The Wisdom in the Apology of Plato

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The concept of “wisdom” which Plato elaborates in his Apology is analyzed here. In doing so, we describe how Socrates, once declared by the Oracle to be “the wisest man,” starts to analyze what wisdom actually means. In trying to contradict the Oracle, Socrates mixes with different social groups including politicians, poets, and artisans. He discovers that none of them possess a real understanding or awareness of what wisdom actually is. Thus, Socrates concludes that he must be the wisest man because, “he knows that he does not know.” This ignorantia docta is a type of humanistic knowledge.

Keywords: Socrates, wisdom, Oracle, ignorantia docta, wise man

1. The Search of Wisdom by Socrates

In this document, I will discuss the person who was Socrates and his unusual conception of “wisdom.” There are three reasons for which we believe the topic is the most relevant in actual philosophy. On the one hand, Socrates was a unique character in the history of humanity, and as such he has had a fundamental influence over all areas of culture in general, and on philosophy in particular. On the other hand, it is of relevance to us to talk about wisdom because, although the philosopher may not be wise, the quest for wisdom is still seen by him or her as the ultimate aspiration. Therefore, just as Socrates himself has taught us, the philosopher is presumed to be someone who is in fact not wise, but who nonetheless coverts wisdom as the object of his searching. Such is their desire for wisdom that the philosopher is willing to give their life for it. As such, we find ourselves before the philosopher’s search for excellence. Thirdly, and following on from the two previous reasons, Socrates, with his particular way of searching for wisdom, traces what will become the occidental conception of the philosopher.

In order to talk about who Socrates was, we will concentrate on the Socrates introduced by Plato in his Apology of Socrates. We know that such a selection is not innocent, since Xenophon and Aristophanes offer us a different version of the historical Socrates. However, in order to develop the topic at hand, we will concentrate on the platonic text. In fact, in it, Plato reconstructs the discourse Socrates supposedly pronounced before the Athenian assembly once he was charged by Anytus and Meletus of corrupting youngsters and of revering gods different to the ones of the city. In order to defend himself of such accusations, Socrates himself
describes what he really had been doing, and it is in the narration of these facts where our philosopher begins to set out his notion of wisdom.

Socrates begins his own defense by mentioning the difficulties he will have to overcome, such as the fact that the accusations are false, the vagueness of the accusations, the interest of the accuser, and his tricky inclusion in the group of sophists among other things. Subsequently, Socrates points out that he thinks such accusations are due to certain things that had been said about him a long time ago, but such rebuttal ends up to be equally false all the same. He then imputes those false accusations with the ones he assumes he possess, that being “certain wisdom” (διὰ σοφίαν τινὰ (20d), which for him is “the man’s own wisdom” (ἡπερ ἐκ τῶν ἰδιῶν θροπίνη σοφία). He continues by outlining the aporetic question that will guide this part of his discourse: ποίαν ὁπώς σοφίαν ταύτην (what is wisdom?). At this point he begins a section, that starts in 20c and ends in 24b, in which Socrates will try to explain to the judges what his wisdom consists of, and it is precisely this that we will analyze here in order to talk about humanistic knowledge.

Socrates begins his narration by saying that everything had started in childhood when his youthful friend Chaerephon asked the Oracle of Delphos, with the passion that characterized him, if “there was somebody wiser than Socrates” (ἐί τις ἡμίον ἐδικησε, to which the Pythia answered categorically that “nobody was wiser than him” (μηδένα σοφότερον εἴναι) (21a). The Oracle’s answer surprised Socrates for two reasons: first, because the Oracle is not allowed to lie; and second, because he himself is plainly conscious that he is not wise. For all this, Socrates wonders with amazement: “What that the god really said and what the enigma indicates? I am aware of not being wise, neither a little nor a lot (ἐγὼ γὰρ δὴ οὐκ ὡς συμπληροῦν τὸν ἐμόν τις ἐμαυτῷ σοφὸς ὠν). [Thus,] What is it that really said in affirming that I am very wise?” (21b)

Before the difficult surprise (ἀπορία), Socrates wonders about the meaning of such an enigmatic reply, and when it couldn’t be solved, he started an enquiry (ἐπὶ ζητησεν αὐτοῦ), the aim of which was to find a man who was wiser than he was, thus, denying the Oracle and at the same time showing himself that there was another man who would end up being wiser than him. With this intention, Socrates started to wander the streets of Athens looking for wise men that would help him deny the Oracle of Delphos of such a statement. Here a comment is made about Plato’s text: The author says that Socrates thought he would find that there were indeed wiser men either among politicians, poets, or artisans, and because of that he started a discourse with a representative of each group. In attempting to comment upon such a platonic text as this, it would be helpful if there was a diagram (a conceptual map) that presented the teachings that he got from each of these interactions, but faithful to his custom, Plato sticks to a dramatic line by line account continuing on from what was previously said in each new dialogue. This technique allows him to establish a dialectic relationship between what Socrates is searching for and what the others (i.e., the politicians, poets, and artisans) think they know. In effect, Socrates analyses his interviewees by trying to find wisdom in them, and in doing so finds that each one believes they know, but in fact none of them know anything. In consequence, in each new dialogue, Socrates retakes only what is useful and discards what is not. This is masterly demonstrated by Plato through his narrative technique.

