Socrates – the ironic bantered

Anton ADĂMUȚ

Universitatea "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" din Iași, Facultatea de Filosofie și Științe Social-Politice
"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iassy, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences
Personal e-mail: antonadamut@yahoo.com

Socrates – the ironic bantered

Plato is vehemently in Meno when he confronts Socrates with the situation to "prove" (to experience) anamnesis by means of an illiterate slave. The problem regards the irrationality of numbers (and Plato himself will come back to it in Theaetetus, and not on the problem of geometry from Meno, but on irrational numbers), i.e. exactly what speeds the fall of Pythagoreanism. According to Popper, Plato uses this example and assigns it to Socrates precisely because he knew that Socrates was not familiar with the "latest" mathematical discoveries. Here is a perfect occasion to ridicule Socrates, and Plato does not hesitate to use it (more over, it can be seen, he creates it!). That is why, Theaetetus shows us how much math Plato knew, not Socrates.

Keywords: Socrates, Plato, philosophy, irony, secret

I wonder, what is new, in the end, in Socrates? The moderns, following Xenophon and Plato, and not less then these, present in Socrates characters, not *a* character. And characters are deeply different and Socrates' doctrine, if he had any doctrine (and we can doubt) is lost or is attenuated. Why? Here are a few reasons:

- the inhabitants from Cyrene claimed that their hedonism has its origin in the Socratic teaching;
- Plato's ascetic mysticism, and this mysticism, frankly speaking, is reduced to very little, also originates from there, in Cyrene;
- Socrates emphasizes the human and has brought philosophy from the sky on earth (Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes*, 5, 4); he is not the first and, some say, he does it also blamable;
- Socrates appropriates the Delphic phrase that he deviates from its purely moral meaning in order to affirm the necessity of an action based on affect (introspection);
- when Socrates says that nobody is willingly bad, gives moral intellectualism its purest expression, which, frankly speaking, Socrates does not intend;
- finally, Socrates affirms the rights of the irrational[1].

We know this from Xenophon and Plato even if the two of them, regarding Socrates, are connected only by admiration, nothing else. Except that Socratism has that else, and Socrates behaves as gadfly or torpedo fish and does not let the Athenians prey for their drowsiness. That is why, after the disaster, Socrates has found himself being burdened with and by all the sins of the humiliated Athens.

On the other hand, I do not want to do an injustice to Xenophon. He was Socrates' disciple as well, he tried to continue on Herodotus, he was not either philosopher, nor historian. Rather "a person of action, even adventurer, some sort of condottiere, he says, most of the times, events where he participated, and Socrates, as he pictures him, is not the metaphysician from Plato's dialogues, but rather a philosopher of practical life, whose experience is the experience of Xenophon himself"[2].

A parenthesis I would like to believe appropriate, seems to be in its place here. It is known, of course, the Camil Petrescu's essay – "On the necessary noocracy" – is under Plato's patronage, the one from *Republic* (473d-e). In this place Socrates tells Glaucon that, if philosophers do not reign in citadels or if the kings are not philosophers, for the citadels and mankind will not stand continuing the bad things. After the noocrat doctrine is somehow made, as much as it is!, Camil Petrescu doubts the fact that the chosen patronage is the most suitable one. A catastrophe is not due to science, as the human race clumsily declare, is due to culture. It is at stake here the illusion of the illuminated despotism. The philosophers thought that they were the ones who were using the kings, while, in reality, the kings are using the philosophers. It is not the only error that can be reproached to Plato, and the fact that his philosophy is a terrible collection of errors did not stop Camil Petrescu to be the debtor of if the Athenian with almost all the political inspiration and expiration. "The Doctrine of Ideas is the huge joke of a genius who gave up. Conceived from doubt, the philosophy, this scientifically-literally hybrid, would have, as all hybrids, a long life"[3]. At Plato is recognized the fact of being an "exegetic monument", the same as the Bible and Shakespeare. Only Shakespeare resembles him in the order of humankind. I want to remark an "intuition" that in the time (years of the Second World War) I encounter only in K.R. Popper. Camil Petrescu says: "only when I have deciphered, after the idealist Sophist, the tired and exasperated smile of the dramatic poet, I have noticed as a consequence, the strange fact that Plato makes a sadistic intellectual pleasure from permanently mocking Socrates, opposing the line of the Sophists, usually more subtle and deeper than his questions"[4].

