

[pp. 116-124]

<https://dx.doi.org/10.12795/Fedro/2023.i23.07>

## **SOCRATES' METHOD OF 'NOT WRITING'** **EL MÉTODO DE SÓCRATES DE "NO ESCRIBIR"**

**Dushyant Kumar**

**Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi**

### **ABSTRACT:**

In this paper, I intend to propound that Socrates' choice of abstaining himself from writing not only leads to the "Socratic Problem" but also renders him vulnerable to misappropriations; a vulnerability he attributes to writing while substantiating his downright dismissal of it. The paper has been divided into three sections. In section one; effort is to contemplate "The Socratic Problem" which has been baffling scholars across centuries. Whether, for example, in Plato's works, is it Plato's or the historical Socrates' views? Absence of Socrates' own work has put his historical existence in a blurry picture and his character under shadows of doubts. In section two, there is an attempt to outline the debate between Phonocentrism and Oral tradition. Socrates is seen projecting phonocentric viewpoints in Plato's Phaedrus, when he censures writing by invoking an Egyptian myth. In the last section, I have put forth a surmise that Plato's Socrates must be an apotheosized and misappropriated version of the historical Socrates. And I question, if it can be taken as an insinuation that we need to consider possibility of misappropriation every time we read history without historicity.

Keywords: The Socratic Problem. Phonocentrism. Misappropriations.

## RESUMEN:

En este artículo, pretendo proponer que la elección de Sócrates de abstenerse de escribir no sólo conduce al “problema socrático”, sino que también lo vuelve vulnerable a apropiaciones indebidas: una vulnerabilidad que se atribuye a la escritura al tiempo que fundamenta su total rechazo hacia ella. El documento se ha dividido en tres secciones. En la sección uno nuestro esfuerzo es contemplar “El problema socrático” que ha desconcertado a los estudiosos a lo largo de los siglos. ¿Se trata, por ejemplo, de las obras de Platón, de las opiniones de Platón o de las del Sócrates histórico? La ausencia de la obra del propio Sócrates ha puesto su existencia histórica en un panorama borroso y su carácter bajo dudas. En la segunda sección se intenta esbozar el debate entre fonocentrismo y tradición oral. Se ve a Sócrates proyectando puntos de vista fonocéntricos en el Fedro de Platón, cuando censura la escritura invocando un mito egipcio. En la última sección, he planteado la conjetura de que el Sócrates de Platón debe ser una versión apoteósica y malversada del Sócrates histórico. Y me pregunto si esto puede tomarse como una insinuación de que debemos considerar la posibilidad de apropiación indebida cada vez que leemos historia sin historicidad.

Palabras Clave: El problema socrático. Fonocentrismo. Apropiaciones indebidas.

## (I)

In Circa 440 BC, Chaerephon, one of Socrates' close friends asked the Oracle of Delphi if there was a living man wiser than Socrates in Athens. The answer was no. In response to this, Socrates, the wisest among men, went on an expedition to prove the prophecy wrong by inquiring about knowledge. In the end, he realised that the Oracle pronounced him to be the wisest as he was the only man to admit that he knew nothing. This man, as we know through Plato's Apology, was put to trial and given a death sentence for blasphemy and impertinence towards the institutional beliefs of Athens by the second democratic regime in 399 BC. Although Socrates died at an advanced age of 71, he never wrote anything. His ideas, views and philosophy, as we know today, have been reconstructed through what other philosophers have written about him. Professor Jenny Bryan has argued that whatever we think we know about Socrates is taken from what other people have said about him. These people include his students, his friends and his foes as Socrates exercised considerable influence in the intellectual aristocratic circles of Athens. However, the most distinguished works come from three Philosophers besides Aristotle, whose observations add much to the corpus. These philosophers are Aristophanes, Plato and Xenophon. Aristophanes wrote Clouds, a comedy, while Socrates was alive. He painted him as a mocked figure with an inclination towards natural philosophy and presented him as a Sophist who charged fees for education and used rhetorical trickery (Bryan, 2013). This Socrates was

out rightly refuted by Xenophon and Plato. Xenophon's Socrates was an ethical teacher and moral philosopher whose chief concern was to make men familiar with morality and make them good. His Socrates was barely concerned with metaphysical and logical realms of philosophy (Copelston, 1993). Plato's Socrates by far is the most controversial figure as he has been painted as a paradigmatic philosopher who lived and died by his philosophy. Someone who used dialectics or Elenchus for his inquiry and gave the doctrine of Forms or Ideas. There are multiple explanations for the diverse versions of Socrates we find in the corpus. The most amiable one being that each philosopher was giving his own interpretation of Socrates and their account therefore should not be taken by words but by their core philosophy. However, the dilemma of finding the real Socrates behind the innumerable versions drawn in the text has been a persistent issue (Dorion, 2011).

