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1 The Rise and Fall of the Socratic Problem

The Socratic problem has quite a history, and is now perhaps only a part of history, since its desperately unsolvable nature does not seem to guarantee it much of a future. It would undoubtedly be presumptuous to claim that the Socratic problem is a closed issue simply because it is not amenable to a satisfactory solution, but it is certainly useful to identify the principal obstacles and pitfalls that render the discovery of a solution improbable, or even impossible.

Socrates, as we know, wrote nothing. His life and ideas are known to us through direct accounts – writings either by contemporaries (Aristophanes) or disciples (Plato and Xenophon) – and through indirect accounts, the most important of which is the one written by Aristotle, who was born fifteen years after Socrates' death (399). Because these accounts vary greatly from one another, the question arises as to whether it is possible to reconstruct the life and – more importantly – the ideas of the historical Socrates on the basis of one, several, or all of these accounts. The "Socratic problem" refers to the historical and methodological problem that historians confront when they attempt to reconstruct the philosophical doctrines of the historical Socrates. Any future stance on the Socratic problem, if it is to be an informed and well-grounded one, presupposes a full understanding of the origins and consequences of the proposed solutions of the last two centuries.[1]

Translated from the French by Melissa Bailar.

1 Reviewing all attempts at a solution would be tedious and useless. I will limit myself to those studies I find to be the most representative or the most significant. For an excellent overview of the literature on the Socratic problem, see Patzer 1987, pp. 1–40. Montuori 1992 pulled together a very useful anthology of the principal texts on the Socratic problem.

1. THE GENESIS: SCHLEIERMACHER AND THE CRITIQUE OF XENOPHON

According to the unanimous opinion of historians,[2] the text that contributed the most to the development of the Socratic problem is Schleiermacher's study entitled "The Worth of Socrates as a Philosopher" (1818).[3] Although certain passages from this seminal work of Socratic studies are often cited, Schleiermacher's work remains largely unappreciated. This lack of recognition is counterproductive because scholars attempting to solve the Socratic problem are often unaware that they are relying on arguments rooted in Schleiermacher that do not stand up to critical analysis.[4]

Schleiermacher starts from the observation that there is a contradiction between the importance of the new beginning attributed to Socrates in the history of Greek philosophy, on the one hand, and the banality of typical representations of Socrates, on the other. According to the latter, Socrates was occupied exclusively with moral questions, concerned himself above all with bettering his disciples, questioned his interlocutors on the best type of life available to mankind, and so on. If Socrates' contribution to philosophy were limited to questions of this sort, we would no longer have any reason, according to Schleiermacher, to see in him the man who was the inspiration for a sort of second birth of Greek philosophy. Schleiermacher thus rejects in their entirety the principal characteristics that constituted the traditional representation of Socrates the "philosopher" at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Because until then scholars had turned primarily to Xenophon to determine the content of the historical Socrates' ideas,[5] it is hardly surprising that Schleiermacher distanced himself from Xenophon's account. In fact, he criticized the author of the *Memorabilia* on two points:

(a) Xenophon was not a philosopher, but rather a soldier and politician, and was thus not the most qualified witness to give a faithful account of Socrates' principal philosophical positions (1818: 56 = 1879: 10). Schleiermacher's criticism presupposes that philosophy

2 See Magalhães-Vilhena 1952, pp. 131, 138, 158, and 186; Montuori 1981a, p. 31; 1981b, pp. 7, 9, 11; 1988, pp. 27–28; Patzer 1987, pp. 9–10.

3 For the English translation of this text, see Schleiermacher 1879. See also Dorion 2001 for an analysis of this text by Schleiermacher.

4 In this way, Brickhouse and Smith 2000, pp. 38, 42–43, discredit Xenophon's account by using two arguments that, although the authors seem unaware of it, could already be found in Schleiermacher.

