

# Socrates as the Paradigmatic Figure of Practical Philosophy\*

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## ABSTRACT

This philosophical essay aims to return to the Socratic problem, ask it anew, and make an attempt to find its possible solution. In the introduction, the author briefly discusses to genesis of the Socratic problem and the basic methodological problems we encounter when dealing with it. Further on, it defines five basic sources of information about Socrates on which the interpretation tradition is based. Then the author outlines two key features of Socrates' personality, aligned with the vast majority of sources: (1) Socrates' belief that he has no theoretical knowledge; (2) Socrates' predilection towards practical questions, and the practical dimension of his activity. In conclusion, the author expresses his belief that it is just this practical dimension of philosophy that has been in the 'blind spot' of the modern study of Socrates which paid too much attention to the search for his doctrine. The history of philosophy, however, does not only have to be the history of doctrines, but can also be the history of reflected life practices which inspire followers in their own practices while reflecting on them. The author therefore proposes to understand the historical Socrates as the paradigmatic figure of practical philosophy.

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— Socrates is one of the most iconic and at the same time most controversial figures of the history of philosophy from the 18th century to the present day. On the one hand, he is the most iconic figure because the modern tradition accepted the influence which had been attributed to Socrates by the ancient tradition, particularly Plato and Aristotle, both of whom have become the ancient philosophers *par excellence* for modern times. On the other hand, Socrates' controversy results from the modern idea of philosophy as a type of thought system presented in the form of a text that can be critically examined.

The paradox to which this condition has led is obvious – what do we do with the 'philosopher founder' who did not write a single text, and whose

philosophical thinking remains hidden in the works of those who wrote about him? In the 19th century this paradox resulted in the so-called Socratic problem, first formulated by Friedrich Schleiermacher, and later developed by many others. The question can simply be formulated as follows: who was the historical Socrates, so as to not contradict the principles that Xenophon called Socratic, and yet also inspired Plato to present him in his dialogues in the way that he did?<sup>1</sup> The aim of our essay is to ask the Socratic question again, briefly look at the figure of Socrates in the context of Socratic literature, and make an attempt to find a possible answer.

1 Schleiermacher (1852), p. cxlii.

## — SOCRACTIC PROBLEM

Socrates is not the only ancient philosopher who wrote nothing. Among many others we mention Pythagoras, Pyrrho, Epictetus, or Ammonius Saccas. We learn about them only through the accounts and quotes preserved by their pupils, followers, commentators and critics. In order to reveal the views of a non-writing philosopher, these accounts need to be critically evaluated, and comparisons drawn. Our endeavour will lead to many methodological problems. Why they are particularly conspicuous in Socrates is owing to the fact that his name is contained in a relatively large number of genres of various texts which often offer very different images of Socrates.

This diversity is also caused by the fact that both classical and Hellenistic authors used to interpret a particular philosopher not as an individual historical person but rather as a representative of a certain type of thinking and behaviour which they either criticised or praised from their position. Everyone who tries to create a consolidated picture of Socrates eventually comes across the question: 'Do we judge our conception of Socrates by what we find in the sources or do we judge the sources by what we think we already know about Socrates?'<sup>2</sup>

Let us highlight some of the main methodological problems that accompany the attempts to reconstruct the views of the historical Socrates. It might seem that if two sources about Socrates are in opposition with regard

to the same subject, one of them must be untrue. However, this does not necessarily have to be the case. They may, for example, refer to another period of Socrates' life, or to a different context in which Socrates addressed the particular subject. Nor is it possible to unambiguously assume from the consistency of multiple sources that they reflect the view of the historical Socrates for the following reason: we cannot retroactively guarantee the mutual independence of these resources, or their independence from another source used by the given authors but not preserved for us, or the general image of Socrates in the given time which did not have to correspond to the views of Socrates himself,<sup>3</sup> of which, by the way, Plato's Socrates complains in the *Apology* (18b–d).

