisdom when in fact they do not.

- Mythically: Eros the philosopher is the son of Poros and Penia. Thus, he is poor and deficient and yet sharp enough to compensate. See *Symposium*, 203 c-e, RAPG p.311.

- Now, Socrates' most famous maxim: "The only thing I know is that I don't know anything" can make sense. Indeed, a first, indispensable step toward true knowledge/wisdom is to recognize that what you thought to know in fact requires further thinking and justification.
- Thus, Socrates' conscious lack of wisdom makes him "the wiser of all men" (Delphic Oracle). He is among the few people who are aware of their lack of wisdom. On the Delphic Oracle, see the *Apology*, 20d-22b and passim.
- It also explain why S. refuses to take himself as a teacher. That is to say,
 - he does not transmit any knowledge in the form of the set of true propositions.
 - That said, as a mediator between the wise and the non wise (just as Eros between men and gods), he can help people to recognize their lack of knowledge/wisdom. This is the reason why he calls himself the great benefactor of Athens in the *Apology*.
- Conclusion: *The philosopher is not a wise man but still is the wiser of all men* means: What makes him a true philosopher is only that he only is aware of his deficiency. That is why philosophy consists in examining other's pretension to knowledge in order to have them reach the first of the rising stairs out of ignorance: the step in which we realize our lack of wisdom.

4.4 Efficiency of Socrates' ways of philosophizing?

4.4.1 What Socrates' irony is not

- Ridicule – a way to use your rhetorical abilities in order to make your interlocutors ridiculous and to appear very bright to others:
 - S. does not pretend to "win a battle"
 - S hopes that his interlocutors will be beyond the unsettling feeling and become better persons (see Alcibiade's discourse).
- Radical Scepticism – a way to destroy the interlocutor's beliefs in such a way that every dialog is made impossible.
 - S. does not aim at the destruction but at the conversion of his interlocutor,
 - Socrates believes rational dialog is the way to both truth and good.

- Rhetoric

It is of high importance to distinguish between rhetoric and philosophical dialogue as defined by Socrates. Socrates wants to talk to the reasonable part of his interlocutors' soul and thus hope to find an agreement with them on what is true, or close to it. Socrates wants philosophy to produce *conviction* about truth. By contrast, a rhetorical discourse manipulate the passions and feelings of the interlocutors. Rhetoric aims at *persuasion*, without any consideration of truth.

It is questionable whether it is possible to convince someone of something without using any means of persuasion.

An important distinction: CONVICTION vs. PERSUASION.

4.4.2 Socrates' maieutics

Symposium, Alcibiades' discourse

Theaetetus, 148e-151d : Socrates presents himself as a *midwife*

- Force his interlocutors to examine and become aware of themselves – to question the values that guide their lives. See Alcibiades's discourse. See *Apology*, 29 b-e.

- Give birth to latent knowledge

Socrates's questions thus should help his interlocutors not only to discover that they were wrong to think they possess knowledge, but also to discover the true knowledge which is latent in their souls.

- Give birth to latent moral behavior, or: lead to moral reformation S. teaches "to be less concerned with what you *have* than with what you *are*" What is important is not possession of wealth, fame, honors or political powers, but rather how one conducts his life: one has strive to to be as excellent and as rational as possible on every occasion of her life.

Socrates' questions is supposed to help his interlocutors to discover and recognize as such the true good. Virtue and hence, happiness, should really be the knowledge to which elenchus should lead.

See *Apology*, 29 b-e.

4.4.3 Concerns about Socrates' method

- Political concern about Socrates' method

All this seem largely negative. Many did criticize Socrates' impudence, this way he had to assess everybody's pretension to knowledge with questions to which he would refuse to give any definite answer. Many considered this a form of provocative attitude, defying the authorities, and which had a bad influence on young people. Aristophanes represents for example Socrates teaching young students how to argue for them beating their parents (Aristophanes, *Clouds*). Remember that Socrates will be judged and condemned for disrespect to gods and perverting the youth.

See again the *Meno*, 80 b, RAPG p.211: "I think you are wise not to sail away from Athens to go and stay elsewhere, for if you were in to behave like this as a stranger in another city, you would be driven away for practicing sorcery". There is more explicit threatening by Callicles in the *Gorgias*.

- Philosophical concern about Socrates' method

It is hard to see what such a methods is good for : it is clearly not a so pleasant experience to be constrained by rational discourse to admit

that we don't know what we pretended and sincerely thought we knew. It is not clear that anyone in such a situation will incline to agree with the questioner.

There is a lot to be think about concerning the violence that philosophical dialog necessarily involves. Unsettling and disturbing, what does warrant any success for Socrates' way of questioning? See the *Apology* 18a:

I am asking you, justly it seems to me, to overlook my manner of speaking [...], but consider and apply your mind to this alone, whether I say what is just or not.

Do you think it is a reasonable expectation about human being, that they don't pay attention to the rhetorical aspects of a discourse, and consider only the truth of what is said instead? It is questionable whether it is possible to convince anyone of anything whithout using the rhetorical means of persuasion. A question to keep in mind: is it true that Socrates does not use rhetorics at all??

In any case, Socrates is threatened for that on several occasions and will finally die because of it. See the *Apology* 38d-e.