5 For a study of the importance of Xenophon's accounts before the start of the nineteenth century, see Dorion 2000, pp. VIII-XII.

is essentially a speculative activity. Thus, since Xenophon's Socratic writings are hardly speculative, Schleiermacher naturally concludes that Xenophon was not a philosopher and that he did not do justice to Socrates' profound philosophical positions. This is in a way an unjust attack on Xenophon, whose admitted goal, as he proclaimed at the start of the *Memorabilia* (1.3.1 and 1.4.1), was to show how and to what extent Socrates was useful to others and contributed to the bettering of his companions through both his example and his words. Are not being useful to others and bettering them worthy objectives of a philosophy understood as *a way of life*? In any case, this criticism received great acclaim, and commentators seeking to discredit Xenophon's account have used it ever since.[6]

(b) Xenophon was so zealous in defending his master against accusations regarding his subversive teachings that Socrates figures in his writings as a representative of the established order and the most traditional values. The positions that Xenophon's Socrates defends are so conservative and conventional that it is impossible to understand how such a flat and dull philosopher could attract, captivate, and maintain the interest of naturally speculative thinkers, such as Plato and Euclid, the founder of the Megarian school. In short, if Socrates had resembled the Socrates of Xenophon's writings, he would not have been surrounded by such disciples; he would instead have repelled them.[7] At the start of the twentieth century, Xenophon's detractors followed Schleiermacher's lead and pushed his criticism of the apologetic nature of Xenophon's Socratic writings even further, saying, for example, that Xenophon defended Socrates so well against the accusations against him that it is difficult to understand how Socrates could possibly have been sentenced to death. (See Burnet 1914: p. 149; Taylor 1932: p. 22.)

It is thus clear to Schleiermacher that Socrates must have been *more* than what Xenophon said about him, because if Socrates only amounted to his portrait in the *Memorabilia*, the immense philosophical influence we attribute to him would be incomprehensible: "And not only *may* Socrates, he *must* have been more, and there must have been more in the back-ground of his speeches, than Xenophon represents." (1879: 11 = 1818: 57) This harsh judgment is nevertheless belied by texts

6 See Dorion 2000, pp. XC-XCI, where I provide many references.

7 Brickhouse and Smith 2000, p. 43, made the same criticism in the same terms.

and accounts that attest that the *Memorabilia* exerted a considerable influence on the first Stoics.[8] But where does Schleiermacher intend to find this other dimension of Socrates that is presumably absent in Xenophon's text? Schleiermacher intends to find the more philosophical dimension of Socrates – "philosophical" in the modern and speculative sense of the term – in Plato, of course. But whatever is found in Plato should not contradict certain given facts in Xenophon's account that are widely recognized as reliable. Schleiermacher states in the form of a question his suggested method for reconstructing the philosophical content of the historical Socrates' thought:

> The only safe method (*Der einzige sichere Weg*) seems to be, to inquire: what may Socrates have been, over and above what Xenophon has described, without however contradicting the strokes of character (*Charakterzügen*), and the practical maxims (*Lebensmaximen*), which Xenophon distinctly delivers as those of Socrates: and what must he have been, to give Plato a right, and an inducement, to exhibit him as he has done in his dialogues? (1879: 14 = 1818: 59)

This "method" raises more problems than it can possibly hope to resolve. As far as the "practical maxims" or the "rules of life" (*Lebensmaximen*) are concerned, a single example will suffice to illustrate the pitfalls obstructing the application of Schleiermacher's so-called method. Book IV, Chapter 5, of the *Memorabilia* is devoted to the way in which Socrates assisted his companions in regulating their behavior. In reading this chapter, it appears that self-mastery (*enkrateia*) is the surest foundation for behavior and action. If self-mastery is the *sine qua non* condition for all successful practical activity, it is hardly surprising that Xenophon affirms that *enkrateia* is the foundation of virtue (*Memorabilia* 1.5.4). Must we consider, then, that the principal role attributed to *enkrateia* has the value of a "practical maxim"? If so, Xenophon's account would have precedence over Plato's as far as this essential aspect of Socratic ethics is concerned. In fact, since Plato's Socrates grants no theoretical importance to *enkrateia* – the term *enkrateia* is not found in Plato's first dialogues, and the idea that moderation (*sôphrosunê*) is in any sense reducible to *enkrateia* is also not found in the *Charmides* – and because he attributes to knowledge the role that Xenophon attributes to *enkrateia*, his position appears irreconcilable with a practical maxim defended by Xenophon's Socrates and must, in accordance with Schleiermacher's method, be sacrificed. As can be seen, this "method" leads to results that are at times contrary to those that Schleiermacher