Eventually, similar problems associated with the search for the historical Socrates have prompted some interpreters to believe that Socrates is a myth – a literary fiction generated by a group of writers at the beginning of the 4th century BC.<sup>4</sup> Even if we reject such an

3 Lacey (1971), pp. 367–368.

4 A clear analysis of scholarly views on Socrates in the 19th and 20th centuries is given in J. Gajda-Krynica (2006), pp. 36–49. According to her, Xenophon's version of Socrates is championed above all by J. Brucker, H. Weissenborn, H. Arnim, H. Gomperz, A. Döring, L. Strauss, and D. Morrison. F. Schleiermacher, J. Burnet, A. E. Taylor, C. Siegel, and H. Maier give preference to Plato. K. Joel and D. Ross lean towards Aristotle's views. E. Zeller, G. Vlastos, W. K. C. Guthrie, U. Wilamowitz, W. Jaeger, and A. Diés attempt to produce a synthesis. E. Duprée, out of all, sees Socrates most as a fictional character, while O. Gigon, A.–H. Chroust and E. Howald do not regard him as

2 Lacey (1971), p. 366.

extremely sceptical interpretation, we can still see that the interpretation tradition essentially agrees only on two facts: that Socrates was sentenced to death at the age of 70 in 399 BC, and that he never wrote anything himself.<sup>5</sup> At least, he did not write down anything philosophical, given that Plato, in his *Phaedo* (60d–61b), has Socrates say that in jail he wrote the metrical version of Aesop's fables and the hymn to Apollo, having been inspired by an ever-recurring dream.

When looking for an image of the historical Socrates, the textual tradition is based on the following 5 sources of information. The first three are composed of the texts of Socrates' younger contemporaries. The oldest of the sources, Aristophanes, depicted Socrates in his comedies, above all in the *Clouds*, and via brief referrals in the *Birds* and the *Frogs*. The second group of sources is composed

of the writings of the historian and philosopher Xenophon – his *Memorabilia*, *Symposium*, *Apology*, *Oeconomicus*, and a short passus in his *Anabasis* (3, 1, 4–5). The third group consists of Plato's Dialogues in which Socrates emerges as the main speaker.<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle's writings form the fourth group. Although Aristotle's knowledge of Socrates is only mediated, mainly through Plato's Academy, and his surviving work does not systematically address him, his account is nevertheless valuable especially because Socrates' name is usually mentioned in relation to some philosophical problem or an attitude, thus suggesting a possible fashion of Socrates' philosophical views.

The last group of information sources includes a wide range of authors from about the 5th century BC up to the 3rd century AD. Among them are Socrates' contemporaries and pupils such as Antisthenes, Aeschines of Sphettus, Euclid of Megara, Phaedo of Elis, Simon 'the Shoemaker' of Athens, and others. The texts of these authors have been preserved in either a very fragmented way, or we only know of them from doxographers, which is regrettable, as otherwise

a philosopher. Gajda-Krynica (2006), pp. 58–60 herself joins this opinion, and at the end of her study she concludes that Socrates was not a philosopher, since he offered no philosophical doctrine. The current basic sources for the study of Socratic issues are the compendiums of Vlastos (1971), Ahbel-Rappe and Kamtekar (2006), Bussanich and Smith (2013), and most recently Stavru and Moore (2018).

5 All doxographic tradition agrees on Socrates' lack of writing. The exception is Epictetus who attributes considerable writing activity to Socrates (Arrian, *Epicteti dissertationes* 2, 1, 32). In this instance, however, we are probably dealing with a misunderstanding caused by mistaking writings on Socrates with those by Socrates; cf. Lacey (1971), p. 366, n. 1. The problem of authorship in ancient philosophical literature is most recently discussed by Škvrnda (2017b). For the trial with Socrates see Kalaš (2008).