We left Socrates addressing “those who seemed wise” (τῶν δοκεῖσσον σοφῶν ἠδὼν); and in first place he decided to interview a politician. Through talking to him, he finds out that “in spite of many people believing that that man was wise” (ὁ ὁπῶς δοκεῖν μὲν ἠδῶν σοφὸς ἰδίοις τὰ πολλὰς ὀνθρώποις), actually he was not. Here Socrates mentions something brief but very important to understand the text we are trying to analyze: This
politician “thought himself he was wise, but he was not” (οἶκτο μὲν ἔδειξαν σοφός, ἐστὶ δ᾽ οὐ). This remark is very important because it puts wisdom on an individual plane; it does not matter how wise others think one is if one believes it sincerely of oneself. But if one believes one is wise, is it a fact that one is?

Subsequently, once Socrates has interviewed the politician, whose name is not given, he concludes that the politician not only did not know, but decides he was cheating himself because he only thought he knew. From that moment on in his failing search for a man wiser than him, Socrates is no longer discouraged, and instead very perceptively discovers something important: That in effect he is wiser than the politician who thought he was wise, because although neither of them knew anything of much value, each thought they believed in something, and yet in turn although Socrates still didn’t know anything, he was conscious of his ignorance; Socrates thinks he does not know something that in fact he does not know. Explicitly the text says: “when I left, I was reasoning alone that I was wiser than that man (ὅς οὐκ οἶγος μὲν οκταί τι εὑρέθησα) and he does not know, conversely, I, as in effect, I do not know (οὐκ οἶδα), neither I think I know (οὐδὲ ὀδηγεῖ).”

Before we continue it is worth pointing out that Socrates distinguishes between “believe that we know” and the authentic “wisdom.” The fact is that I believe that I know does not imply that I know; simply, I may be wrong, or my belief could plainly be wrong. And this distinction establishes the first delimitation of our understanding of wisdom: It is one thing to believe that I know and another that I do know. Imagine how we would cheat if we thought that our belief was equivalent to wisdom. Socrates infers that, from this point of view, the Oracle was right, as he knows that he does not know, whereas the politician is cheating himself that he knows, without knowing. In that sense, Socrates is one step ahead of the politician, and because of this he realizes that he is actually wiser than the politician.

Because of these negative results, Socrates decided to leave the politician in peace, and address another man dedicated to a different activity in order to obtain more wisdom: the poets. He thought that among them he would find himself more ignorant; nevertheless he found that not only did they cheat like the politicians by believing to know what they do not know, but they did not actually write their poems from being wise, “but because of certain natural gifts and in a state of inspiration, like the fortune-tellers…” (ἄλλα φίλατο τινι καὶ ἀνθυπατῶνες ἄσοφοι οἱ θεόμαντες…) (22c). That kind of inspiration, however, does not count as wisdom for it cannot be accounted for: the poets, it is written, “say a lot of beautiful things, but they do not know about what they said” (οὐκόν λέγουσι μὲν πολλὰ καὶ καλὰ, ἣσαν δὲ οὐδὲν ἄν λέγοσι) (22c). Not only that but Socrates decides the poets’ purported wisdom gave way to a special characteristic: Believing themselves wise in poetry without realizing that it is only inspiration, they spread their supposed wisdom to other areas and themes: “They, because of poetry, also believed were wise about the other things they did not know about” (ἄλλα ἄριστοιν αὐξῶν διὰ τῆς ποιήσεως οἰκομένων καὶ τῶλα σοφητάτων ἔκαι ἀνθρώπων δούλου καὶ θριάζον) (22c). Incredible! The poets not only confused inspiration with wisdom, but decided to take the confusion to areas not related to the poetic activity, as if writing poetry made them competent to make a net, design a ship or engage in political activity.