8 See D.L. 7.2; Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 9.92–101; Long 1988, pp. 162–163; Dorion 2000, p. 33 n. 231.

had anticipated. The difficulties raised by this method notwithstanding, it did exert exceptional programmatic influence in as much as it defined the program of research followed by several generations of philosophers in their attempt to determine the philosophical content of the historical Socrates' thought. Schleiermacher's method enjoyed a considerable success, as is demonstrated by the very large number of historians who adhere to or refer to it.[9]

After a considerable time, Schleiermacher's essay eventually led to the full rejection of Xenophon's account. The critical movement he initiated grew over the course of the nineteenth century, and reached its height in 1915 when Xenophon's Socratic writings had become completely discredited. To Schleiermacher's two criticisms, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians added eight others.[10] Nearly a century after Schleiermacher's seminal article and in the space of only a few years, scholars in France (Robin 1910); England (Taylor 1911; Burnet 1911 and 1914); and Germany (Maier 1913) published in rapid succession and completely independently from one another studies that were so critical of Xenophon's Socratic writings that it was no longer clear what merit could possibly be attributed to the author of the *Memorabilia*.

The consensus that emerged during this period is neither accidental nor a coincidence, and in fact represents the end result of the movement launched by Schleiermacher a century earlier. From there, it was only a small step to claim that Xenophon is completely worthless to us, as Taylor and Burnet did,[11] and that the historical Socrates completely corresponded to Plato's Socrates. Burnet and Taylor's position thus seems to be the culmination and logical conclusion of Schleiermacher's attack on Xenophon's Socratic writings at the start of the nineteenth century. Even if it is generally agreed that Burnet and Taylor's thesis is too extreme, and that Plato's Socrates cannot be simply equated with the historical Socrates, twentieth-century scholarship has in a sense endorsed their work by ostracizing Xenophon's Socrates and by deeming Plato's Socrates the only one worthy of any interest whatsoever.[12] Although the historical development of the Socratic problem has been

9 See the numerous references given by Dorion 2000, p. XIII, n. 2.

10 For a detailed presentation of these critiques, see Dorion 2000, pp. XVII-XCIX.

11 See Burnet 1914, p. 150: "It is really impossible to preserve Xenophon's Sokrates, even if he were worth preserving."

12 See, among others, Vlastos 1971, p. 2: Plato's Socrates is "in fact the only Socrates worth talking about"; Santas 1979, p. X: "It is only Plato's Socrates that is of major interest to the contemporary philosopher"; Kahn 1981, p. 319: "As far as we are concerned, the Socrates of the dialogues [i.e. Plato's] *is* the historical Socrates. He is certainly the only one who counts for the history of philosophy."

far from linear, the overwhelming majority of the scholarly work dating from the beginnings of the Socratic problem until 1915 completely reversed the prevailing situation of 1815 against which Schleiermacher rebelled, to the benefit of Plato. If the disgrace that Xenophon's Socratic writings suffered were the immediate consequence of the birth and development of the Socratic problem, in contrast, the recent renewal of interest in them is largely due to the decline of this problem.

