

ON SOME COMMON NOTIONS IN CONFUCIANISM AND SOCRATIC THOUGHT: PRUDENCE, MODERATION, TEMPERANCE ETC.

The answer to such an issue seems to be a positive one in many respects and in spite of flagrant differences. On a purely historical basis, both thinkers are distant from each other by only one century and both have exerted a decisive influence not only upon their contemporary philosophers, but also diachronically. Kung-fu-tse erred for years through China trying to teach his fellow countrymen and often held important state positions in recognition of his valuable teachings which soon after were raised to the rank of a religion. Socrates, on the contrary, after having bravely participated in various war expeditions, spent an active sedentary life in Athens where he distinguished himself by trying to teach his fellow-citizens the prominence of consequent reasoning against the false reasoning promoted by the Sophists, who tried to distort the truth by understating it in comparison with falsehood, thus attracting the inconvenience of the Athenians who, on the charge of his corrupting the city's youth, sentenced him to death with a slight majority. Socrates, however, faced death with calmness after having rejected the temptation of his followers to escape from prison, arguing that he had freely chosen to respect the laws. I do believe that such a decision reminds of Confucius' own recommendation to obey legislation for the sake of the human person.

Socrates' teaching itself has revolutioned Western thought, and is still valid in the West, thanks to his disciples, since he himself, unlike Confucius, had not left any writings. We know, nevertheless, through Plato's *Republic*¹ and *Laws*², that he envisaged a kind of a *four-rooted practical reason* comprising *bravery*, *justice*, and *temperance* *prudence*³ which become to a virtuous life and which more or less correspond to the five cardinal virtues praised by Confucius, i.e. *wisdom*, *goodness*, *sincere attachment*, *respectfulness* and *bravery*⁴ that allow to live in accordance with the laws that govern the world. Was Chrysippus the Stoic, who lived almost one century after Socrates, aware of this principle when he asserted that one should live conformingly and conveniently to nature⁵? On the other hand, according to Confucius' theory exposed in his commentaries on the so-called *Book of Spring and Summer*, the treatises on *High (or Sublime) Knowledge* and on *Correct Measure* were composed. Correct measure allows one to promptly insert himself into the world and live in harmony with the others.

1. Cf. *Rep.*, IV, 428 b ff; 430 b-d, 431 c; 433 b; 436 aff.

2. Cf. *Laws*, I, 631 c; XII, 963 d-e.

3. Cf. E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *Philosophical Questionings*, vol. 2, Athens, Univ. Press, 1978, pp. 122-125.

4. Cf. S.K. SHRYOAKE, *The Origin and Development of the State-Cult of Confucius*, New York, 1932, pp. 67 ff.

5. Cf. CHRYSIPPUS, fr. 4 (Arnim, SVF, III, 4, 12).

In the same way Socrate's theory praises the human quality of temperance which is illustrated by the presocratic tradition through the proverbial phrase *μηδὲν ἄγαν*, meaning to act by avoiding any kind of excess, together with the notion of *Καιρός*, meaning the *right moment to grasp* before it fades away and disappears for ever, i.e. neither too fast nor too late. I shall insist on this issue by stressing the importance of *kairicity* in Socrates' philosophy as a factor of correct human behavior inspired by the correct use of prudence and moderation. This will enable to make clear a closer connection between the Confucian and the Socratic conception of practical reason under the aspect of their common moral pragmatism.

Writing in the mid-20th century, the author of the most substantial monograph on Socrates, V. de Magalhães Vilhena, came to the conclusion that «none of the witnesses [to Socrates] can truly be called historical», and that «we do not have Socrates as he was»⁶. Nothing could be more true. After Aristophanes⁷ and Xenophon there is Plato, who provides us with first-hand information about Socrates, even if it is information that does not enable one clearly to detect what is due to Plato and what is due to his great teacher. The picture in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* is that of a Socrates preoccupied with questions of ethics⁸. Aristotle echoes Xenophon in refusing to allow Socrates a penchant for any kind of philosophical debate other than ethical, even as he recognizes Socrates as the parent of the method of induction in investigating the common elements qualifying the mutually comparable specific instances with which intellect must begin its work of unearthing the essence of a problem⁹.