Plato had known Socrates from the earliest years of his childhood and studied under him for eight years. He was 28 years old when Socrates was put to death after a trial in which he was present. After his teacher's death, he wrote tirelessly to defend him against the hostility and antagonistic accounts. In these accounts he made Socrates the protagonist and made him express himself through dialogues with certain interlocutors. The attempt was to reach an agreeable definition of certain virtues, though it was never achieved. This method is called the Socratic method or the Elenchus. Plato has used this method extensively in his works which has given way to various controversies. It is argued that although Plato was exclusively documenting Socratic philosophy in his early works he uses him as his spokesman in his later works, this has been called the 'Socratic Problem'. Therefore, it is possible to separate genuinely Socratic elements in his works from those that are his own creation (Kahn, 1996 & Rowe, 2007). Although it's a matter of debate, the standard works of Plato that are considered Socratic are Charmides, Crito, Euthyphro, Hippias Minor, Ion and Laches, in addition to Apologia, which has been given a special status as it is a posthumous defence of Socrates trial, as they are characterised by Elenchus (Woolf, 2013). Philosophers have argued both in favour of and against Plato when it comes to the 'Socratic Problem' although the majority, who has an interest in 'Socratic Philosophy', seems to consider Plato's Socrates as historically accurate. However, there are contradictions in Plato's Socrates within his own corpus itself which must not be overlooked. For instance, when he explicitly highlights the issue of historicity in his works. It has been argued that when Plato does this he's trying to put his own words in Socrates mouth (Copplestone, 1993).

Any account of Socrates must necessarily begin with the admission that there is, and always will be, a "problem of Socrates" (Hackforth, 1933). Socrates being one of the most influential figures in western intellectual tradition is unknown to us as a historical individual behind his accounts. Because he wrote nothing, we come to know him through four major sources, i.e. Aristophanes' Clouds, Plato and Xenophon's extensive writings, and Aristotle. William J. Prior (2006) while explaining the "Socratic Problem" outlines the limitations of our knowledge that unfortunately, does not extend to what doctrines, if any, Socrates may have professed. Some-

thing contemporary philosophical scholars want to know the most. The Socratic Problem arises in part from the fact that none of our sources has impeccable credentials as a biographer. Though *Clouds* gives us some serious information about Socrates, it loses its legitimacy on the grounds that it is a comedy, which cannot be serious enough to be a biography. Xenophon has been criticized for making Socrates bland and uncontroversial, and having interests that can only have been Xenophon's own, such as military science and estate management. Not only has his length and closeness of association with Socrates been questioned but also his interest in Socrates' philosophy. Plato abundantly deals with Socrates' philosophy and answers his questions. This raises the question: where, in his work does Plato present Socrates' views, and where does he present his own? The hope to solve this question by the "Tripartite division" (early, middle, and late) of Plato's work has been criticized; both membership of respective groups and the order of the dialogues (Kahn, 2002). Even if we accept the tripartite grouping of the dialogues, however, and the general developmental picture that goes with them, it seems there is no decisive reason to believe that the dialogues of the early group represent the views of the historical Socrates rather than an early stage of Plato's own philosophical thought. Last among our sources is Aristotle. Objectivity of his historical account of Socrates has been questioned due to his tendency to see earlier thinkers as the forerunners of his own views. Some critics of Aristotle as a source for Socrates have questioned whether there is anything in his account that is not traceable to Plato's dialogues (Burnet, 1912).