2. THE IMPASSE AND THE FALL: THE FICTIONAL NATURE OF THE *LOGOI SOKRATIKOI*

The nearly unanimous discredit that befell Xenophon's Socratic writings nonetheless did not bring about a solution to the Socratic problem. Historians continued to debate the value of the three other sources, with the majority of them giving priority to Plato, others to Aristotle,[13] and a final few to Aristophanes.[14] In short, if everyone, or nearly everyone, agreed to reject Xenophon's accounts, no one was in agreement over the respective reliability of the three other sources. It is probably impossible to reconstruct the ideas of the historical Socrates from Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, not only because the very genre of comedy lends itself to exaggeration and even excess, but also because there is good reason to believe that Socrates' character in *The Clouds* is really a composite figure whose traits were gathered not only from Socrates himself but also from the *physiologoi* and the sophists.[15] The case of Plato's account especially highlights the absence of consensus; if we consider only those commentators who are inclined to grant priority to Plato's dialogues, we notice that they do not turn to the same dialogues to reconstruct the historical Socrates' theories. Some rely mostly on the *Apology*,[16] many base their work on the entirety of the early dialogues,[17] or on just a few of them, others still call on the apocryphal dialogues,[18] and finally some consider that every word that Plato put in Socrates' mouth, whether in an early, middle, or late dialogue, has a place in the record of the historical Socrates.[19] It is quite surprising that there is

13 Joël 1893, I, p. 203.
14 See the numerous references indicated by Montuori 1988, p. 42, n. 36. H. Gomperz 1924 went so far as to claim that the historical Socrates was found not in *The Clouds* but in fragments of other comedies!
15 See Ross 1933, p. 10; Dover 1968, pp. XXXVI, XL; Guthrie 1971, p. 52; Vlastos 1971, p. 1, n.1 and the many authors mentioned by Montuori 1988, p. 41, n.35.
16 See *infra* pp.17–18.
17 See Maier 1913; Guthrie 1975, p. 67; Vlastos 1991, pp. 45–50; Graham 1992; Brickhouse and Smith 2000, pp. 44–49; 2003, pp. 112–113.
18 See Tarrant 1938.
19 This is the position defended by Taylor 1911, p. IX, and Burnet 1911; 1914.

no consensus regarding the number and identity of Plato's dialogues that would allow for the reconstruction of the historical Socrates' ideas, but, in another way, this disagreement among interpreters is inevitable because of the doctrinal heterogeneity of Socrates' character in the *corpus platonicum*.[20]

The lack of consensus and the proliferation of attempted solutions undoubtedly led to the scholarly works running out of steam, but this did not necessarily mean that the Socratic problem was a false problem to which a solution could never be found. The position that would finally evoke a lasting skepticism surrounding the Socratic problem was initiated in Germany in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This major discovery, credited primarily to K. Joël (1895–1896), is that of the fictional nature of the *logoi sokratikoi*.

The Socratic problem has all the makings of a false problem because it rests on a misunderstanding. This in turn entails an inevitable misinterpretation of the exact nature of the preserved "testimony" about Socrates. For the Socratic problem as it had been debated since the start of the nineteenth century to have meaning, the principal direct witnesses (Xenophon and Plato) must have intended to faithfully reconstruct Socrates' ideas through writings that aimed to transmit at least the spirit and content, if not the exact words, of Socrates' dialogues. If this had been their intention, we would be justified in asking which account best corresponds to the thought of the historical Socrates. Yet everything seems to indicate that neither Xenophon nor Plato set out with the intention of faithfully reporting Socrates' ideas. Xenophon's and Plato's Socratic writings belong to a literary genre–that of the *logos sokratikos*, which Aristotle[21] explicitly recognized and which authorizes by its very nature a certain degree of fiction and a great freedom of invention as far as the setting and content are concerned, most notably with the ideas expressed by the different characters. Yet, since Aristotle sees in the *logoi sokratikoi* a form of *mimêsis* (imitation), would we not be well justified in considering them faithful documents that aim to accurately reproduce the life and thought of Socrates? This is precisely how Taylor interpreted Aristotle's account of the *logoi sokratikoi*: "Aristotle [...] regards the 'Socratic discourse' as a highly realistic kind of composition. You cannot, of course, infer that he holds that the actual Socrates must have really made every remark ascribed to him in such a discourse, but

20 Montuori 1981a, p. 225: "It is important to underline that Plato does not give us a single image of Socrates, coherent and complete, but a disconcerting plurality of images, all of which have been noted by the critics, who in turn have taken one or the other as the most faithful description of the historical person of Sophroniscus's son." See also p. 226.

