

Dr. Marko Uršič, University of Ljubljana

Socrates' Logos, Daemon, Ethos

Socrates couldn't convince the judges of his innocence with words of reason, with *logos*, yet paradoxically, it is this historically attested failure of the philosopher's apology that has become one of the pinnacles of the history of the mind. In the preserved works about Socrates, which were written by his best disciple Plato (Socrates himself having written none), it is often difficult to discern the thoughts of the teacher from those of the disciple, *The Apology* being perhaps the most authentic work about Socrates. In spite of this it is certain that the first philosopher who consciously grew "love of wisdom", which is the literal meaning of the expression *philosophy*, truly relied upon words of reason, with the help of which he tirelessly fought, until his very last hour, against human stupidity, blind passions, pride, prejudices, despondency, and, nevertheless, against "sophisms", intellectual clichés, about which some of his contemporaries were so boastful.

Socrates' famous motto *I only know that I know nothing*, in which the wise man's modesty and bitter irony are resumed, is the cornerstone of critical philosophical thinking, that learned ignorance that renounces absolute knowledge but not cognition itself because its last word is not general scepticism (even though this is the way in which some understood Socrates). Socratic ignorance is conscious that the ultimate truth of the world – if it even exists – transcends very much our human cognition. Despite all, Socrates as well as ourselves, his distant successors, are on our way to truth still most reliably lead by *logos*, that is word, thought, reason, or mind, although it may be that, when it seems to us that we have climbed the ladder of knowledge almost to its top, it turns out that the utmost range of the *logos* is its very self-denial, the "mystical" point of its breaking, transcending, to paradox.

We often hear of Socrates as the founder of ancient "enlightenment", the herald of reason and mind, the messenger of *logos*, which gradually asserted itself within classical Greek thought in opposition to *mythos*. This overall conclusion, of course, generally holds true: in those times "the light of reason" was undoubtedly forming out of the archaic "darkness", of the imprisonment of human thought in nature and myths. On the other hand what has just been said is also a simplification that screens our view of Socrates as a whole. We should not forget that the philosopher's *logos* stems out of the "daemon" (*daimonion*), the inner voice that the thinker follows and that asks it for the right path when he thinks he could go astray. The daemon is neither something reasoning nor something "bright" although it leads the wise to ethically correct judgements and decisions. The daemon of Socrates comes out of the depth of the soul, of which already the mysterious Heraclitus said: "The confines of the soul, while walking, you will not find even if you travel all the paths; such a deep *logos* it has." Socrates knew about this depth of *logos*, this abyss of primordial fire, which thought encounters in the soul – and it is in this very awareness that his spiritual greatness lies: To know *this* and at the same time to be "enlightened"!

Plato retained from his teacher the wise balance between *logos* and *mythos*, which is characteristic of the great and evergreen Greek thought. In contemporary interpretations of Socrates' and/or Plato's philosophy this balance is too often forgotten, mainly under the influence of Nietzsche, who saw in Socrates' ethical

enlightenment and in Plato's epopee of mind the beginning of the decadence of Western thinking, the breaking off from the "genuine" Dionysian as the highest and purest expression of the power to will. In *The Birth of the Tragedy* Nietzsche says that the "newly born daemon called Socrates" beat Dionysus as well as Apollo. He sees Socrates above all as a herald of reason, as the originator of the enlightenment, which with its dialectics is supposed to be the main culprit for the deepening nihilism. Heidegger retains Nietzsche's understanding of Socrates and through him also his understanding of a great part of contemporary philosophy. But in such a view on the wise Athenian, the first "lover of wisdom", many a thing remain unnoticed and even distorted, this having far-reaching consequences for the understanding of our history of the mind and, through it, also of the present. In contemporary philosophical debates it is not uncommon, it seems, not only to have Socrates put in the dock, as it was the case in the Athenian trial, but also to have reason itself charged together with him, that is rational thinking, in which also modern enlightenment and scientific thinking are founded, the latter having its roots already in the ancient *logos*. This is, in my opinion, a grave mistake: those who see in reason and science the deviation of thought from some presumed original pre-Socratic "hiddenness of being", inevitably call for a return into a "pre-rational" state of mind, but such a return would be catastrophic for our complex and vulnerable civilisation. The paths do not lead back but ahead – always, of course, with a vigilant, attentive, and loving look backwards, also toward the old wise Socrates.

The *ethos* is undoubtedly in the centre of Socrates' learned ignorance. But how can the ethos be based upon ignorance, although a learned one? Is this possible at all? This question is akin to some other more frequently expressed one: How is human ethos possible without God? Is it not that without God everything is permitted, everything and at the same time nothing? As we know, this fateful and immensely complex question haunted Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Sartre... But how would have Socrates answered it? Had this question even been posed in his times? It had, because it was Socrates who, while confronting sophistic relativism, was the first to become clearly aware of the problem of founding ethical thinking and behaviour. In this he was lead by his daemon, that inner voice, that advised him, despite his having been falsely charged, not a runaway but a brave confrontation with death. From a today's point of view the Socratic daemon is, despite being of great importance to Socrates himself, seen mainly as some kind of metaphor, which but tells us something essential: *ethos* cannot be found anywhere else than in the self. One cannot support one's decision for good with any faith in the other world, one cannot find it in the theological-metaphysical economy of (otherworldly?) reward and punishment, even though one leaves open, as does Socrates, the possibility of soul's immortality.

Remaining on this side of the curtain, man recognises the laws – in Socrates' drama they appear even in person, as the Laws – in which common good is founded. Socrates teaches us that those laws have to be pursued at any cost. But even the highest laws would be helpless for the affirmation of the human *ethos* if our inner daemon didn't consciously choose to follow them. From the today's point of view, almost two and a half millenniums after Socrates, the question of universal and unconditional validity of laws (ontological, cosmological, ethical) discloses itself to us as too complex to solve on the theoretical level. Despite this, also in the contemporary human there remains some steadfast support though more intuitively reliable than rationally provable: The highest law, "the ultimate truth" (not in a

temporary but in an existential sense) is that which is – Good. Without this basic philosophical faith, which Socrates and Plato and many great minds after them revealed to us, we would be completely lost in the fathomlessness of the world. Not only on the brink of death, where we encounter Socrates in a human drama, but also in the middle of life: every moment, every hour, every day. Beyond that what is called “modern nihilism” still remains the immovable *ethos* of Socrates.