6 According to Vlastos (1991), pp. 46–47, (1994), p. 135 these are principally the so-called earlier (elenctic) dialogues of Plato – *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Republic I*; then the transitional dialogues – *Euthydemus*, *Hippias Major*, *Lysis*, *Menexenus*, *Meno*; to these he adds passages from the middle period dialogues: the speech of Alcibiades in the *Symposium* (215a–222b) and the two bibliographical passages in the *Phaedo* (57a–61c, 115c–118a).

they would most likely belong to the most important sources of knowledge of Socrates' life and views. In the fifth group there are also all the later works referring to Socrates in any way. Of these, perhaps the most interesting texts are the shorter ones about Socrates, created in the Roman period and during the so-called second sophistry, by authors such as Diogenes Laërtius, Libanius, Plutarch, Apuleius, Maximus of Tyre, and Dion of Prusa. Let us now take a closer look at the preserved images of Socrates individually.

### — SOCRATES OF ARISTOPHANES

The earliest text to mention Socrates is the *Clouds*, Aristophanes' comedy played in 423 (and reworked a few years later – cf. *Nubes* 518–562) when Socrates was about 46 years old. It is the only text on Socrates written during his lifetime that has been preserved in its entirety. The faithfulness of Aristophanes' image of Socrates is mostly categorically rejected by scholars. His partial rehabilitation was brought about by E. Taylor (1951), Vander Waerdt (1994), L. Edmunds (1986), A. Bowie (1993), and M. Montuori (1981).<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted, however, that Socrates' contemporary followers took the Aristophanes' image of him seriously while opposing it (Plato *Apology*

18b–d, 19b–d; Xenophon *Apology* 14–15, *Memorabilia* 1, 1, 11–16). Aristophanes' choice of Socrates for a character in his comedy indicates at least the assumption that Socrates had already been known to a relatively broad audience who would associate him with 'modern' intellectual extravagances (cf. Plato *Apology* 19b–20c).

Aristophanes' Socrates combines two main motifs – the examination of the physical universe (*physis*) associated with non-traditional religious attitudes typical of some older philosophers, and the sophist 'both sides' argumentation. The Socrates of the *Clouds* is the leader of a paid philosophical school called a 'thinking-house'. We find him watching the sky from a hanging basket, while his pupils 'fix their eyes so on the ground' to 'seek things underground,' with their 'rump turned up towards the sky' because 'it's taking private lessons on the stars' (*Nubes* 186–194).<sup>8</sup>

Aristophanes' Socrates devotes his time to astronomy, geography, zoology, and grammatical exploration; he introduces new deities while rejecting the classical gods of the Greek Pantheon as old-fashioned. At the same time he teaches rhetoric, especially the way how to outwit the inferior, i.e. unjust argument (*hetton logos*) over the superior, i.e. just argument (*kreitton logos*) as a means to win litigation. In the traditional history of philosophy, Aristophanes' Socrates could be characterised as a utilitarian eclectic, and a syncretist

7 The last of these explores the possible Anaxagoric background to Socrates' views. In his recent dissertation, F. Škvrnda (2017a) gives an interesting attempt at reconstruction of the historical Socrates on the basis of analysing the contemporary religious and cultural background.

8 Translation: B. B. Rogers; in Aristophanes I. The Loeb Classical Library, 1930.

of the older natural philosophy and the new ethics of the sophists, prone to mysticism.<sup>9</sup>

### — SOCRATES OF XENOPHON

The second group of sources traditionally used in the search for the historical Socrates includes the writings of Socrates' pupil Xenophon of Athens. According to contemporary philosophical historiography he was more of a historian and a man of letters with a weak feel for philosophy, which leads to the conclusion that he was unable (unlike Plato) to deeply understand Socrates' philosophy. Interestingly, however, in the 18th century, Xenophon's image of Socrates was still considered to be as reliable as (or even more so than) Plato's and a similar attitude was held by many authors of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, too. Of the earlier advocates of Xenophon let us mention J. J. Brucker and his *Historia Critica Philosophiae*, who followed the line of his predecessors;<sup>10</sup> the contemporary ones include D. Morrison (1994), L.-A. Dorion (2006), and M. A. Flower (2017).