These contradictory conceptions, already advanced in antiquity, necessarily cast their long shadow over the diverging views of 19th-century students of Socratic philosophy. This is notoriously the case with the older German scholars. August Döring, for example, sees Xenophon's as the authentic image of Socrates, so that Plato will have appealed to Socrates purely in order to lend more weight to his own theses¹⁰. Karl Joel, on the other hand, will have none of the idea that Socrates' portrait from Xenophon's brush is the only true one¹¹. English scholars of the first half of the 20th century, notably J. Burnet¹², and

6. V. DE, MAGALHÃES VILHENA, *Le problème de Socrate. Le Socrate historique et le Socrate de Platon*, 1952, P.U.F., Paris, pp. 453 and 455; *Socrate et la légende platonicienne*, 1952, P.U.F., Paris. Cf. E. DUPRÉEL, *La légende de Socrate et les sources de Platon*, 1922, Bruxelles, pp. 55 ff.; M. MONNIER, *La légende de Socrate*, 1926, Paris. Cf. L. ROBIN, *Les Mémoires de Xenophon et notre connaissance de la philosophie de Socrate*, *La pensée grecque*, 1923, Paris, p.81; G. KAFKA, *Sokrates, Plato und der sokratische Kreis*, 1921; K. SCHREMPF, *Sokrates*, 1928; E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *Philosophes de l'Égée*, 1991, Athens, Aegean Foundation, pp. 80-81. See also the analytical study by A. FOUILLÉE, *La philosophie de Socrate*, 2 vols., Paris 1874; and P. BRAÏLAS-ARMÉNIS, *La philosophie de Socrate selon A. Fouillée*, Corfu, 1875. The latter work appears in E. MOUTSOPOULOS, & Th. ANASTASSOPOULOU (eds), P. BRAÏLAS-ARMÉNIS, *Œuvres philosophiques*, vol. 5, Athens, Foundation for Research and Editions of Modern Greek Philosophy, 1978, pp.129-250 (CPGR [Corpus Philosophorum Graecorum Recentiorum], published under the direction of E. Moutsopoulos). Cf. also J. BRUN, *Socrate*, (5th ed.), Paris, P.U.F., 1973, pp. 114-115.

7. Cf. E. I. ANGHÉLOPOULOS, *Aristophane et ses idées sur Socrate*, Athens, 1933, pp. 37-48. Cf. P. THIERY, *Aristophane, et l'ancienne comédie*, Paris, P.U.F., 1999, pp. 26-33.

8. Cf. H. STRAUSS, *Xenophon's Socrates*, 1972; M. LUCCIONI, *Xénophon et le socratisme*, Paris, 1953.

9. Cf. T. DEMAN, *Le témoignage d'Aristote sur Socrate*, Paris, Les Belles-Lettres, 1942, pp. 17 ff.

10. A. DÖRING, *Die Lehre des Sokrates als soziales Reformsystem. Neuer Versuch zur Lösung des Problems der sokratischen Philosophie*, München, Beck, 1895, pp. 33 ff.

11. Cf. K. JOEL, *Der echte und der xenophontische Sokrates*, 3 vols., Berlin, 1893-1901, vol.1, p.33 ff.

A.E. Taylor¹³, are in opposition to the preceding German tradition in taking the portrait of Socrates presented by Plato in the «Socratic» dialogues, and hence the continuity of Socrates' presence in Plato's works, as the truth. The German thinker H. Maier, a near contemporary of Burnet and Taylor, only partly espouses their view: whereas he is in agreement with them about accepting that Socrates' thought made a huge contribution to the evolution of human thought (albeit with Plato as middleman), he parts company with them when it comes to admitting the specific character that they ascribe to Socrates' contribution¹⁴.

If all that mattered was how to evaluate what this contribution has meant to philosophy, we would be obliged to stress the innovative way in which Socrates managed to exploit the possibilities of human intelligence as he perceived them. That he introduced a new view of life is hardly deniable. *Per se*, his thesis (the authority of which remains unchallenged to this day) that «the unexamined life is not worth living»¹⁵, reflecting the need for consciousness to maintain ceaseless vigilance when faced with day-to-day problems and, *a fortiori*, philosophical problems, is Socrates' way of defining a new attitude to existence. Plato has a reprise of the structure of this phrase, further on in time, in his *Statesman*: all he does is to modify its variables so as to make it applicable to a philosophy of art founded on real life. «A life not embellished with art» (he writes) «would not be worth living»¹⁶.