In view of such new deception, Socrates decided to get away from them, and instead address the artisans (χειροτέχναι). He was sure that, among them, he would find somebody wiser than he, since they “knew things he did not know,” and that they would be wiser than him (καὶ τούτοι μὲν οὐκ ἔφεσαθεν, ἄλλα ἄρισταντο δ ἔγω
οὐκ ἡπιστάμην καὶ μου ταύτῃ σοφότερον ἦσαν) (d). But he found among them the same defect as the poets; that is to say that they spread their knowledge to areas which they knew nothing about: “because of the facts that they develop their art appropriately, each one of them esteemed they were wise in regards to the other things, and that mistake deemed their wisdom” (διὰ τὸ τῆν τέχνην καλῶς ἐξηράντεσθαι ἔκαστος ἡμῖν καὶ τὰλα τὸ μέγιστα σοφώτατος εἶναι—καὶ αὐτῶν αὕτη ἢ πλημμέλεια ἢκαὶ τὴν τῆν σοφίαν) (d). Before presenting the teaching that Socrates has gotten from the artisans, it is worth pointing out a change in the type of vocabulary used in this paragraph the platonic work presents. In effect, in this paragraph, Plato does not talk about “the wisdom of artisans,” but instead the “knowledge of artisans.” We already know that the term “σοφία” can be translated as wisdom, but it does not appear in this passage. On the contrary, Plato uses two different words to talk about the “knowledge” of the χειροτέχναι: He uses as “ἠπίσταντο” as “ἠπιστάμην.” Both participles are derived from the noun, known to all philosophers, ‘ἐπιστήμη’. This change is not casual and Plato shows clearly that whereas “ἐπιστήμη” is somehow equivalent to what we call knowledge, on the one hand, σοφία is equivalent to wisdom. That is why Socrates acknowledges that even knowing many things that he ignores χειροτέχναι, actually, they do not know.

Now we move on to what Socrates learns from the artisans. He acquires two teachings: (a) the wisdom that he is searching is not something that is done, in the sense of “doing something appropriately,” but something different; and (b) although we know how to do something appropriately, that does not imply that we know about other things. That is to say if I know how to weave nets, that does not imply that I know how to give speeches; if I know how to give speeches, that is not implying that I know how to leave adequately, or how to take care of the soul.

These interviews with politicians, poets, and artisans make Socrates wonder what is preferable: to continue being ignorant, and to be aware of it, or to pretend to be wise without actually knowing anything. Socrates arrives at the conclusion that the Oracle was right: He, being aware of his ignorance, is wiser (σοφότατος) than the others. In fact, for him, the only one that is really wise is the God from the Oracle of Delphos (τῷ ὄντι ὁ θεὸς σοφὸς εἶναι), that is to say, Apollus; and from the divine perspective, “human wisdom is deserving of little or nothing” (ἢ θηρευτὴν σοφία ἢκιν τινὶ ἢπίστευσθαι ἢκιν καὶοὐκένος) (23a). And it is here that we find sense in the Oracle’s reply: As human wisdom is worth little, it is better to know that we do not know.

2. Concept of Wisdom in Classic Philosophy

From all this, the occidental philosophical tradition has outlined its conception of philosophy. What is it? What does this activity, so different from any other human activity, consists of? From the Socratic dialogue, we have analyzed we can take two teachings that help us answer new questionings. First, the philosopher, without being wise, aspires to be so; he looks actively for wisdom—the nuance is important: He searches “avidly” (θηρεύω). And second, the philosopher knows that he does not know, and tries to show the others through the maieutic dialogues that they do not know either.

To sum up, I would like to point out the paradoxical situation that the philosopher leaves: He or she, loves wisdom, however at the same time he knows he does not know what wisdom is. Under such circumstances, what is his place in the world? I do not know the answer. The answer cannot be among men since their knowledge is not their knowledge, and their work is to demonstrate to those who believe they know that they do not know; nor can they be among the gods, since they are human and not divine. Plato is very aware of this characteristic of the philosopher for in the Teatetus (149a). He makes Socrates say: “They said I do not have
place (ἁπορίας; ἄνω) and that I only produce in man the aporia (ἅπωτάν).” The aporia is that state in which one does not know what to do since all certainties have crumbled. Such a state is uncomfortable for some, but for others it is stunning in a moving and passionate way. Such is the case of many of us that, like Alcibiades: “It is to the heart or to the soul, or as it is convenient to call that, to which we addresses now, and it is where the fang is stabbed, were I notice the bite of philosophical discourses. When I listen to them the heart overwhels stronger than to the coribants during their delirium, making me shed tears because of their words…” (“Symposium,” 215e).

Notes

1. Socrates… that you produce the same effect with simple prose unaided by instruments. For example, when we hear you… we are all astounded and entranced.

2. We do not develop the Dionysian conception of the philosophy presented to the own Plato in the Symposium.


4. Literally: worker, craftsman, architect, artist, artisan; and with the nuance of doing it with skill, such as a “technician” would do it nowadays.

Works Cited