21 See *Poetics* 1.1447a28-b13; *Rhetoric* 3.16.1417a18–21; fr. 72 Rose (= Athenaeus 15.505c).

it would not be a proper 'imitation' of Socrates unless it were in all its main points a faithful presentation." (1911, p. 55) A lot is at stake in the interpretation of Aristotle's testimony, because if the *mimêsis* is understood as a faithful imitation of reality, in principle nothing keeps us from considering the *logoi sokratikoi* to be a reliable and privileged material aiming to reconstruct the life and thought of Socrates; on the other hand, if the *mimêsis*, as Aristotle understands it, is a creation that authorizes a degree of fiction and invention, the task of reconstructing the thought of Socrates based on the *logoi sokratikoi* seems doomed to fail. According to Joël, then, Aristotle's account establishes that the *logos sokratikos*, classified as a form of *mimêsis*, allows for a substantial amount of fiction and invention, as far as both the setting and the ideas expressed by the characters are concerned. The recognition of the fictional character of *logoi sokratikoi* did not immediately gain acceptance without debate or controversy.[22] It is to Joël's immense credit that he brought this essential dimension of *logoi sokratikoi* to light; it is likewise unfortunate that this important discovery is not always credited to him.[23]

Since *logoi sokratikoi* are literary works in which the author can give his imagination free reign, while remaining within the plausible bounds of a credible representation of Socrates' *êthos*, the degree of fiction and invention inherent in *logoi sokratikoi* means they cannot be considered as accounts written for their historical accuracy. This does not mean, of course, that the *logoi sokratikoi* contain no single authentic trait or accurate detail; but as the historical concern of *logoi sokratikoi* is only incidental, and since we do not have at our disposal the criteria that would allow us to separate invention from authenticity, it would certainly be more prudent to renounce any hope of finding the "true"

22 On the debate surrounding the nature and status of the *logoi sokratikoi*, see Deman 1942, pp. 25–33. In the years following the publication of Joël's study, numerous commentators agreed with him and recognized the fictional nature of the *logoi sokratikoi* (see Robin 1910, p. 26; Maier 1913, p. 27, n.1; Dupréel 1922, pp. 457–460; Magalhães-Vilhena 1952, pp. 225, 326, 345, 351, 370, etc.).

23 Momigliano's works 1971, pp. 46–57, are often cited to justify affirming the *logoi sokratikoi*'s fictional nature (see Vlastos 1991, pp. 49, n. 14, 99 n.72; Kahn 1992, pp. 237–238; 1996, pp. 33–34; Beversluis 1993, p. 300, n. 14; Vander Waerdt 1993, p. 7; 1994, p. 2, n. 6). In fact, searching Momigliano's work for a precise argument that attempts to demonstrate the fictional character of the *logoi sokratikoi* is fruitless (see Dorion 2000, pp. CVIII-CXI). Furthermore, Momigliano never refers to Aristotle's account of the *logoi sokratikoi*, even though it is precisely this account that authorizes evaluating the *logoi sokratikoi* as literary creations.

Socrates in these writings. Furthermore, if we consider the fact that many of Socrates' disciples wrote *logoi sokratikoi*,[24] and that there is good reason to believe that the portraits of Socrates differed greatly from one author to the next, and sometimes even within the same author's writing,[25] it is likely that Socrates rapidly became a sort of literary character (*dramatis persona*) endowed with his own existence and placed at the center of the polemics and rivalries that pitted one Socratic against another.[26] Each author of *logoi sokratikoi* in this way created "his own" Socrates, whom he contrasted with the competing Socrates' outlined by the other Socratics. Each laid claim to, and quarreled over, the heritage of their bygone master, as well as faithfulness to his memory and his teachings.