Xenophon's image of Socrates is almost the exact opposite of that of Aristophanes. In religious affairs, his Socrates holds traditional views (*Memorabilia* 1, 3–4; 4, 3), refuses the practices of the sophists, is not concerned with the theoretical examination of the natural world (*fysis*), and finds the studies in geometry or astronomy

meaningful only to the extent that they are useful for everyday life (*Memorabilia* 4, 7). He has a circle of pupils whom he teaches for free.

Xenophon's Socrates is less ironical in his treatment of others and more 'down to earth' than Plato's. The Elenctic Method (the method of counteracting opponents' opinions), characteristic of the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues, is used only as a preparatory stage; afterwards he makes no qualms about voicing his own views. However, these are not presented in the form of theories. Xenophon emphasises that Socrates had never promised to be a teacher of virtue (*arete*); on the contrary, he called for his pupils to follow the way he himself lived (*Memorabilia* 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 17) and acted (*Memorabilia* 4, 4, 10).

Xenophon's Socrates is a moralist in the best sense of the word, a philosopher who solves practical problems, finds fitting examples from life, and is always willing and able to provide useful advice to which he even uses his *daimonion* (cf. *Memorabilia* 1, 1, 4). It was not by chance that many Hellenistic philosophers and moralists considered Xenophon's style and his presentation of Socrates as the ultimate example of writing and living.

### — SOCRATES OF PLATO

In the 19th century, the originally positive assessment of Xenophon's account of Socrates changed under the influence of F. Schleiermacher's work; he considered Xenophon a statesman rather than a philosopher. In his view, Xenophon's intention was to defend his teacher from

9 For Socrates as a "pythagorizing mystic" see Škvrnda (2015).

10 Cf. Montouri (1981), p. 22; Malusa (1993), p. 229.



criticism rather than systematically interpret his views which he – unlike Plato the philosopher – was unable to correctly understand.<sup>11</sup> This attitude of Schleiermacher was accepted by the majority of contemporary scholars who even often radicalised them.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of Socrates as Plato's great teacher, the founder of dialectics, and the father of modern philosophy was born; an idea that would be shared, with greater or lesser amount of scepticism, by most 20th century authors. Among the most influential works of the 20th century which attempt to reconstruct the philosophy of the historic Socrates on the basis of Plato's dialogues is *Socrates. Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (1991). The author G. Vlastos – in connection with the stylometric studies dividing Plato's dialogues into the early, middle and late ones – earmarks two types of Socrates the philosopher. The first one is the historical Socrates (Socrates<sub>E</sub> – Socrates Earlier), and the other one is the Socrates of Plato (Socrates<sub>M</sub> – Socrates Middle). However, Vlastos' model was soon exposed to serious objections of some academics.<sup>13</sup>

If we are to compare Plato's and Xenophon's Socrates, then the former is more speculative and very reticent in expressing his own attitudes. He is a tireless debater and an adroit thinker who often casts doubt on dominant opinions. The typical and widely used method

of Plato's Socrates is the *elenchos* – logical refutation of his fellow debaters' opinions, which he bases on exposing the contradictions in the claims they themselves offered. He often accents his 'ignorance', says he has no knowledge and therefore he cannot teach anything to anybody. He compares himself to a midwife in that that he himself is unable to give birth to thoughts, but he can help others to deliver their own thoughts; nevertheless, it is necessary to examine whether the newborn are true (*Theaetetus* 150a–151d).