R. Hackforth (1933), commenting on the sources, claims that their writings are not reports in any literal sense, but reconstructions or interpretations coloured, to a greater or lesser degree, by the writer's own interests and prejudices, and inevitably selective in their treatment of a complex personality. William J. Prior (2006) argues that "despite their differences of emphasis, our sources agree about several aspects of Socrates. Where they concur, we have the best historical evidence about Socrates that we are likely to have. If we reject this evidence, we shall have nothing on which to base our account of the historical Socrates." He further argues that similar information found in different sources has formed the basis of our historical understanding of Socrates, which can be taken as certain as anything about an historical figure but uncertainty and the blurry images are of his Character.

## (II)

In this section, I shall breeze through the debate between "Writing" and "Phonocentrism" in the western philosophical tradition. I might not be able to touch all corners of this debate spread almost throughout the known history. But I shall try to throw light on "Phonocentrism" evident not only in Socrates (by that I mean Plato) but also in civilization in the closest proximity of Plato's time- The Celts. On the other side, I will talk of Jacques Derrida's critique of Phonocentrism, where he not only proves Rousseau's claim of writing's relation to power and

control wrong, but also establishes, with help from Anne Ross, that writing posed threat to the supremacy of the intellectual class in the oral traditions.

Socrates is against writing. This is probably the main reason why he refrained from doing the same. His disbelief in the tradition of writing not only gave rise to the “Socratic Problem” but also rendered him vulnerable to the same problems he warns us against in the case of writing; misinterpretations and misappropriations. In Plato’s *Phaedrus* (1901), he recounts the myth of Thoth and Thamus in order to illustrate his philosophical misgivings about writing. He quotes Thamus disapproving Thoth’s invention of writing by saying that,

“[Writing]... will create forgetfulness in the learner’s souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing...” (Plato, 370BCE/1901, p. 132.)

Further in the conversation, Socrates attributes writing to preserving a solemn silence like that of in paintings. He warns that written material is distributed equally among those who can understand the subject and those who cannot. Writing is open to unauthorized interpretation and appropriation and therefore cannot serve as a trustworthy medium of transfer of knowledge. In *Phaedrus*, Socrates sets the virtues of speech over/ against the potential vices of writing. Socrates argues that a good public speaker is not a plausible bluffer or sophist but the one who has knowledge: the one who knows his subject, knows his definitions and species of being, and knows the mind and ethos of his audience. Towards the end of the dialogue, having concluded against the sophists that there is ‘a genuine art of speaking’, he raises the question of ‘the propriety and impropriety of writing’, and very quickly decides that the ideal means for the communication of truth is ‘the living and animate speech of a man of knowledge, of which written speech might fairly be called a kind of shadow’ (Duddy,1996).

Tom Duddy (1996) suspects and tries to expose links between social hierarchy and orality. He claims existence of a tell-tale affinity between the ancient Celtic resistance to writing and the phonocentrism of Plato. It is particularly interesting about the early Celts, he points out, that their educated classes ‘knew’ writing but remained committed to oral cultural practices. It is arguable that the learned classes among the Celts - the druids, jilid (or poet-seers), and bards - were committed to orality not because they belonged to a simple, ‘uncivilized’, egalitarian community which was threatened by writing but because, on the contrary, their privileged and powerful positions within an aristocratic social structure were threatened by writing.

Derrida has argued that the concepts of voice and speech have been given a questionable priority in traditional western conceptions of language. Whenever philosophers, anthropologists, or linguists have discussed the nature of signification, meaning, and communication they have ten-

ded to define them in terms of vocal utterance or face-to-face conversation, treating the spoken word as the natural and most effective means of expression or communication, while regarding the written word as a distancing, alienating, corruptible contrivance. Speech is privileged in the phonocentric tradition because it is supposed to consist in the immediate communication or conveyance of meanings by a speaker and the immediate reception or 'grasping' of those meanings by a listener. In speech, one appears to make oneself directly present to another. ( Duddy, 1996)

Rousseau sees speech as natural, as the medium of co-operative, organic, communal life, whereas writing is seen as contributing to the collapse of community. Writing, therefore, is the medium of 'civilization,' facilitating the emergence of an artificial society in which institutions and structures mediate, complicate, and distort the relations between people. In the context of such a complicated and institutionalized society, writing comes into its own, becoming the element and medium of separation and hierarchy. It makes possible rationalization and social control, and becomes the instrument of rulers, lawmakers, priests, and anyone else in a position to exercise power (Duddy, 1996).

