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The Socratic *Phronesis* Today

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Abstract: One can say that the historical Socrates cannot be interpreted as an "intellectualist" and an "enemy of life." On the contrary: Socrates's actuality lies precisely in the fact that wisdom implies knowledge of one's own ignorance, the self-birthing and the daily improvement of myself using all the rational and irrational potentialities of life.

This conception of the ethical soul in Socrates can be compared today with the moral brain of neuroscience, which is understood in its integral unity as the locus of the body-soul in its complex unity: reason-emotion-instinct.

However, in spite of the analogies, there is a clear *opposition* between the Socratic *encephalon* and the moral brain of neurobiology. The Socratic one is free, internal, personal. The neuronal can be induced and manipulated through technology. The Socratic lesson is that virtue cannot be taught—and even less artificially provoked—from the outside. Nevertheless, in today's world, we cannot think about ethics without both: Socrates as well as the advances in neuroethics.

> Give me . . . some of the ribands—that I may crown the marvelous head of . . . Socrates [thaumastén kephalén]
> —Plato, *Symposium*, 213e

I

Was such a "marvelous head," this "amazing encephalos," the residence of the rational soul? Or of that part of the intellective, divine, and immortal soul that Plato (contrary to Aristotle) "located" in the head? Was his master's rationalism what Plato considered the subject of such wonder and awe (*thauma*)? And was truly Socrates

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the father of definition as was written down for posterity by Aristotle? Was there any basis for Nietzsche's view of Socrates as the "enemy of life"?

It is a well-known fact that the discussion about Socratic intellectualism has given ground through the centuries to different and opposing interpretations concurring into the so-called "Socratic problem."[1] Today, however, the great advances in classical philology and the critical studies on the history of Greek philosophy have been crucial in reviewing the interpretation of an intellectualistic Socrates, and separating out of Plato's *Dialogues* everything that may belong to the historical Socrates from the theoretical *corpus* of Plato's original philosophy. This has opened new possibilities for a deeper and more credible understanding of what was truly amazing in Socrates's head, and therefore in the Socratic *éthos* and ethics.

We could actually say that Socrates represents a double turn: a turn toward *human life*, here and now, *hic et nunc*, and a turn toward the internal and fundamental domain of such life, the *Soul* or *Psyche*. But a soul conceived in a completely opposite manner to, for example, the Orphic and Pythagorean idea of a soul "fallen" into the world, into the "corporal jail." Consequently, the Socratic idea of philosophy could not validate the subsequent Platonic belief that philosophizing consists of "learning to die and to be dead," while for Socrates it would have been implicitly the other way: learning to live and to be alive—ethically alive.

Since about death we don't know if it is

> a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness or, as men say, it is a change or migration of the soul from this world to another. . . . What we do know is that unrighteousness overtakes us faster than death. (Apology, b38–39)

Today we can adhere to the interpretation line by which there is no dualism in Socrates between philosophy and life, nor between soul and body, precisely because the Socratic soul and its ethical mission do not depend on the existence of another world or on life beyond death. *The soul cannot be conceived apart from the body because it is not separated from life*. Thus, the basis of ethics is not religious, political, or metaphysical; in Socrates it is rather human. In addition, today we could say that the most amazing thing about the Socratic head would be the fact that it contains, so to speak, the "entire" soul, with both its rational and irrational faculties. A soul intrinsically attached to life and to its own corporeality. A diverse and substantially one soul in its full complexity.

If an image could better describe the soul living in the amazing Socratic head; it would be the one depicted in the myth of the winged chariot in the *Phaedrus*, where, remarkably enough, Plato himself offers an integrative vision of *psyche*. What makes the soul immortal, Plato says, is its capacity to move by itself, its *autokinesis*, which depends in turn on the ability to join and harmonize the driving power of the charioteer (the reason) with the two great forces of movement, symbolically represented by two horses. One, representing the *θυμωειδές*, white, noble, obedient; the other, representing the *ἐπιθυμητικόν*, totally opposite, whose strength however is essential for the ascending movement of the soul.

The same etymology of *phrónesis* and *sophrosyne* refers to an exceptional sort of wisdom which combines in itself thought, understanding, prudence, but also feeling, free will, purpose, spirit, self-care . . . ; its own root, *phren*, (*phrenos*), refers to the entrails and heart as the seat of passions.[2]

Socrates truly represents the paradigm for *practical wisdom*, that is to say, knowledge translated into a way of life. It combines in an indissoluble bond the faculties of the soul, and avoids the hiatus between "seeing the best" and "doing the worst," an apparently unsurmountable gap later expressed by Ovidius "I see the better and approve it, but I follow the worse." Such gap could only be overcome if the act of seeing is not merely the intellectual product of a supposedly sufficient reason, separable from the other mental functions, especially emotions and the drive of life.

