ON SOCRATES' UNDERSTANDING OF *PHILOSOPHOS* IN PLATO'S *APOLOGIA*: A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT
This paper will critically expose Socrates' understanding of philosophos in Plato's *Apologia*. Firstly, Socrates' understanding of *philosophos,* vis-à-vis *sophistes* and *sophos* will be discussed. Then, how Socrates treats philosophy as a way of life in *Apologia* will be established. In other words, his understanding of "a life worth living," and his attitude towards life and "the most important things" will be discussed. Then, "the why" of philosophy for Socrates will be examined. In light of this, the question "can sophistry and philosophy be distinguished clearly?" will be attempted to answer. Lastly, with inspirations from some contemporary quotations, Socratic understanding will be attempted to be adapted to today, and a Socratic account of what it is to be a philosopher today will be given.
Keywords: Socrates, *Apologia*, philosopher, sophistry, demarcation.

1. Introduction

The name of Socrates represents a set of values for each philosopher and each student of philosophy, although the "what" of these values change from age to age, from society to society, and even from person to person. This is firstly because of the fact that the interpretations of texts are relative to the readers' intents and assumptions hidden or bare. Even the writers of our age can be interpreted in various ways. When it comes to Socrates, given the fact that he wrote nothing, and his enormous effects on his contemporaries and future readers, the case is more and more complicated. Naturally enough, there is hardly an agreement on the issue of Socrates' reception. While some adore "a Socrates of their own", others disgrace him with the pieces of evidence they have and interpret. I think in parallel to many scholars claiming that it is impossible to claim the knowledge of "historical Socrates" hundred percent correct. However, since we can see his immense effect on the value systems of societies in history and even of today's society, he is more than worthy to study, especially if one would like to have an insight into the issue of "what it is to be a philosopher". His demeanor, at least according to the testimony of Plato, may even be counted as *the* philosophical demeanor. Indeed, it had been read so from many ages and is still read such by many, and he is considered by many to be not only the founder of philosophy but the philosophical father of today's western civilization.

In this paper, I will try to expose and comment on Socrates' understanding of *philosophos* in Plato's *Apologia*. Doing this, I will first discuss Socrates' understanding of *philosophos,* vis-à-vis *sophistes* and *sophos.* Then I will state that Socrates sees philosophy as a way of life, and will try to catch his understanding of "a life worth living" and his attitude towards life and "the most important things". Then, I will try briefly to expose "the why" of philosophy for Socrates. Finally, I will ask a question: "can sophistry and philosophy be distinguished clearly?", and will attempt to answer it briefly. Lastly, with inspirations from some contemporary quotations, I will try to adapt Socratic understanding to today and will give a Socratic account of "what it is to be a philosopher" today.

2. The "What": *Philosophos* vis-à-vis *Sophistes* and *Sophos*

I believe that truthfulness and honesty constitute the essence of philosophy, to investigate and express thoughts in a way not to cheat anyone for power, money, or any kind of personal

benefit. One must say what their thoughts really are, and in a way that is understandable for the ones they communicate. And when reading texts or listening to speeches, one must evaluate what is told in terms of the "justness" of the material, not its charm. Beautiful sentences taste good, however, it is the major aim of poetry, rather than philosophy. Philosophy is, in its essence, like her daughter "science", neutral to the beauty of the words, and its major concern is the soundness of the content. In many schools, this is what firstly taught is to philosophy students when they begin to their education.

In my view, Socrates' demeanor in the initial sentences of *Apologia* poses an epitome for the essence of philosophy as just described. Socrates rejects that he is an orator using embellished words to influence people (17a4-b5). Thus, while defending himself from the "first accusations", or the prejudices of the jurors who believe in his accusers, he distinguishes himself from *sophistes* and declares that he will use his daily language, i.e., the language he uses in the marketplace and other places (17c7-10). And he requests the jurors to evaluate what they say according to their justness, explaining that that was the first time he appears in a law court and foreign to the language of forensic oratory (18a1-4), just in the way philosophy requires. In other words, Socrates declares that his defense will be philosophical, and invites the jurors to get involved in philosophy, requesting them to be just.