The mission of Plato's Socrates is to constantly explore himself as well as his fellow citizens. He examines whether they take care of both their virtue and souls, and whether they are really wise when they declare themselves to be wise (*Apology* 23b, 29c–30b).<sup>14</sup> From the modern perspective, Plato's picture of Socrates comes across as the most philosophical, and the majority of contemporary interpreters still find it the most credible. At the same time, the midwifery of the Platonic Socrates is a good justification for the diverse and original views of Socrates' followers, including Aristippus and Antisthenes, Euclid and Phaedo. His constant denial of his own wisdom which could be transferable to

11 Schleiermacher (1852), p. cxxxviii.

12 Cf. Zeller (1877), pp. 100–101.

13 Nehamas (1992), Nails (1993), Kahn (1996), McPherran (2011), Vasiliou (2013), and Prior (2013).

14 In contrast to Xenophon and Aristotle, Plato's Socrates admits to being interested in exploring *physis* in his youth (*Phaedo* 96a–100a; cf. Diogenes Laërtius 2, 45; Sextus Empiricus *Adversus Mathematicos* 7, 8; Cicero *Academicæ Questiones* 1, 4, 15), or to the fact that he studied with Sophists (Plato *Meno* 96d, *Charmides* 163d). This caused several scholars to divide Socrates' life into two phases; cf. Vander Waerdt (1994), pp. 66–75.

someone else can serve as a major explanation for his non-writing. In short, Plato's Socrates could be characterised as a typical intellectual, ironist, sceptic, and moral philosopher.<sup>15</sup>

### — SOCRATES OF ARISTOTLE

There is another source of information on Socrates' philosophy believed to be credible: that of Aristotle who came to Athens about 30 years after Socrates' death; he was familiar with not only Plato's dialogues but also the dialogues of other Socratics, as well as the period of oral tradition referring to Socrates.<sup>16</sup> In the body of Aristotle's works, we find (just) over 40 references to Socrates. What is so valuable in his testimony is, *inter alia*, that he is clearly aware of the differences between the historical Socrates and the Socrates of Plato's dialogues. The reconstruction of the historical Socrates based on Aristotle's accounts was attempted by O. Gigon (1947). However, most modern scholars understand Aristotle as a credible addition to Plato's picture of Socrates.

Aristotle tells that the historical Socrates devoted his attention to the moral virtues (*ethikas aretas*) and he was the first one to seek their general definitions, but unlike Plato, he never regarded neither universals nor definitions as existing in separation, i.e. he did not postulate them as Forms

(*Metaphysica* 1078b9–32). In agreement with Xenophon, Aristotle's Socrates disregards the study of the physical universe (*Metaphysica* 987b2). His Socrates used to ask questions and not to answer them; for he used to confess that he did not know. He would not refute the views of his opponents by putting forward a different view and proving its plausibility, but through questions and answers he would show a contradiction in the claims made by the opponents themselves (*Sophistici Elenchi* 165b3–6, 183b7–8).

Aristotle's Socrates held the position of ethical intellectualism and claimed that knowledge is a necessary and sufficient condition for our conduct. For this reason, it is impossible to suffer from *acrasia* (lack of self-control) – indeed, once we learn what is good, we act accordingly; in other words, our poor decisions are exclusively a matter of our ignorance rather than a drive of the irrational parts of our soul (*Magna Moralia* 1182a15–26; *Ethica Eudemia* 1216b2–9; *Ethica Nicomachea* 1145b23–27). From a modern point of view, Aristotle's Socrates can be characterized as a typical moral philosopher, the founder of analytical ethics, and a proponent of strong ethical intellectualism.

### — SOCRATES OF SOCRATICS

The fifth (and the last) group of authors describing Socrates is, as aforementioned, a very diverse one covering the period from about the 5th century BC until the 3rd century AD. It consists of other Socrates' pupils (except Xenophon and Plato) whose works

15 We already find this form of understanding the character of Socratic philosophy in the so-called Second and Third Academy, which were known by their development of scepticism.