There are, indeed, several signs of the complexity and richness of the Socratic thought to be *read*, certainly not in a written book, but in the evidence of *Socrates's own life*, in his *ethos*, in his character or way of being, as revealed in his acts and language, in his exceptional way of living as well as dying, in solitude and company, truly faithful to his paradoxical "free destiny."

The Socratic harmony between self-consciousness and life is, from my point of view, also a harmony between *silence* and *dialogue*, between self-care and the care for the others. Or, in Greek words, between *diánoia* and *diálogos*. The turn toward inner reflection is not equivalent to a hermit's seclusion; it is intrinsically complementary to the indefatigable Socratic *logos*, which inquires, wits, examines, excites. . . . Could there be a Socrates without the Athenian *Agora*?

Certainly, "not-teaching" lies also in the essence of the Socratic "teaching." This could only be clarified in light of the great paradox: the *docta ignorantia*, the wisdom of not-knowing, of liberating oneself from false and extrinsic knowledge as a fertile way to achieve "self-parturition," the goal of the Socratic pursuit. Virtue cannot be taught, because it "has to be born" in every "soul" by work of the *phrónesis*, a knowledge that is not merely rational nor external, but incapable of being separated from the Delphic "know thyself."

Authenticity is indeed the goal of practical wisdom: getting to know oneself and to be oneself (*autós*). A goal that can be achieved through the Socratic method of *elenchus*, *catharsis*, and *irony*; through the type of *docta ignorantia* that questions false and extrinsic purposes and knowledge as a way to conceive or "give birth" (*maieutics*) to the understanding of the soul (*psyche*) and virtue (*areté*).

It is precisely because of its authenticity that the *phrónesis* is immediately translated into praxis, into action and realization, into a *way of life* summarized in what Socrates considered the supreme human duty: "to become better" every day. Not as a one-time act, not as the lonely swallow . . . , but as a never-ending self-improvement process, because to be what we are is for Socrates an open, individual and endless task.

It is not a *"neutral" knowledge* either, cut off from valuation. On the contrary, *phrónesis* means knowing the value (of good and evil, justice and injustice). We might even say that deep, inside the human soul there is a sort of *non-indifference*, which defines the person's ethical condition.[3] Furthermore the Socratic wisdom finds

that the original disposition of the human soul is a *will to do good*. Consequently, good is coincident with wisdom, and evil with ignorance. Good is also concerned with the care of the soul, while evil implies caring only for external goods, as fairly expressed by Socrates in his speech to the Athenians:

> You my friend—a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens—are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? (Plato, *Apology* 29e)

The care of the soul (*therapéia psyches*), seems to consist of no other thing than a personal and growing development of the most distinctive faculties of human nature, its *areté* or excellence. It is not only about caring, but also about improving through a transforming and creative process. Virtue is not a static and finished state. It is rather a process, movement, construction. In this sense, we may assume that Socrates's ethical praxis could not have been a *repression* of the irrational forces of life, but a genuine control over them, incorporating and putting them to the service of a *fundamental will to do good*. That is, to the service of wisdom and virtue.

> no man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil.
>
> To prefer evil to good is not in human nature . . .
>
> No evil can happen to a good man." (Plato, *Protagoras* 358d)

That's the key of Socratic autarchy, vital satisfaction and happiness (*eudaimonía*).

II

The perennial presence of the Socratic figure, along with the remarkable variety of different interpretations it provokes, is especially manifest in Western tradition, beginning with its influence in Plato and Aristotle, as well as the minor Socratics. Later on, we find it in Roman philosophy, and even in the modern and contemporary world.[4]

Would it be an unjustified leap, or a senselessness, to regard Socrates in a context seemingly as alien as could be that of recent knowledge of the sciences of life, specifically the *neurosciences*, flourishing today? Would it be possible to present an analogy between that "wonderful head" of Socrates, praised by Plato, to the no less astonishing human brain, especially with the "ethical brain" today being revealed by neurobiology? What is there in the neuronal realm that could be related with *the integral unity of the soul* that underlies the practical wisdom of Socrates?

Is there any relation between the ethical improvement of the soul and the possible genetic and neuronal improvement that present and future techno-sciences offer? What transcendence, both ethical and human in general, can this contribute?

In spite of the historical and cultural distances of the two cognitive approaches to the ethical "interior" of human nature, one in the form of natural science, the other as practical wisdom, and also the epistemological, methodological and existential

differences of the two of them, the correlation is evident between the ethical brain of neurobiology and the ethical soul of Socrates—or between nature and rule, as pondered by Changeux and Ricoeur.[5] Here, I would like to point out some basic aspects of such a correlation, and what I consider to be the main difference.