The observation is extremely pertinent. I do not know if philosophy humiliates itself in the Platonic dialogues; certain it is however the fact that Socrates is humiliated. In *Parmenides*, *Cratylus*, *Protagoras*, Socrates is often facing difficulty, bantered because he does not know for he is too young, suspended in reasoning or, in the best case, finishing the dispute in a vague intentionality. Appears a striking contrast between the Platonic creed and the Socratic one, and Plato himself is not as truth lover as he claims, that Socrates is, often, a subject of mockery. We are dealing with a misogynist, hypocrite, duplicitous Plato.

Plato does not ever pay his debts[5]. He lets Socrates, with his entire virtue, to do it. And Socrates does it, we see this from the dialogues, docile, so that he does not wake up the anger of the disciple who knows his terrible secret [I mention here also about the category of secret (Pythagorean) of geometrical type, on the obscure secret of Heraclitus, the Messianic secret, Descartes' masked secret, the betted one of Pascal, the sly secret of Hegel or the pseudonymic one of Kierkegaard].

About a certain Platonic secret also speaks Andrei Cornea[6] when he puts in connection the secret with the way of writing in Plato's case: "how can the philosopher avoid the readers to reveal his <<secret>>, i.e. to reveal the justifying character of his demarche". Which was the secret? Socrates does not know, and not even this does he know! Here is what Plato "knew", what Parmenides suspected (the one from that dialogue and which is Plato's witness, and not Socrates'!), this is why the demon is either permitted to Socrates, or drawn. The *daimonion* is Plato's blackmail, and with this demon he has been blackmailing the world for almost three millenniums. That is why the world "worships" him and conscientiously pays off all his debts, but absolutely all his debts! And he has many, of course! Max Nordau says, and he does not even refer to Plato, I can read in this key his intervention: "there are few stairs that would allow climbing up so fast the heights as debts. It is revolting to think how much have the pedants defamed and despised them. The world has been as unfair as possible with them. The brilliant Henrich Heine will be forgiven many naughtiness and lacks of respect, but never the line:

<<Man, pay up your debts>>.

What levity! What immorality! If you follow this advice, you are lost"[7].

It is at least as cute as Sestov when he says, referring to Heine: "Even the Germans, his fellow citizens (Germans especially, maybe), cannot agree at all on the appreciation of the value he had. Some consider him a genius, others – untalented and vulgar. Moreover, his enemies, now, but also some other time, put so much passion in their attacks, that one would say they are not fighting with a dead opponent, but with one who is alive. And they hate him for the same reasons, like the ones who were his contemporaneous [...]. The hurt ego never forgives, therefore the Germans could not either forgive Heine's ironies"[8].

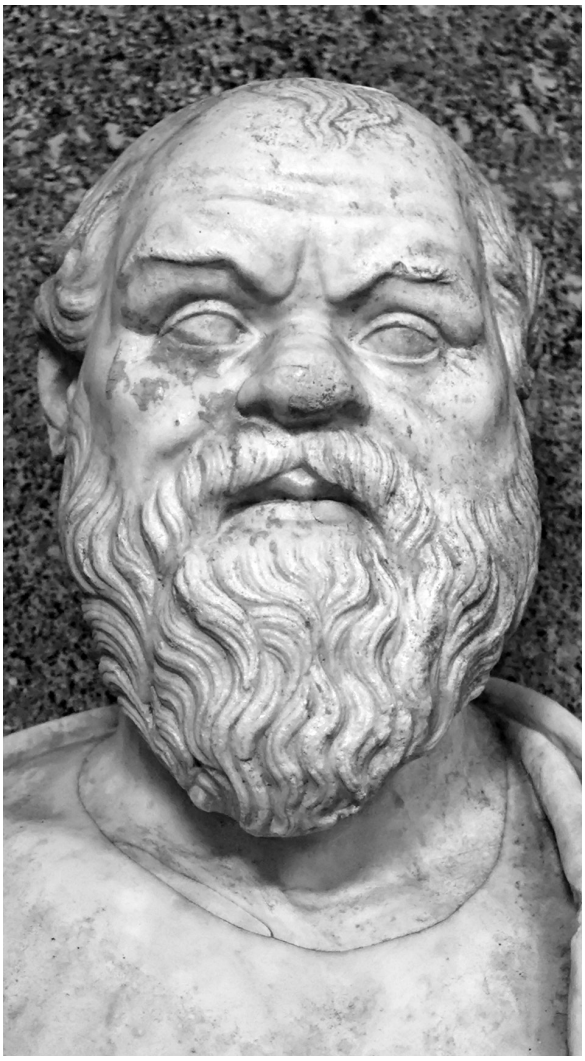
Plato is vehement in *Meno* when he confronts Socrates with the situation to "prove" (to experience) anamnesis by means of an illiterate slave. The problem regards the irrationality of numbers (and Plato himself will come back to it in *Theaetetus*, and not on the problem of geometry from *Meno*, but on irrational numbers), i.e. exactly what speeds the fall of Pythagoreanism. According to Popper, Plato uses this example and assigns it to Socrates precisely because he knew that Socrates was not familiar with the "latest" mathematical discoveries. Here is a perfect occasion to ridicule Socrates, and Plato does not hesitate to use it