Derrida's response to the phonocentric current in Western thinking is to question the dichotomy which it purports to set up between the putative 'immediacy' of speech and the putative 'mediacy' of writing. In deconstructively questioning this tradition he does not propose simply to stand it on its head, asserting that writing is wholly innocent of the charges brought against it. Rather, he sets out to show that the most useful account that can be given of the characteristic features of language is at the same time an account of the characteristic features of writing. Indeed, writing can be understood in a generously extended, non-ethnocentric, pluri-dimensional sense which effectively comprises or 'comprehends' language; and therefore that the superiority of speech over writing, or of oral cultures over literate ones - or, for that matter, of literate cultures over oral ones - are theses that cannot be established ( Duddy, 1996)

In the Celtic society, druids, along with the Jilid and bards, had a professional commitment to orality, resulting in a principled resistance to writing. This resistance raises a question. The answers suggested by Anne Ross are interesting in the light of Derrida's characterization of phonocentrism. She suggests (i) that the Celts regarded their lore or 'knowledge' in a semi-sacred light; (ii) that they were therefore unwilling to make such secret and sacred lore available to uninitiated outsiders who might use it ignorantly and blasphemously; and (iii) that the cultivation of an oral memory - which was so central to the culture and so definitive of their own powerful positions within that culture - would be threatened by the transcription of the lore.

The motives attributed to the learned classes for their opposition to transcription are remarkably similar to those which Thamus gave to Thoth for refusing to approve the invention of writing. It brings us to an inference that the intellectual learned classes in Oral traditions which resisted writing had a motive to keep power of knowledge under their control. Transmission and preser-

vation of culture, identity, rituals and tradition which controls society lie in memorization of the intellectual knowledge. The Roman Catholic Church's control over Bible in Latin language and Brahmins' control over Brahmanical religion of the Indian subcontinent coded in Sanskrit language are examples from other parts of the world where learned intellectual classes preserved knowledge by preventing written transmission to all sections of society. And this is the tradition which faced challenges during Christian Reformation when mass printing of the Bible, especially in local languages, posed serious damages to the Church rule.

If not anything else, I am convinced of the view that reflection of phonocentrism and downright dismissal of writing by Socrates in *Phaedrus*(1901), under the umbrella of his superfluous spiritual treatise of soulful vs. soulless mediums (spoken vs. written) of knowledge transfer, is inutile and counterproductive; in the sense that his such views facilitated misappropriation of his character in absence of his original works. And not only this, dismissal of writing itself is non-progressive for society, especially future generations.

### (III)

From section (I) we extrapolate the ambiguity faced when Socrates' historicity is questioned. Uncertainty rises on probing if Plato's Socrates was the historical Socrates. The most striking incongruity between what Socrates says and what Plato does occurs when Socrates condemns writing in a work that Plato has written (Cohn, 2001). Charles S. Griswold (1986), describes it as follows: "a simple act of reflection reveals a puzzling dimension in the last section of the *Phaedrus*. Socrates' criticisms of writing are themselves written. . . . Must not Plato either reject the criticisms or weigh them differently than Socrates does? ... [Socrates'] criticism of writing is itself written and so itself recanted- by Plato." This leaves one bewildered trying to decode the mysterious tangles between Plato and his protagonist. Viewing this through a simpler lens, if Plato were speaking his views through Socrates, obviously by playing with his character, then why did he contradict himself?

Dorrit Cohn (2001) suggests a possibility to understand Socrates' polemic against writing here, and his corollary advocacy of oral discourse, as the representation of a historically significant moment: an aging man launching a defensive move against literacy- The new form of communication increasingly fashionable with the younger men of Socrates' time. The relationship of Plato to his protagonist would then correspond, in this respect, to the historically realistic image of a generational conflict, in which Plato takes his place as a pivotal figure in the transition from an oral to a literate culture.