16 Cf. Guthrie (1971), pp. 38–39, Suvák (2007), pp. 14–15, n. 20.



have been preserved only in the form of fragments as well as references and shorter texts dedicated to Socrates and created in the Roman period and during the so-called second sophistry. Modern commentators either ignored this group, or viewed it very suspiciously. A partial change came about as late as the end of the 20th century, especially thanks to Giannantoni's collection *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae* (1990). Research in this field is still in its initial stages. Of the works devoted to it let us mention at least the second part of the collection edited by Paul A. Vander Waerdt (1994), and the collections edited by Rossetti and Stavru (2010) and by Suvák (2014).

Apart from Plato and Xenophon, there are about 12 other authors of the so-called Socratic dialogues whom we know a little better, and the list of the names of all the Socratics in the Giannantoni Collection exceeds 70.<sup>17</sup> And it is exactly these Socratics and their so-called Socratic schools (in the modern tradition sometimes referred to as 'minor' as opposed to the Academy and the Lykeion) who may play a crucial role in the quest for the image of the historical Socrates and assessing his impact. The influence of many of them was enormous. The later Hellenistic mainstreams either claimed their founders to have been Socrates' direct pupils (the Cynics of Antisthenes and the Cyrenaics of Aristippus), or they vehemently avowed themselves to Socrates' legacy (academic sceptics and stoics).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Clay (1994).

Most of the 'minor' Socratics were critical of the 'metaphysical' speculations of the Plato and Aristotle type. Their exploration was mainly focused on matters of practical ethics. As an example of how the 'minor' Socratics understood Socrates let us mention Aeschines and his *Alcibiades* dialogue preserved in a fragmentary form. Socrates implies to Alcibiades that he has no useful knowledge to teach him. Nevertheless, he believes that if he stays with him he can make him a better person through his love. Finally, having brought him to acknowledge his ignorance, he gives him a gift of the statue of Themistocles; whenever he looks at it he will remember his own imperfection by comparing himself to the famous general.<sup>18</sup>

## — SOCRATIC PROBLEM AGAIN

So who was the historical Socrates and what philosophical position did he hold? Was he Aristophanes' sophist, utilitarian eclectic, and mystic? Or Xenophon's moralist? Or Plato's ironists and sceptic? Or was he Aristotle's creator of ethical intellectualism? Or the practical ethicist of Aeschines and many other Socratics? Each of these images offers a Socratic doctrine, or rather a certain set of philosophical attitudes that he adopted. At the same time, each of these images has its own relevance and is defensible. It seems, however, that the philosophical thinking of these many 'Socrateses' is

<sup>18</sup> Fr. VI A 50–53 (Giannantoni), Suvák (2007), p. 23. The similarly anti-theoretical philosophy of Antisthenes is most recently analysed by Suvák (2017), see also Zelinová (2016).

impossible to combine into a consistent image of one and only Socrates. This has led many interpreters to claim that Socrates was not the author of any philosophical doctrine and therefore he cannot be considered a philosopher. However, it resulted in a paradox – the non-writing philosopher propelled many of his contemporaries and followers into philosophical writing, teaching and living.

But if we look back once more at the authors discussed in our essay, we can discover two important features of Socrates' personality. The first one is the claim that Socrates believed that he had no (theoretical) knowledge; this claim is unambiguously corroborated by Xenophon, Plato and Aristotle, and neither is it dismissed by other Socratics. The only exception is Aristophanes whose Socrates is inundated with various doctrines (which can be understood as comic hyperbole).

The second feature is that of Socrates' predilection towards practical questions and the practical dimension of his work. This feature is most evident in Xenophon, the 'minor' Socratics, and the Hellenistic tradition. Socrates of Plato's "early" dialogues, albeit more sophisticated and more sceptical, also deals primarily with practical questions, while Plato raises no doubts of the power and importance of his activities.