(more over, it can be seen, he creates it!). That is why, *Theaetetus* shows us how much math Plato knew, not Socrates.

Until the end, Socrates had only one dignified successor, Antisthenes. "Plato, his most gifted disciple, would soon prove himself to be the least faithful"[9].

Socrates, however, was honest, and this Plato has to admit, whether he wants to or not. Plato believed to have rediscovered a new meaning of the Socratic doctrine. He was wrong. He did it however after involving him in the *Republic*. Socrates is the adherent of the theory of open society; Plato, of the closed one. For Plato, change is fatal and only the repose is divine. Society is an organism that, being in making, is sickly. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates did not have the right to defend himself. The betrayal is obvious, the same is its reverse: "I think that Plato's continuous endeavors to make Socrates reinterpret himself are at the same time efforts to calm down his own qualms of conscience"[10]. Placing his teaching further the Socratic one, Plato wants to convince himself with the fact that he is not a traitor. The inner conflict is permanent. *Parmenides*, as a matter of fact, can also be called "Plato against Plato". It is not theory of Ideas at stake, at stake is Plato's position regarding Socrates. The one who has a debt feels in debt. And it hurts! The clearest expression of the conflict is noticed by Popper in *Menexenos*. Philosophical, but from the perspective of doctrine, this dialogue offers almost nothing. It speaks of the art of using the word in order to praise Athens' greatness and it satirizes the rhetors. Socrates presents in this dialogue the discourse of Aspasia (eloquence) in order to "protect" himself. According to Popper, the dialogue is perfectly authentic and makes "know the tendency to idealize Plato"[11]. The conclusion: "who could doubt that Plato reveals here how seriously impressed was by the creed of open society and what exertion had to make in order to recover and to realize where he is – in the enemies' camp"[12].

Socrates was honest if we constantly compare him with Plato. Plato's argument seems to have been the same, even if late. A quick prove, but not insignificant: "In *The Sophist*, one of the late dialogues, the one who leads the discussion is no longer Socrates. Plato felt, probably, that he can no longer put in Socrates' mouth his own thoughts and resorted to a fictitious character called the Eleatic Stranger. Socrates is also present, that is true, but participates in the discussion only little. *The Sophist*, however, has one of the most beautiful eulogies that Plato made to Socrates. Could it be that he had remorse for transforming Socrates in a quasi-passive auditor? Could it be that he remembered now, almost at the life's sunset, of the youth years spent around Socrates and to have felt the need of a reverence? We do not know"[13]. If we knew, we would define, and if we define, as Samuel Butler says, we would surround with a wall of words a vacant place of ideas.



Socrates
Image Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/92/Socrates_Pio-Clementino_Inv314.jpg

What we must learn from Plato, especially the one from *Republic*, is exactly the opposite of what he wants to transmit to us. What Plato did not want us to know is the fact that not diminishing man means the certainty of completeness. But, with one of Noica's words, "people are defined according to the way in which they get lost"[14]. And what was called "against Socratism" begins from Plato as well. Anyhow, if the historians of ancient philosophy try to establish its grounds, they will notice that this is impossible because of at least three obstacles:

- the conviction that there is a Socratic doctrine (Plato himself puts his own doctrines on Socrates);

- the conviction that one can speak of an original Platonism (hence the bizarre phrase "Socratic-Platonism", which comes back to saying, regarding the first version, that the historical Socrates is a Socrates of Plato) and, in the end;

- faith in an Aristotelianism that dates strictly from Aristotle onwards.