Socrates distinguishes himself not only from *sophistes*, but also from *sophos*. While defending himself against the rumor that he gets paid like sophists, he claims to have human wisdom, in opposition to super-human wisdom (20d7-e3). In my opinion, when Socrates' general attitude in *Apologia* is read, the super-human wisdom he talks about is comparable to *sophos*, self-explanatory expertise in various kinds of knowledge. Instead of claiming expertise on issues, Socrates holds that human wisdom (*sophia*) is "the knowledge of one's ignorance", and he claims to have it. Indeed, this is the first step of the philosophical inquiry, since one thinks that he or she knows, there is no need for an inquiry, and one of the reasons why he is seen as the founder of the academic discipline of philosophy is his declaration of ignorance. Socrates loves *sophia*, and goes for it since he doesn't have it. Whomever he questioned turned out not to be wise. But Socrates thought that he had a kind of wisdom peculiar to humans, and it is of little or no importance compared to the wisdom of the god -the god at Delphi, or Apollo (23a4-6), which is, as stated, the knowledge of his ignorance, and that makes him the wisest of all. Although Socrates doesn't deny the possibility of supra-human wisdom, thus the existence of *sophos* at least for the god at Delphi, as a *philosophos*, he rejects to have it (Brickhouse & Smith, 98).

Thus, the "what" of *philosophos* for Socrates can be formulated roughly as follows: one who knows her/his ignorance in advance and inquires in a truthful and honest way to find what the true and the just is.

3. The "How": Philosophy as a Way of Life, or, as Apprenticeship in the Craft of Life

For Socrates, the "unexamined life isn't worth living for a human being" (38a5). And "[t]he greatest good for a human" is "to discuss virtue every day" (38a1). Thus, philosophy is an activity that makes life worth living for a human being, or, it is what makes a human being a human being. So, what is the "how" of *philosophos*? How can one be a philosopher?

The answer may be given as mirroring one's investigations in one's life and thus trying to be "as good as possible" (29e1f). Since human wisdom is not the "real" wisdom, that "the god at Delphi" has, the only thing human beings can do for wisdom is to question what virtues are, and live their life based on their inquiries. One is *philosophos* inasmuch as he or she lives in a way inquiring how he or she ought to live. The god at Delphi is perfect, but human beings can have their way to perfection -without the possibility of reaching it- only with philosophy, examining what the good is, and applying the outcomes in life.

So, how ought one live? For living good, or just, one must concern with justice, and justice demands that one must concern with "the most important things". And for Socrates, the most

important things are virtues (Brickhouse & Smith, 125), since all the "good things" come from virtue (30a7-b4). In other words, knowing is crucially important not as such, but inasmuch as it creates virtue since virtue is the most important thing.

Here, Socrates' practice in *Apologia* may put light upon the issue at stake. In my opinion, he shares four Ancient Greek virtues, i.e., of courage, prudence, justice, and restraint, and since his philosophical attitude is to "question" what values really mean. How he investigates and practices these virtues would be a vivid example of the how of the *philosophos*. For example, when Socrates defends himself from the "old prejudices", he states that the "risk of living or dying" is of no opposite weighted thing to acting just or unjust (27b5-28c). Since virtue is the most important thing, and justice is among them, it requires courage to a degree that even risks one's life when virtue is at stake. Socrates' justice also includes prudence and restraint, since it requires human wisdom, which is humility, or the knowledge of one's ignorance: the prudence gained with philosophical inquiries. And he claims to have a *daimonion* who tells what is right or wrong, makes him a performer of self-mastery, and thus gives him restraint while he is to act unjustly and thus against virtue. In other words, in each decision of conduct, Socrates tells us to question our actions according to these four virtues that complement each other as the united body of virtue and act accordingly. For him, all the good things in life come from virtue, and philosophy is the way to the good.

At this point, Brickhouse and Smith's argument would be useful. They start their argument by mentioning Socrates' words for the wisdom peculiar to craftsmen (126, c.f. *Apology*, 22d2-4), which is not the wisdom of the most important things. And for Socrates, "to qualify as a genuine practitioner of craft", one must be able to: " [...] (a) produce the examples of the full range of things one has knowledge of, (b) [...] be a competent judge of whether something is a good example of what it is one knows, and (c) [...] give an adequate explanation both of how to produce examples of one's craft and of the judgments one makes about examples that one's craft produces (Brickhouse & Smith, 126). Socrates thinks that wisdom brings the perfection of the soul; however, he admits that he lacks perfection, and as a philosopher considering virtue, he declares himself as one who "pursue" these abilities. In other words, "Socrates identifies wisdom with the perfection of the soul as a kind of craft knowledge" (ibid, 133), and claiming that virtues are the most important things and all the good things in life come from virtue, possessing this craft has a "supreme value", "Socrates understands the crucial importance of pursuing virtue in the only way it can be pursued, though [sic] philosophy" (ibid, 134).* Precisely, following Brickhouse and Smith, it can be said that philosophy is the lifelong apprenticeship in the craft of life. And *philosophos*, by questioning what virtues really mean, is the one who practices this apprenticeship. A better apprentice produces more virtue, judges it better, and can explain how to produce virtue and how to make a judgment on virtue, and has the possibility to be regarded as an artisan after his/her death.

