

Wolfgang Deppert

At the Socrates Year 2002

**Of the Origin of Religious Freedom
or
How to Learn from Socrates to Orient Oneself**

(English version of a lecture held at the 2002 IARF Congress in Budapest/Hungary (28.7. - 2.8.02) at Friday, 2.8.02,
translated by Manfred Paul, Germany)

(1)

Religion means initially to attribute the acts of one's own to a carrying framework of sense. And religiousness is one's capability to follow an already existing framework of sense or to acquire it by one's own efforts. We may therefore distinguish between a religious 'steerage from outside' and a religious 'steerage from within'. The person of the former type is convinced to be too imperfect oneself to organize one's life self-responsibly. For that reason it seeks an authority to tell it how to live a meaningful life.

Humans guided religiously from outside follow an authoritative conduct of life. They need religious freedom only then, when there exist competing authoritarian religious systems so that they may freely decide to which authoritarian religious 'sense system' they wish to subordinate themselves. – Humans guided religiously from within, however, are much more dependent on religious freedom, as they are not willing to believe anything which contradicts their own convictions. They claim to live their lives in their individual way and, by that, they are responsible before themselves for what they do and what they do not do. Their conduct of life must be described, therefore, as a self-responsible one.

We have to proceed from the fact that in the mythical age people did not reflect upon the question

for the meaning of life, because they were embedded into a world still completely determined by gods and goddesses. Only with the decay of the myth which goes along with the development of becoming conscious of one's individuality, man is faced with the question of how to lead a life meaningfully. Socrates who in this year died exactly 2400 years ago, was, to our knowledge, the first person to perfect himself in a self-responsible conduct of life.

(2)

The history of thought of the situation at the times of Socrates was very similar to that one in the world of ours. During his time people were losing, to a great extent, their tie with the polytheistic, mythical realm of the gods, and today vast numbers of people are losing their faith in the monotheistic confessions. Then and today an increasing need for orientation prevailed. Although Socrates had demonstrated, by his example to steer one's life by thinking, the developing of a safe system of 'steerage from within', it was notably his follower Plato who ensured the clear supremacy of the authoritarian sense system of the 'steerage from outside' in Graeco-Roman times. Christianity and the Islamic world could become established on this philosophical basis and could essentially determine the Middle Ages up to the European modern times. Today, these authoritarian systems of orientation have been losing their persuasive power considerably. Therefore it is of quite particular interest to learn how Socrates was developing and was living his religiousness.

What do we know about the historical Socrates' life and his way of thinking? As has been proved, he drank, by reason of a death sentence, a cup of lethal poison, although he would have been able to flee. How self-assured and confidently a man must have lived his life, if he is prepared – in full possession of his mental and physical strength – to stand up with his own death for his way to live! What a kind of life was it which has made Socrates so admirable and how well-grounded was it?

There is nothing but a few written documents about the historical Socrates. He himself has left nothing in writing. Since for him everything was a matter of a conscious life here and now. Most of his many followers, however, produced scripts on their mentor Socrates. Regrettably

most of the Graeco-Roman witnesses were, by the implacable Christianization, systematically destroyed. As late as in the middle of the third century (Christian era) the wealth of the ancient sources was accessible to the author Diogenes Laertius, when he wrote down, in the year about 230, his work “Biographies and Opinions of Famous Philosophers”. From him we learn (II 20) that Socrates was said to be the first to speak of principles of life. In addition to him we possess, today, notably in the scripts of the two Socrates followers Xenophon and Plato, reports on the life and work of their mentor. The idea of Socrates’ life principles as delineated by Plato, in a wilful way, is almost contrary to the idea portrayed by Xenophon. Initially the Socrates view of Xenophon was acknowledged as the authentic one, as the reputation of an objective observer was hurrying ahead of the historiographer Xenophon. During the longest period of the past Socrates interpretations, however, Plato’s version was taken seriously and that of Xenophon was rejected. Today, as it appears to have become clear why Plato’s version is so controversial to that one of Xenophon, we have to proceed from the assumption that the historical Socrates was described in the more authentic way by Xenophon. All the more so since the latter quotes many scripts of eyewitnesses so that, by doing so, possible one-sided overdrawings of single interpreters by Xenophon were smoothed down, above all, in his reminiscences, the so-called ‘Memorabilien’.

(3)

According to Xenophon, Socrates’ most important principle of life seems to have been the imperative (interpreted by himself): “Know thyself!”, which is said to originate from the seven wise men and was recorded as an epigraph at the Delphian Apollo Temple. For Socrates, however, this principle is derived from the still more fundamental insight that words obtain their meaning, and statements their validity, only from a very certain reference, and it is essential to make this reference. This may be commented on a conversation between Socrates and Aristipp, passed on to posterity by Xenophon; it arises from the question to Socrates “whether he knows anything that is good.”

After that responded

Socrates: “Do you ask me, let’s say, whether I know what is good for fever?”

Aristipp: “No.”

Socrates: “But what is good for eye disease?”

Aristipp: "Not at all."