Moreover, practical dimension of Socrates' character should be clearly identified in Plato's "middle period" dialogues too. Most obvious example is the *Phaedo*. At the beginning of the last discussion with his friends, Socrates

claims that "a man who really has spent his life on philosophy is steadfast when he is about to die and optimistic..." (63e10–64a1), hence "...those who engage with philosophy in the right way are practicing nothing else but dying and being dead" (64a6–8).<sup>19</sup> Although the ensuing discussion is "theoretical" and "metaphysical" in many aspects, the end of the dialogue clearly aims at practical point, as Kohen rightly notes: "Indeed, rather than using his final breath to utter some sort of profundity that would followed blindly as Socrates' true and final teaching, Socrates instead direct his interlocutors back to the unresolved argument they have been having about the soul's immortality".<sup>20</sup> This is the final echo of Socrates' claim in *Apology*, that "the unexamined life is not fit for a man to live" (38a6–7). Neither profundity nor theory, but certain way of living (and dying) is what should be considered most.

Another example is the *Republic*, dialogue famous for the "Platonic" tripartite immortal soul, theory of the state, using geometry and great metaphysical allegories. However, closer look on dialogue shows, as Rowe suggests, that the philosophical, literary, and rhetorical style is not so different from Plato's "earlier" one and that the *Republic* continues with

19 Translation: Ch. Emlyn-Jones, W. Preddy; in Plato I. The Loeb Classical Library, 2013.

20 Kohen (2011), p. 72. Kohen's article gives more arguments to show how the Plato's Socrates, especially of the *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*, "is carefully crafted to serve as a new model for heroic behaviour that ought to be emulated" Kohen (2011), p. 46.

those ideas that surface and dominate the so-called “Socratic” dialogues, ideas such as the virtue is knowledge, that a just person will harm no one and that no man goes wrong willingly.<sup>21</sup> The very “Socratic” topics such as justice, good, and education are discussed throughout the dialogue, and according to Rosen the *Republic* “is not a treatise on politics but a dramatic portrait of people conversing about the connection between justice and the good”.<sup>22</sup> The city-soul analogies repeatedly raising a questions on human character and the way of living. Finally, at the end of the *Book IX*, when Socrates abandons the question whether the city they have been founding and discussing could exist or not, he concludes that it is “a model up in heaven for anyone willing to look and if he sees it, found himself on it” (592b1–3).<sup>23</sup> We are back “down to earth”, being asked to create our lives here and now in certain proper way.

Another “middle” dialogue, the *Phaedrus*, should be profitably read as a dialogue on education, since both rhetoric and philosophy have an educational function and leads the souls to different way of living. The well-known critique of writing (274c–275e) does not imply that any written text is in fact useless; “only that it should not be written (nor read) without awareness of the danger of writing, together with the sense that what ultimately matters is *neither* writing *nor* speaking but the way of life in

which they can find a worthy place”, as Ferrari brilliantly pointed out.<sup>24</sup> There is no room to go deeper in *Phaedrus* or further to other Plato’s dialogues; however, it is hard to find a single one where a certain way of living and thinking plays no role.

Apart from Plato “later” dialogues, the most theoretical impression is probably given by Aristotle’s Socrates, although even his Socrates has no theoretical knowledge. And when Aristotle describes Socrates as the first person to look for the general definitions of moral virtues, he actually makes him the founder of the part of philosophy which he calls practical. In this case, not even Aristophanes is an exception; in the *Clouds*, Strepsiades attends Socrates’ lessons for purely practical reasons (to get himself rid of debt). And although he himself fails in learning – because of his ineptitude and conservatism – his son does succeed, which eventually leads to a tragicomic end of the play. Indeed, Aristophanes’ Socrates can also be primarily grasped as a (a)moral philosopher dealing with practical issues.