Socrates was trying in his own way to introduce philosophical reasoning into a new world dominated by a respect for knowledge, a respect stemming from recognition of how important the principle of freedom is. The Presocratics had built up a corpus of knowledge about the nature of the cosmos and of human reality. Socrates, the sworn foe of the Sophists and their dispensation, for a fee, of ready-made knowledge, nevertheless kept company with them in so far as he shared the object of their concern, namely, human consciousness. And indeed, we can point to three moments in the history of philosophy when there occurred a change of target of this kind, from the external to the internal world. The first involved the Sophists and Socrates; the second, Kant; and the third, Husserl and the tradition that began with him¹⁷. On further scrutiny, however, Socrates the son of Phainarete the midwife (to whom he owed his maieutic technique) is clearly differentiated from the Sophists. On Plato's showing, the latter had a knack of transforming «a weak argument into a strong argument»¹⁸. Socrates, however, founded his arguments on feigned ignorance, and ultimately on a single firm piece of knowledge: «the one thing

12. Cf. J. BURNET, *The Socratic Doctrine of the Soul*, 1916, London; *Platonism*, 1928, Berkeley California Univ. Press, (Sather Classical Lectures, vol.5); *Early Greek Philosophy*, 1930 (reissued 1948, London), chs. XII and XV.

13. Cf. A. E. TAYLOR, *Plato. The Man and his Work*, new edition, with a foreword by E. MOUTSOPOULOS, 1991, Norwood (Conn.), Easton Press, esp. pp. 24-25; cf. A. E. TAYLOR, *Varia socratica*, Oxford, 1911; Peter DAVIES, *Socrates*, Cambridge, Univ. Press, 1932.

14. Cf. H. MAIER, *Sokrates. Sein Werk und seine geschichtliche Stellung*, Tübingen, Mohr, pp. 73 ff. Cf. C. SIEGEL, *Platon und Sokrates*, Leipzig, Meiner, 1920, pp. 25-29.

15. *Apology*, 38 a.

16. *Statesman*, 299 e.

17. Cf. E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *L'itinéraire de l'esprit*, vol.1 : *Les êtres*, Athens, Hermes, p. 15; IDEM, *Philosophes de l'Égée*, p. 84.

18. *Apology*, 18 b: τὸν ἥττω λόγον κρείττω.

that I know is that I know nothing»¹⁹, before pursuing his path with common sense as his exclusive criterion (which is the essence of Socratic irony).

Seen in this light, the specific nature of Socrates' teaching is of signal importance. He rejects ready-made knowledge. Rather than make elaborate set speeches, he puts questions, often embarrassing ones, that unlock replies calling forth new questions; until his interlocutor, exhausted and without further recourse, is obliged to give up. The style of this type of teaching can only be understood in the context of the dialogue form, which allows the midwife technique to be applied to absolutely any enquiry whatever. It will bring the interlocutor face to face with an *aporia*, a dead end, and will deprive him of the chance to continue doggedly with the line of argument he has been forced into, even as he is led to choose a succession of criteria. Socrates pretends to go along with him and give him help, but in so doing he makes this quite plain to the other – perfectly aware of what is at stake each time, much like the chessplayer, Heraclitus' παῖς πεσσεύων²⁰, carrying out his grand strategy after each tactical move, in a spirit of intentional enjoyment of *kairos*. That is why Socrates has to be the central figure of every dialogue, the person pulling the strings. He can do this because his thinking is consistent: it is based on open and ceaseless recourse to the power of pure intellect. The result is an explicit recognition of the principles of reason that mark out the function field of a system of logical possibilities.

The Sophists too, to be sure, used the power of the intellect. But they did so in order to demonstrate, as and when possible, the seeming validity of both of two opposing positions; and here they were making use of a form in which the primitive mentality clothes such principles as identity and causality²¹. Socrates, by contrast, starts out from a methodical scepticism, and arrives quite deliberately at a rationalism that is, in the best sense of the word, dogmatic. For him, any argument that is properly conducted will serve for knowledge; not just any knowledge, but knowledge related to the entire content of consciousness, in other words, the whole of the aspects of existence and human life. When things go wrong, this is because of deviation from the single road that leads to a problem's correct solution. The deviation will be out of carelessness, since «no one errs voluntarily»²². This is the watchword of Socratic rationalism. To insistently follow the path of philosophical investigation: that should be the philosopher's constant care. Far from being impervious to the end result, he will assign prior importance to the accidents which

19. *Ibid.*, 29 b: οὐκ εἰδῶς... οὕτω καὶ οἶμαι οὐκ εἰδέναι. Cf. G. REALE, *Socrate. Alla scoperta della sapienza umana*, Milano, Rizzoli, 2000, pp. 159-161.