Now let's forage for some arguments which might throw more light on the abstruse relationship of Plato and his protagonist, and inspect for apotheosization and misappropriation. When trying to unravel this mystery whether Plato's Socrates was an apotheosized version or not, we need to look at the claims that propose the same. One of such threads is comparison of Jesus and Socrates. Jesus made enemies by criticizing the hypocrisy and graft of his contemporary

preachers. Socrates made enemies because he went about puncturing the bubble of self-conceited knowledge with which men were inflated. Like Jesus he made men question certain handed-down traditions (Bostick, 1916). If we do not look at the very method of capital punishment, Jesus' and Socrates' deaths are identical in the sense that they occur in almost similar plot.

Socrates has been depicted as the wisest of all men in Athens. Within Plato's writings themselves Socrates is given status beyond the human. Socrates represents the ideals of bravery, justice, temperance: but supremely wisdom, (ambiguous phrase; supremely wise maybe; 'but'?) for it is through reasoned argument and self-critical awareness that he is able to achieve his state of mind. In Plato's developed philosophical vision, true archetypes of the virtues are to be found not in this world but in his World of Forms: nevertheless Socrates seems to come as close as is possible to an exemplification of those virtues in a single man (Gooch, 1985). It can be very well argued that the Socrates depicted by Plato is more than a human. I believe that Plato's Socrates is apotheosized version of the historical Socrates as he seems to be closest to an ideal man.

Paul W. Gooch (1985) suggests that Plato, in constructing and preserving his Socrates, found himself involved in a difficult problem. He wanted to give us a striking character, utterly dedicated to philosophy as religious duty - but also to philosophy as a negative enterprise, destructive of unthinking opinion. Socrates, as Plato started with him, claimed no positive knowledge. He also could claim no successes in his method: no one with whom he worked was able to produce knowledge. The result was anger and hostility, leading to Socrates' death. Plato, however, soon wanted to put his Socrates to more productive use in his dialogues. In the very act of writing down conversations, Plato opened up the possibility for an interpretation of Socratic argument as yielding more than negative content. And as his philosophic vision expanded, Plato developed a Socrates who allows many positive doctrines to emerge in the course of discussion. At the same time, Plato attempts to be true if not to the content then at least to the form of the early Socrates' profession of ignorance. Hence the difficult problem: Plato is forced to create a Socrates who becomes insincerely ironical. He keeps saying that he does not know, but Plato's very writing pushes us to suspect that his Socrates does know whatever it is that Plato is using him to teach us. Karl Popper (1945) also accuses Plato of betraying and misappropriating Socrates.

Apotheosized and misappropriated, it is not obscure that Socrates has been distorted. And all this is the result of Socrates' Method of 'Not Writing'. He had his own reasons to not write but as I have elaborated in section (II), the reasons to write, weigh more. No wonder historically celebrated personalities are misappropriated (for drawing legitimacy etc.), but in case of characters without historicity, especially when they are apotheosized, we need to be heedful while learning about them.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Bryan, J. (2013). Socrates: Sources and Interpretations. In J. Warren, & F. Sheffield (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Ancient Philosophy*. Routledge.
- Bostick, W. F. (1916). Jesus and Socrates. *The Biblical World*, 47(4), 248–252.
- Cohn, D. (2001). Does Socrates Speak for Plato? Reflections on an Open Question. *New Literary History*, 32(3), 485–500.
- Copleston, F. (1993.). *A History of Philosophy*, 1(?), 96-115. Image Books.
- Dorion, L. (2011). The Rise and Fall of Socratic Problem. In D. Morisson (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*. Cambridge University Press.
- Duddy, T. (1996). Derrida and the Druids: Writing, Lore, and Power in Early Celtic Society. *Religion & Literature*, 28(2/3).
- Gooch, P. W. (1985). Socrates: Devious or Divine? *Greece & Rome*, 32(1), 32-41.
- Griswold, C.S. (1986). Self-knowledge and the of the soul in Plato's Phaedrus, 217–218.
- Hackforth, R. (1933). Great Thinkers. (I) Socrates. *Philosophy*, 8(31), 259–272.
- Prior, W. J. (2006). The Socratic Problem. In H. Benson (Ed.), *A Blackwell Companion to Plato*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Woolf, R. (2013). Plato on Philosophical Method: Enquiry and Definition. In J. Warren, & F. Sheffield (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Ancient Philosophy*. Routledge.