Socrates: "Perhaps what is good for hunger?"

Aristipp: "No."

Socrates: "Truly, I cannot answer your question. I don't know any good that is no good for anything, and I also don't want to know it."

Certainly, this overdrawn phraseology originates from Xenophon, and it is directed against Plato's idea of the good as such or the good per se. We have every reason for supposing that the various hypostases of (linguistic) predicates, as undertaken by Plato as arguments for his theory of ideas, was refused by Socrates; because we know from Antisthenes, to which Diogenes Laertius is testimony, that Plato's inclination to hypostatize was regarded as the consequence of his often recorded haughtiness. Antisthenes, however, has the reputation of being the Socrates follower who most loyally preserved and exerted the Socratic way of life and who passed it on to his Cynic School, so that it could be carried on until to the times of the Stoic School.

'What is good' must, for the historic Socrates, always be related to the victory over a problematic situation. Without any reference, for Socrates, there exists nothing good. In those examples, indicated here by Socrates, the meaning of the word 'good' is not determined until it stands for a usefulness by which given problems of survival can be surmounted. With our terms of today we say: Socrates was a relativist, since, for him, there are no meanings for words which exist for themselves.

But how can a relativist give rise to certainty in his thinking? Because he can not be grounded, after all, on any absolute certainty (which is provided only for those who can believe in an absolute divine authority), can he? This is the vital religious question which is as relevant today as it must have been for Socrates at his time. To this very deepest quest for the religious substantiating I should like to quote Antisthenes again, who, according to Diogenes Laertius' witness, is supposed to have said about the Socratic philosophy the following:

"The question which benefit philosophy had caused him, he answered: The mental power to communicate with myself."

Behind it, evidently, there is the Socratic awareness that the single source for a sure thinking and

– governed by it – for a meaningful conduct of life can be found in one’s innermost thoughts and feelings. This conviction grows from the pantheistic awareness which, originating from the Miletian thought [from the ancient city Miletos], interspersed and upheld the whole pre-Socratic philosophy and which leads, in Socrates, to a religiously supported consciousness that the very particular reference point, by which human actions can be conferred a meaning, represents the single human individual. With this consciousness arises the concept of the uniqueness of the human being and the must of the mutual tolerance. Through the insight only, to strain oneself the tolerance against other religious convictions, religious freedom becomes a reality.

(4)

Thus, the source of the wish for religious freedom lies in the pantheistic religiousness which, in Socrates, led to the awareness of being self-responsible for one’s conduct of life. Being self-responsible religiously includes that the responsibility for the standards (or measures) of one’s own decision cannot be transferred to another person and not at all to an external authority or expert; that is why from pantheism follows a religious foundation for the Socratic relativism, as described above, which may be understood as a religious ‘steerage from within’. This context for grounds and reasons can have been on hand for Socrates only intuitively, indeed; for there was available in his thinking, really, no explicit term for religion.

If a person wants to lend meaning to his thoughts and actions, by reason of a possibly only intuitively existing conviction of his religious self-responsibility, then it can do that only, if it knows itself. “Know thyself!” is for Socrates the call towards himself which is the necessary result as the consequence of his relativism. To philosophize means, for Socrates, to reflect thoroughly in order to find the foundation of all foundations in himself.

Socrates went his way of self-knowledge, and no one could divert him from following this way until to his death. The Stoic Epiktet, therefore, sees in Socrates the wise man who achieved the goal described by Stoicism. Epiktet underlines this conviction by quoting, at the very end of his “Small Handbook of Moral”, Socrates’ words which he is said to have spoken, according to the Stoic tradition, about his relation to his prosecutors:

“Meletos and Anytos can kill me, but they cannot do damage to me.”

Obviously, Socrates distinguishes here between the external and the inner existence of man. And with this he mentally anticipated the widest developed notion of the dignity of man that we know today. Indeed, Socrates' inner existence survived his physical death 2400 years ago, notwithstanding the objections, until today; because it grows living in everybody who is in quest of the historical Socrates in the scripts of Xenophon and in the early scripts of Plato. Socrates is the thinker of whom we hopefully may learn how to overcome our days' need for orientation, being constantly expanding more and more.

Plato and Xenophon report concurrently that Socrates spoke of a Daimonion, a voice in himself which warned him when he was going to do something wrong. Undoubtedly, this is the first historical report of the inner order function which today we call conscience; in these days it announces us inconsistencies within our own value system. That this is transmitted already by Socrates is another indication that he was a relativist; because a meaning and a sense structure which receives its internal certainty by mutual dependencies, is much more susceptible to inner opposition than a sense system that is founded on absolute meanings and values through one-sided dependencies. This wonder, that an order function is intuitively effective in us, drawing our attention to contradictions jeopardizing our mental existence, recognized already Socrates in himself and he gave it a name of divineness, Daimonion. From that resulted, for him, the inner necessity to submit himself to the call for inner and external truthfulness on his course of life. Through this call towards himself the mystery is solved, why Socrates could attain such a great competence in his thoughts and actions.