20. Cf. HERACLITUS, fr. B 52 D. - K., I. 162.5; PLATO, *Gorgias*, 450 d; *Rep.*, 487 b-c; *Phaedrus*, 274 d; *Statesman*, 299 e; *Laws*, VII, 820 c-e; 903 e. Cf. E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *L'art de vivre selon Épicure: pet-teia et kairos*, *Philosophia* 27-28 1997-1998, pp.19-25.

21. Cf. L. LÉVY-BRUHL, *La mentalité primitive*, Paris, Alcan, 1922, republished (15th ed.) Paris, P.U.F., 1960, pp. 57-63; *Le surnaturel et la nature dans la mentalité primitive*, Paris, Alcan, 1933; new edition, Paris, P.U.F., 1963, pp.13-20. Cf. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *La pensée sauvage*, vol.1, Paris, Plon, 1964, pp. 23-29; J. CAZENEUVE, *La pensée archaïque*, Paris, A. Colin, 1961, pp. 11 ff; E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *Philosophes de l'Égée*, pp. 18-20.

22. *Apology*, 37 a : ἐχὼν μηδένᾳ ἀδικοῦν. Cf. *Protag.*, 345 a, 358 c; *Rep.*, IX, 589 c; *Tim.*, 86 e: κακὸς ἐχὼν οὐδεὶς; *Laws*, VII, 731 c; VIII, 832 e; IX, 860 c. Cf. E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *La pensée et l'erreur*, Athens, 1961, p. 42; *La connaissance et la science*, Athens, University Editions, 1972, p. 136; and by extension, cf. also IDEM, *L'homme méchant par nature: Kant contre Rousseau, L'année 1793. Kant sur la politique et la religion (Actes du Premier Congrès de la Société Kantienne de Langue Française, 1993)*, Paris, Vrin, 1995, pp. 195-197.

are in the full sense a constant guarantee that the dialogue is running along the right lines. Moreover, the majority of the dialogues written in Plato's early days, (those same «Socratic» dialogues, so called because they are thought accurately to reproduce the Master's teaching style, are in point of fact *aporetic*²³; that is, they lead Socrates' interlocutor (as I have already pointed out) to an *aporia* or cul-de-sac. The most obvious thing about these dialogues is that they make clear what deviating pathway the interlocutor has been obliged to take in order to arrive at the opinion (or belief)²⁴ that he reckons to be true.

To grasp an object of thought properly one needs, first and foremost, exact knowledge of the range of themes in which the object under consideration (most often a specific notion) is embodied. This proper grasp is attainable only if one clearly defines the notion in play; and the definition must also take into account not only the notion's specific nature but its relation to that other notion whose particular instance it is. Its authentic sense will be revealed in return for a comparison between these two terms, using as axes the «kind and difference» which define its essence: ἐκ γένους καὶ διαφορῶν, as Aristotle will later put it²⁵.

The dialectical opposition of contraries is resolved not by overriding them (the Hegelian *Aufhebung*), but by making appeal to their moderation, most often expressed as a mediety. In Plato's *Symposium*, for example, it is Diotima's teaching (which Socrates is thought to have reproduced) which overcomes the opposition between human and divine by having recourse to the notion of *daimon*²⁶. Although these speculations foreshadow the hallmark of Plato's doctrine of the *mixed*²⁷, it is equally true that they express certain typically Socratic considerations that may apply just as much to the domain of epistemology as to the domain of ethics and ontology. In Socrates' philosophy, virtue appears as very particularly the outcome both of exact knowledge and of a moderation, also *kairic* in nature, in the subject's attitude to life – a reduction of extremes of behaviour and a sort of rigorousness in the act of avoiding any excesses. For Socrates, then, moderation is not a pure form, but a genuine and essential quality that consciousness must fit with if it is to attain its purpose. What is more, moderation, under the aspect of mediety, is one of the

23. Cf. V. GOLDSCHMIDT, *Les dialogues de Platon. Structure et méthode dialectique*, Paris, P.U.F., 1947, pp.15-30.

24. Cf. Y. LAFRANCE, *La théorie platonicienne de la Doxa*, Paris & Montréal, 1981, Les Belles-Lettres & Bellarmin, reviewed by E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *Diotima*, 12, 1984, pp. 217-219. Cf. E. MOUTSOPOULOS, La notion de croyance chez Platon, *Diotima*, 23, 1995, pp. 143-151.