## CONCLUSION

When Homer, in the second Book of *Iliad*, invokes the sisterhood of Muses to reveal the names of the leaders and the number of ships fighting under Troy, he says that they (the Muses) are omnipresent and omniscient, while we mortals know nothing except through *kleos*, and we have no real knowledge (*Iliad* 2, 485–486). I think these verses are

21 Rowe (2006), p. 20.

22 Rosen (2005), p. 2.

23 Translation: Ch. Emlyn-Jones, W. Preddy; in Plato VI. The Loeb Classical Library, 2013.

24 Ferrari (1987), p. 221.

spot on, regarding our position on the Socratic problem. Unlike Homer, however, we have no access to Muses who would reveal the ‘truth’ about Socrates. What has ensued after Socrates is *kleos* – in both meanings of the word; *kleos* as rumour or report, and *kleos* as fame or glory. Why should we not understand the legacy of Socrates as reports and rumours left behind by Socratics, their followers and critics, on the actions of their hero? The reports whose task is to inspire (or caution) their contemporaries and next generations to do similar acts, and follow a similar way of thinking and living.

Such an idea does not have to be absurd as long as we are aware of what P. Hadot points out in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995): that the entire Greco-Roman tradition sees philosophy foremost as practical in its goals, as a way of life.<sup>25</sup> I think that it is exactly this practical dimension of philosophy that was in the ‘blind spot’ of most modern study of Socrates, which focused too eagerly on the search for his doctrine.

But how we should understand such thing as “practical dimension

of philosophy” when speaking about Socrates? When in Plato’s *Phaedrus* Socrates is asked whether he think the mythological story on Boreas abduction of Oreithuia from Ilissus is true, he answers that it would not be odd to him to doubt it and give some reasonable interpretation. However, then he would need a lot of spare time to interpret all other mythical stories and creatures. But he never had time to do it for the following reason: “I am still incapable of obeying the Delphic inscription and knowing myself. It strikes me as absurd to look into matters that have nothing to do with me as long as I’m still ignorant of this respect... I investigate myself rather than these things, to see whether I am in fact a creature of more complexity and savagery than Typhon, or something tamer and more simple with a naturally divine and non-Typhonic nature” (229e5–230a6).<sup>26</sup>

Of course, this does not mean that Socrates considered mythical stories or reasonable interpretations worthless. Socratic tradition shows him open to discussing any topic and searching any reasonable explanation. But such doings cannot be properly conducted without concerning what they are for us, how they could help us to live the good life. Such heritage should be recognized in many Socratic writings and also inspired later Hellenistic philosophies where “physics” and “logic” are worth to be studied because they help us to see where we are placed in the world, how

25 The practical dimension of Socrates’ thinking is also highlighted by Jan Patočka (1991), who sees his philosophy in a ‘life plan’ (p. 125), or ‘style unity of the life’ (p. 147). For the differences and similarities between Patočka’s idea of ‘care of the soul’ and Foucault’s idea of ‘care of the self’ see Hladký (2010), pp. 149–154. For the difference between the care of one’s self and the knowledge of one’s soul see Hobza (2009). For the hypothesis that some of the early Greek lyricists should be considered as forerunners of practical philosophy, see Porubjak (2018).

26 Translation: R. Waterfield; in Plato: *Phaedrus*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

do we perceive it, and how do we think. However, final goal of such studies is “ethics” – the way of life. No matter how complex all those philosophies were and how much they differ each other, finally they were trying to answer the same “practical” question of how to become better friend to ourselves and to each other, and how to live milder, calmer, and happier life to reach eudaimonia. Without the figure of Socrates, whoever he *really* was, such philosophical tradition is hard to be imagined.

Thus, the history of philosophy does not only have to be the history of theories

and doctrines, but also the history of reflected life practices which inspire followers in their own practices as well as reflect on them. From this point of view, we could perceive Socrates’ philosophy as the mission of a certain (philosophical) type of life lived to inspire his contemporaries. They, afterwards, each in their own way, initiated the entire ensuing tradition. Consequently, the historical Socrates could be interpreted as the paradigmatic figure of practical philosophy. I leave it to the reader to decide whether the Socratic problem is cracked open by such an interpretation or not. ■

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