Nurtured by the *evolutionary* and *genomic* conception of universal life, and supported by the extraordinary power of new technologies, current neurosciences have yielded new insights into the human brain, which seem to be closer to Socrates's one and integral soul than to all the dualistic representations (dualism between soul and body, reason and passion, thought and emotions, intelligence and instincts, practical reason and disposition, etc.) that have prevailed in Western philosophy from Plato to the present, even though this doesn't imply that we should end up in monism or reductionism.

Today we know that the human brain, as an outcome of biological evolution, keeps many structures and cerebral functions from previous evolutionary stages that we share with other animals (fish, reptiles, inferior and superior mammals). We also know that in the most recent stages of evolution the cerebral cortex developed in the two hemispheres of the brain, each one performing different yet complementary tasks. Along its countless folds, it comprises a large part of the encephalic mass, and it is the "seat" of the superior functions of the mind, which are characteristic of the human brain. In addition, we know that such regions, structures, and neuronal functions are interconnected. Thus, the cerebral universe constitutes an indivisible and unitary reality, and the rational system of the human brain is intrinsically integrated into the most basic and archaic emotions and vital instincts.[6]

In fact, the most recent developments in neuroscience show that the biological roots of *morality* are present in the human brain. This implies that morality has its own origin in evolution, and not in a hypothetical order that transcends the earthly life. Consequently, the scientific evidence brought by neurobiology makes clear the physical and mental elements that configure the ethical nature of man. They would include the *self* as an *axis* of individuality and authenticity, as well as a determinant factor in self-consciousness, choice and action. In the second place there is language, basis of interhuman communication, supported by the discovery of the so-called "mirror neurons," on which the ethically decisive phenomenon of "empathy" seems to depend. Finally, it also evidences the plasticity or malleability of such neuronal nature, its unfinished and open condition, capable of self-transformation or *autopóiesis*, which philosophically corresponds to its historicity and ethicality.

In this sense, the *biological nature of morality* would shed new light and confirm the reading of the Socratic soul as a one and whole reality in its full complexity and vitality. But, reciprocally, the philosophical perspective of practical wisdom could and should expand and bring light to the neurobiological knowledge of so-called neuroethics.

However, beyond any possible and fruitful correlation, I consider it necessary to mention the categorical difference between the practical level of ethical wisdom in general, and that of the current techno-sciences. It is a fact that today, life sciences have an extraordinary practical scope and application, as well as a new and powerful

capacity to change nature, with largely unpredictable and potentially life-threatening consequences. In the specific case of neuroscience, such power implies the possibility to intervene and improve substantially the cerebral functions, particularly those regarding the character and behavior of human beings, in order to support—it is said—a physically, psychologically, and ethically healthier and happier life. This is the reason for the use of all kinds of drugs, direct and indirect interventions, and every sort of genetic and neuronal manipulation on the life of the brain.

It is at this point that we may ask: what does "neuro-technological" improvement have to do with the Socratic "becoming better every day" by means of *phrónesis*? What does it have to do with the "care of the soul" that a *free soul* could take on itself without external intervention, through self-knowledge, self-parturition, and the autarchy of virtue? Is ethical wisdom to be replaced by the genetic or neurological techno-science?

All these questions remain open to discussion, as they involve the human and ethical destiny of man. But it is precisely the philosophical (Socratic) perspective of practical wisdom that can offer the fundamental basis and criteria for the theoretical and practical knowledge of the "ethical brain."

In any case, the aim of the philosophical perspective is to generate consciousness about the irreducibility of ethical and biological issues, about the threat that such confusion may represent for ethics, and for the human being. Not only confusion among causes and conditions, but also between the ethical praxis of self-improvement, and the potential of the genetic improvement of the brain offered by current and future "bio-techno-sciences."

It is finally at this point, where the key of the Socratic teaching regains significance. Virtue *cannot be taught* and even less artificially or physically induced from the outside. Virtue *has to be born* as a personal and free act of the human being.

NOTES

1. V. De Magalhães-Vilhena, *Le problème de Socrate. Le Socrate historique et le Socrate de Platon* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952).

2. Henry George Lidell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, [1925] 1996).

3. See, E. Nicol, *La idea del hombre* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977).

4. A. Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton, Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1998).

5. J. P. Changeaux, and P. Ricœur, *Ce qui nous fait penser. La nature et la règle* (Paris, Editions Odile Jacob, 1998).

6. A. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994) and A. Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (New York: Harcourt, 2003).

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