25. ARISTOTLE, *Topica*, A8, 103 b15: ὁ ὁρισμὸς ἐκ γένους καὶ διαφορῶν ἐστί. Cf. *Topica*, Z4, 141 b 2; 153 b14. Cf. *Metaph.* I 7, 1057 b 7: ἐκ τοῦ γένους καὶ τῶν διαφορῶν τὰ εἶδη; H2, 1042 b 32: τὰ γένη τῶν διαφορῶν; Z 4 1030 b 5: ὁ πρῶτως καὶ ἀπλῶς ὁρισμὸς ὁ τοῦ τί ἦν εἶναι καὶ τῶν οὐσιῶν ἐστί, and Z5, 1031 a 12: ἐστὶν ὁ ὁρισμὸς καὶ τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι λόγος; *Second anal.*, Δ 13, 97 b 26: τοῦ καθόλου καὶ τοῦ εἶδους ὁ ὁρισμός; Cf. also *Metaph.*, A6, 987 b 3; Z11, 1036 a 29; M4, 1087 b 31.

26. *Symposium*, 202 d ff. Cf. *Apol.*, 27 d, *Phaedo*, 107 d; *Phaedrus*, 240 b. Cf. also E. MOUTSOPOULOS, Sur l'idée de médiété ontologique, *Les corps intermédiaires* (IV^e Colloque d'Athènes), Athens, Piraeus School of Higher Studies in Industry, 1986, pp. 296-301.

27. Cf. N.-I. BOUSSOULAS, *L'être et la composition des mixtes dans le «Philèbe» de Platon*, Paris, P.U.F., 1952, pp. 19-27 and 75-77; IDEM, L'esthétique platonicienne, *Actes du IV^e Congrès International d'Esthétique*, Athènes, 1960, pp. 749-754. Cf. S. DELCOMMINETTE, *Le «Philèbe» de Platon. Introduction à l'agathologie platonicienne*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2006, pp. 425 ff., reviewed by E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *Diotima*, 36, 2008, pp. 187-188.

means that consciousness uses to this end. Looked at from this angle, Socrates has tried to find the best possible reply to the attitude of most of the Sophists, whose attachment to relativism is illustrated in the extremism of their thesis. Gorgias, for instance, made no bones about recommending that the canonical proportions for sculpture should be altered so that forms seen in perspective would have a modicum of verisimilitude. Socrates was no less of an anthropocentrist than Protagoras; but his own position was that human beings are free because they are able to be consistent with themselves, and this to some extent stimulates them to train themselves in virtue²⁸.

Moderation as recourse to the essential quality of mediety²⁹, and indeed measure, and (when all is said and done) the *kairos*³⁰, freedom within the bounds of consistency, ceaseless investigation of right action in knowledge as well as conduct: these are, historically, the principal contributions of Socratic thought to philosophy. To take Socrates as par excellence the lasting model of the philosopher is no mere invention. He remains the lover of wisdom as well as of life, proceeding to teach people by jolting up people, and by offering himself as an example of the consistency in virtue that let him face death with unconcern and disdain. Isn't this the way of life Confucius advocated as well?

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28. *Phaedo*, 93 e : ἡ ἀρετὴ ἁρμονία ... εἶη; *Gorgias*, 479 d; 504 e; 506 d; *Rep.*, III, 403 d; 407 a; 444 d; VIII, 554 e; X, 613 1; *Philebus*, 64 e: μετριότης... καὶ ἑυμετρία κάλλος δῆπου καὶ ἀρετὴ πανταχοῦ ἑυμβαίνει γίγνεσθαι; *Laws*, X, 886 b, 903.

29. Cf. E. MOUTSOPOULOS, Sur l'idée de médété ontologique, pp. 296-301.

30. Cf. IDEM, Kairos ou l'humanisation du temps, *Diotima*, 16, 1988, pp. 129-131; *Kairicité et liberté*, Athènes, Académie d'Athènes, 2007, pp. 151 ff.