(5)

There remains to clarify the question how Socrates proceeded on his course to self-knowledge. For that we obtain valuable details from a conversation (we owe to Xenophon) between the Sophist Euthydemus and Socrates in which the otherwise so self-conscious Euthydemus became quite subdued because Socrates, by continuously reducing the former's arguments on justice and injustice, impelled him into the greatest trouble to orient himself. Euthydemus must therefore

admit not to know of any way in order to improve his position. For this reason Socrates proposed to him to follow the course of life traced out by his self-knowledge. He asked Euthydemus whether he had not noticed the epigraph at the Delphian Apollo Temple: “Know thyself!” and whether he had not submitted himself to a self-examination. Thereupon Euthydemus answered that he had not done this since he would know himself quite well, so that Socrates directed the following words to him and, if we wish so, also to us (IV 25):

“Do you think that only that one knows oneself who knows his own name, or don’t you rather mean that only this one knows one’s value and non-value who examined oneself about one’s usefulness for the human life?”

Hence for Socrates the course to self-knowledge is simultaneously a method by which to find out how we can contribute something to preserve the human community, as through it the basis of our own existence is safeguarded. By this also the self-knowledge is reflexive to the requirements of a meaningful living together, in other words: also self-knowledge does not obtain any absoluteness with Socrates. Self-knowledge generally means for him to experience what one knows and masters and what not and which of those matters you neither know nor master you might still be able to learn. The famous sentence: “I know that I know nothing!” never was said by Socrates; because for him self-knowledge means to know about what one knows nothing.

The pre-condition for doing something useful for the human community is, however, that we feel for that a positive impulse for action in ourselves. Here Plato and Xenophon differ basically in their describing the historical Socrates; for Xenophon speaks explicitly of an advising daimonion, whereas this isn’t mentioned with Plato at all. Xenophon reports that Socrates would have said the following about the way how we can get the daimonion to give positive signals to us [1.1 (9)]:

“one ought to learn and afterwards to turn into action, what to learn the gods would have conferred upon oneself; but what evades human vigilance and knowledge one ought to explore from the gods with the aid of the prophecy art, because the gods would give signals to those to whom they would be gracious.”

That, what Socrates apostrophizes here with prophecy art, corresponds to the efforts of today to

find ways of setting free our own creativity. It has already been shown that truthfulness, for Socrates, is the most important principle for the development of a harmonizing value system. Henceforth, this system is equally the key for the unfolding of the own creative power; for only the virtue of truthfulness puts the gods in a gracious mood! And also this can be verified by the way of self-observation still today. If we have said, let's say, the untruth, then we risk, again and again, that something of it becomes known, and our creativity is paralysed. This is true particularly if we have done this folly with regard to the persons who are close to us. Because we must always be alert to avoid dropping a hint by which our untruthfulness could be deduced, instead of having our ideas delightfully flow and being able to exchange them. Being untruthful means, notably among those persons who are close to us, to stifle our own creativity. For it is quite certain that the creativity is then retarded enormously, if we control our ideas too strongly and have to evaluate their practicability too early. From exactly this one has to refrain, indeed, when the generally known brainstorming is exercised. On the other hand, regarding our creative abilities, we cannot get acquainted in a better way than by practising unrestricted openness towards only very few people particularly close to us, as the Stoic Seneca postulates for the attainment of friendship.

With that we realize now that the recommending daimonion corresponds to our modern concept of creativity. Why Plato concealed us this extremely important function of the Socratic daimonion, I, up to now, can explain only for this reason that Plato wanted to show that among the people there are only very few selected individuals capable to dispose of orientating and state reigning insights. For Socrates, however, it appears to be quite certain that everyone is master of an advising and a warning daimonion, provided (s)he consequently is following the course of self-knowledge.

The course to self-knowledge is a lifelong task, since, in a mysterious way, all human individuals are endowed with immeasurable manifold characteristics. In any new surroundings we may discover a new side to our character, notably also while we meet unknown people. Who walks on the path of self-knowledge, is in need not only of the luck to be able to trust implicitly very few people, but (s)he must – apparently contrasting to that – try to meet as many people as possible and to come together with them in always new situations. That is why Socrates, day by day, went to the Athens market place, to the Agora, in order to see people there, with whom he

was seeking, in continuously new conversations, to come to the grounds of their problems and possibly offering solutions. This was his course to self-knowledge which did not lead into loneliness, but into the centre of the community life of the municipality, to the market place, to Athens Agora. Individualism was, for Socrates, no contrast to communal life, but on the contrary, for him individualism presupposes appropriate living together, and the latter requires the first.

Socrates gives us the certainty today that people, under the condition of religious freedom, are capable to self-determination and that this capability is designed inside all humans. For him the orientation is given birth through the concept of values that everyone is able to develop, experience and recognize, by his or her taking part in communal life. With this conception Socrates is the first liberal man having anchored the foundation of democratic types of state in the minds of human beings. To him we may refer not only in 2002 as the “Socrates Year” but also in the millennium ahead of us.