If the *logoi sokratikoi* cannot be read or interpreted as historical documents in the strictest sense, but rather as literary and philosophical works that include a substantial degree of invention, even concerning the ideas expressed, then the Socratic problem seems hopelessly deprived of the "documents" from which the elements of a solution could be unearthed and the key to the enigma found. If our principal sources are already interpretations, we must recognize all that this entails: first, we cannot favor one interpretation over another, since nothing justifies such a bias on the historical level, and second, attempting to reconcile them all would be in vain, because such agreement would be either *impossible* or *superficial*. It is often *impossible* because of the many insurmountable contradictions in Plato's and Xenophon's accounts.[27] It is not the case that

> the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues agrees with the versions of Socrates in Xenophon, Antisthenes, Aeschines, and also the spurious Platonic dialogues (see D. Tarrant 1938), e.g. in practicing the style of refutation known as the

24 According to Diogenes Laertius, Antisthenes (6.15–18), Aeschines (2.60–63), Phaedo (2.105), and Euclid (2.108) composed Socratic dialogues. Diogenes Laertius (2.121–125) attributes *logoi sokratikoi* to several other Socratics as well (Crito, Simon, Glaucon, Simmias, Cebes), but this evidence should be treated with caution. It is generally accepted that Aristippus did not compose Socratic dialogues.

25 I am thinking primarily of Plato, whose representation of Socrates evolved so considerably from the early to the middle dialogues that we are really dealing with two Socrateses, irreducible and opposed to one another, as Vlastos clearly demonstrated (1991, pp. 45–80).

26 See Gigon 1947, p. 314: "The Socratic literature is primarily self-presentation of the Socratics, of their own philosophical thought and their literary (*dichterisches*) abilities."

27 See the list of the seventeen major contradictions on the philosophical level (Dorion 2006, pp. 95–96). This list is not exhaustive.

elenchus, professing ignorance of major questions, and having a philosophical mission. (Graham 1992, p. 143 n.9)

This claim reveals a significant misunderstanding of Xenophon's Socratic texts, for Xenophon's Socrates hardly ever practices the *elenchus*, never acknowledges his ignorance regarding the most important questions, and in contrast to Plato's Socrates, never identifies a philosophical mission. And when agreement is possible between Plato and Xenophon, it is more often than not *superficial*. Not only does such agreement not necessarily guarantee an objective fact; it is usually nothing but a superficial concordance that might mask more fundamental discrepancies. There are, of course, many Socratic themes common to Xenophon and Plato, but such overlapping does not indicate a common theory that could be attributed to the historical Socrates. To "demonstrate" a fundamental agreement between Plato and Xenophon, Luccioni (1953, pp. 48–56) was naïve enough to believe that drawing up a list of several dozen common themes (the divine sign, virtue as science, piety, self-knowledge, the dialectic, his rejection of the study of nature, etc.) would suffice. In fact, it is easy to demonstrate that Xenophon's treatment of any one of these themes cannot be assimilated with Plato's treatment of it. The differences in the treatment of these common themes are so important that the least common denominator amounts to very little in most cases. For example, self-knowledge is a privileged theme in the reflections of both Plato's and Xenophon's Socrates, but their respective conceptions of self-knowledge are so different from one another that it is impossible to tease out any features of a common theory. Furthermore, the sporadic agreements between Plato and Xenophon are not as significant as some might suggest. Take the case of the Delphic oracle: both Plato (*Apology* 20e-23b) and Xenophon (*Apology* 14–16) certainly attest to it, but this nevertheless does not mean that it constituted an actual episode in Socrates' life. In fact, there is nothing to say that it is not a myth first invented by Plato and later taken up and reinterpreted by Xenophon. It would be a mistake to believe that an agreement between two texts allowing the use of fiction is indicative of an objective fact (see Joël 1895: 478). Moreover, the existence and significance of the many differences between these two versions are not really apparent without an exegetic study that would seek to understand them in light of the respective and consistent representations that Plato and Xenophon created of Socrates and the fundamentals of his ethics. The oracle's response in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* appears as a sort of condensed or concentrated version of the ethics defended by Socrates, which justifies the claim that, "Xenophon has reformulated Plato's account of the oracle's response in the service of his own understanding of Socratic ethics." (Vander Waerdt 1994, p. 39)