Now I may formulate the "how" of Socrates' *philosophos* roughly as follows: one may be called *philosophos* by pursuing virtue and pursue to act accordingly, practicing the voluntary apprenticeship of the craft of life, and by improving his or her soul on producing, judging and explaining virtue better.

4. The "Why": *Philosophos* as "God's Gift": The Need for a "Gadfly"

For me, the "why" of the *philosophos* is a two-sided question. Its sides are 1)"why is it valuable for one to be a *philosophos*?", and 2)"why is *philosophos* valuable for society?". The answer Socrates would give to the first side of the question showed itself above, in the what and how of the *philosophos*: philosophy deals with "the most important thing(s)", i.e., virtue, and thus, for Socrates, any field of knowledge would be categorically less important than philosophy. Because the first side is already answered, in this section, I will attempt to portray

* In the source, it is clear from the flow of the sentence that the word "through" is misspelled as "though".

Socrates' approach to the second side of the question briefly.

While warning the jurors that they would do harm to themselves, not to him, Socrates compares himself to a "gadfly" (30e5). He says that he is like a gadfly attached to the city of Athens, since as a philosopher, "he awakens, persuades, and reproaches each and every one of" the citizens of Athens (30e5-31a). In this way, he is "god's gift", since without gadfly horses, without *philosophos*, society gets "asleep". Socrates warns that by putting himself to death, jurors might be wrong since they won't find easily someone like himself (31a). Besides, he says that his occupation, i.e., philosophy, is hard work, making him ignore his mundane affairs such as domestic life, and leading him to poverty (31b-31c2).

Thus, the "why" of *philosophos* in the second sense as Socrates puts seems to be clear: *philosophos* is the rarely-found hard worker of the jolting of society in terms of virtues, and without such people, societies find themselves asleep and in danger of non-productivity and decadence, since everything good comes from virtue and the pursuit of virtue may only be performed through philosophy.

5. A Question: The Problem of Demarcation

In the history of philosophy, the Socratic approach to *philosophos* is practiced, questioned, evolved, embraced, and criticized. Philosophy had been divided into branches, and it also gave birth to sciences and changed the world tremendously in one way or another. Today, in what ways can we embrace, or criticize, and/or revise the Socratic understanding of the philosopher and philosophy? In my opinion, this is a huge question, however, I would like to ask a basic question on the issue here. The question indicates the problem of demarcation and can be formulated as follows. "Can *sophistes* and *philosophos* be distinguished clearly?". The usual answer may be the embracing of Socrates' understanding of *philosophos* in the history of philosophy. However, some thinkers, e.g. Jacques Derrida, think otherwise. For Derrida, "any clear demarcating line between philosophy on the one hand, and sophistry on the other, is an impossibility" (Irwin, 65, c.f. Derrida, 110). This question makes me remember two problems: the problem of truth and the impossibility of measuring one's honesty.

As it is known, the problem of truth is one of the eternal problems of philosophy. Putting it in one sentence, it is the question of "is there only one truth, and do human beings have the capability to reach it?". It is relevant to the issue of demarcation since if there is one, or absolute, truth, and human beings have the capability to reach it, demarcation is perfectly possible. At our age, almost all philosophers from both analytic and continental traditions agree to reject at least the human capability of reaching "absolute truth". In fact, Socrates himself already rejected this, and as discussed above, declared the wisdom peculiar to him as "human virtue", which is "the knowledge of one's ignorance", in an indirect way also rejecting the possibility of human *sophos*.

What if the "God's eye" point of view also doesn't exist, or in Nietzsche's words, there is no fact, only interpretations (*The Will to Power*, §481. [1883-1888])? At this point, Nietzsche's perspectivism would give an insight to the problem of demarcation. For Nietzsche, "[i]n so far as the word "knowledge" has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is interpretable otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings" (ibid.). Thus, knowledge depends on perspectives (ibid.). In other words, from one perspective, a proposition may be knowledge, or true, while from another, it may be an irrelevant or false proposition, but perspectives are not matters of knowledge. And perspectives are our drives, which are various "desires to rule", and there are "pros and cons" to these drives (ibid.).

In my opinion, the philosopher and the sophist may be demarcated as two different types, but only in theoretical terms. That is to say, if one honestly and truthfully expresses one's perspective, e.g., life, common good, humanism, women's rights, socialism, free-market economy, etc., and gets involved in the pursuit of finding what is good or bad for his or her perspective, he or she may be called as a philosopher. Just as Socrates implies, and is widely

shared among almost everyone in philosophy, the pursuit of philosophy must be done for knowledge's sake, not some worldly personal benefits, and must be truthfully performed in order for the possession of the name philosopher. However, this is only a theoretical demarcation; since it is impossible to measure one's truthfulness and honesty in full certainty.

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