Here is the reason for which Dupréel speaks of "*Cratylus* and the Origins of Aristotelianism"[15], and puts in connection the dialogue *Cratylus* with *Metaphysics* on the line of the relation matter-form and of homonymy. Dupréel's analysis convinces: Aristotelianism is, as paradoxically as it may sound, pre-Aristotelic and Plato's game with the masks does not succeed!

Frederick Copleston concludes regarding this matter: "it seems that the best version is to accept Aristotle's testimony and, accepting the fact that Socrates' portrait made by Xenophon is not complete, to maintain the traditional perspective according to which Plato put his own theories on master's account"[16]. To thus act means to do injustice either to Plato himself, or to Aristotle, or to Xenophon who was not, however, a blockhead. Moreover, if it is difficult to distinguish between Plato and Socrates in the very Platonic dialogues, why would things be different between Xenophon and Socrates in Xenophon's writings? And things are like this! And the two of them, Plato and Xenophon, show us, why not, rather who they are than who Socrates' is!

Note:

1. Pierre Lévêque, *Aventura greacă*, vol. I, Editura Meridiane, București, 1987, pp. 451-452.
2. Jean Defradas, *Literatura elină*, Editura Tineretului, București, 1968, p. 125.
3. Camil Petrescu, *Doctrina substanței*, vol. II, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, Bucureşti, 1988, p. 251.
4. *Ibidem*, pp. 251 – 252.
5. „Plato liked teaching justice! This did not stop him at all to be the son of his time, i.e., in the allowed limits, to violate the commands that he alone proclaimed" (Lev Şestov, *Începuturi și sfârșituri*, Institutul European, Iași, 1993, pp. 111-112).
6. Andrei Cornea, *Platon. Filozofie și cenzură*, Editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1995, p. 64.
7. Max Nordau, *Paradoxe Sociologice*, Bucureşti, Alcalay, f.a., p. 66.
8. Lev Şestov, *op. cit.,* pp. 116-117.
9. Karl R. Popper, *Societatea deschisă și dușmanii ei,* vol. I, Editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1993, p. 220.
10. *Ibidem*, p. 222.
11. *Ibidem,* note 35, p. 342.
12. *Ibidem,* , p. 224.
13. Alexandru Dragomir, *Crase banalități metafizice*, Editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, 2004, p. 155.
14. Constantin Noica, *Jurnal Filozofic*, Editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1990, p. 10.
15. Eugène Dupréel, *La Légende Socratique et les Sources de Platon*, Les Editions Robert Sand, Bruxelles, 1922, pp. 214-255. The author puts on two columns texts from *Cratylus* (393b-c, 394d) and *Metaphysics* (1033b, 1034a-b) and sees that Aristotle uses the same examples as Socrates in the discussion with Hermogenes: "horse-man" in Plato, "man-horse" in Aristotle; as for the offspring against nature, Socrates mentions the calf, Aristotle the mule, this is it!
16. Frederick Copleston, *Istoria Filosofiei. Grecia și Roma*, vol. I, Editura ALL, București, 2008, p. 93.

Bibliography:

Cornea, Andrei, *Platon. Filozofie și cenzură / Plato. Philosophy and Censorship*, Editura Humanitas, București, 1995.

Copleston, Frederick, *Istoria Filosofiei. Grecia. Roma / History of Philosophy. Greece. Rome*, vol. I, Editura ALL, București, 2008.

Defradas, Jean, *Literatura elină / Greek Literature*, Editura Tinaeretului, București, 1968.

Dragomir, Alexandru, *Crase banalități metafizice / Mere Metaphysical Trivialities*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2004.

Duparéel, Eugène, *La Légende Socratique et les Sources de Platon / The Socratic Legend and Plato´s Sources*, Les Editions Robert Sand, Bruxelles, 1922.

Lévêque, Pierre, *Aventura greacă / The Greek Adventure*, vol. I, Editura Meridiane, București, 1987.

Noica, Constantin, *Jurnal filozofic / Philosophical Diary*, Editura Humanitas, București, 1990.

Nordau, Max, *Paradoxe sociologice / Sociological Paradoxes*, București, Alcalay, f.a.,

Petrescu, Camil, *Doctrina substanței / The Doctrine of the Substance*, vol. II, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1988

Șestov, Lev, *Începuturi, sfârșituri / Beginnings, Endings*, Institutul European, Iași, 1993.

Popper, R. Karl, *Societatea deschisă și dușmanii ei / Open Society and Its Enemies,* vol. I, Editura Humanitas, București, 1993.