

Préface

Jean-Luc Périllié's work on the "Socratic Mysteries" is one of the most astonishing books published in the last 50 years in the field of Ancient Philosophy. It has the potential to initiate a revolution in the much treated domain of Socratic studies.

Yet to proclaim "a revolution" would be far from the intentions of the author and incompatible with his unpretentious, modest and sober style. His leading question — who was the historical Socrates? — is certainly not a revolutionary one, nor are his methods or his choice of sources: he just presents reliable, accurate philological interpretations of the well-known passages about Socrates in Aristophanes, Plato, Xenophon, Aeschines and Aristotle. How is it possible that the results of a work that tries to answer an old question with conventional methods come out as truly revolutionary? The answer is quite simple: Périllié manages to rid himself more radically than anyone before him of the age-old prejudices that dominated modern times "Socratic studies". Moreover, he has the courage to draw conclusions which many other interpreters could and should have drawn from the strength of their own observations, but failed to draw from fear of losing the cherished figure of Socrates the rationalist, founder of rationalist (i.e. non-religious) European philosophy.

The so-called "Socratic question" has often been declared insoluble. Périllié believes that it can be solved with sufficient historical certainty. What is needed is above all an unbiased reading of our sources. Common to the four portraits drawn by those who knew Socrates personally, i.e. the above mentioned authors with the exception of Aristotle, is the picture of Socrates as a religious figure. Since philosophy is generally perceived as a result of the emancipation of rational thought from the dominance of irrational (Christian) religion, to accept that the first man who practiced philosophy in a way similar to ours was a deeply religious figure is, for the majority of present day scholars, a challenge unprecedented in its (seeming) absurdity. Yet what counts is not our wishful thinking about an ideal beginning of European philosophy, but the testimony of the sources.

Périllié starts from the no doubt correct observation that Socrates does not appear, not even in Plato's early aporetic dialogues, as a mere sceptic. He never questions the existence or the importance of the realm of the divine. When he insists on his lack of own knowledge, he frequently claims to have heard (*akēkoa*, *ēkousa*) certain truths from other sources (e.g. *Men.* 81 a, *Gorg.* 493 a). Périllié takes as a base for his interpretation a complete survey of all passages in which there is talk of oral religious traditions known to and appreciated by Socrates. The relevant texts occur in dialogues of wholly different size, orientation and character, such as *Meno*, *Gorgias*, *Charmides*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Cratylus* and *Euthydemus*. To my knowledge, before

Périllié no one has collected the entirety of these passages nor has anyone posed the question of their historical trustworthiness.

The usual procedure concerning these passages was to isolate them and to declare them as philosophically irrelevant in their respective contexts or to disregard them as being meant “ironically”. Above all, few interpreters would take them seriously as pieces of information on the *historical* Socrates. Périllié refuses to adopt this interpretive tendency. Taken together, these passages show an astonishing coherence and consistency. The religious views Socrates claims to have received from wise priests and priestesses turn out to be the creed of mysteries of the Orphic-Pythagorean type. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the *eudaimonia* attained by initiation into the mysteries — the doctrine contained in the *Palaios Logos* quoted several times by Plato (*Phaedo* 70c, *Epist.* 7, 335a, *Laws* 715e) — was, according to Périllié, the religious and philosophical background of the elenctic and dialectical activities of the *historical* Socrates.

If we try to follow, if only tentatively, Périllié’s approach, we have to admit, perhaps with great astonishment, that there is no rational argument for the usual discarding (*qua* historical information) of Socrates’ claims about his oral sources. To do so is an unfounded *decision* of modern scholarship. Why then should Plato have invented all these reports? Périllié succeeds to show, by a very detailed and penetrating reading, which he calls “lecture phénoménologique”, the intrinsic credibility of the relevant passages. A very clear case is Alcibiades’ great speech in the *Symposium*, where Socrates is portrayed as the head of a mystery circle of initiates held together by an orally transmitted doctrine of eudemonism, a circle fascinated by their leader to such a degree that they can say of themselves *ekpeplēgmenoi esmen kai katechometha* (*Symp.* 215 d5-6), that their hearts “start leaping in their chests and tears come streaming down their faces” (215 e2). Both Alcibiades (in the *Symposium*) and Aischines (in Plutarch) are witnesses of an unusually strong charisma in Socrates which cannot be explained either by his rhetorical or by his elenctic skills. The impact exercised by Socrates results rather from the fact that he offered his esoteric circle “une toute nouvelle religion de type philosophique”. Neither the ‘Silenus-like’ nature of Socrates, Périllié argues, nor the mysteries of Eros, nor the transposition of the Eleusinian initiation into a philosophical initiation, can be a mere invention of Plato. All this has to be attributed to the “true Socrates”.

What is more, even the strange remark of Socrates in *Theaetetus* 149a, that his *maieutikē technē* had remained unknown to the public up to this day (i.e. until shortly before his trial), has to be taken as serious historical information. Though it seems to be, at first glance, in contradiction with *Apol.* 33b (where Socrates claims that he always says the same things to everybody), it is fully confirmed by Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, v. 135 ff., where we already find the terminology of the “art” of maieutics, as well as the injunction to keep it secret, since it is *ou themis* to divulge *mysteria*. Indeed even Plato did not divulge the secret of the *maieutikē technē* in his earlier dialogues — only 30 years after the death of Socrates, did he mention it for the first and only time. Aristophanes’ picture of Socrates as the head of an esoteric *hetairia* no doubt corresponded, says Périllié, to historical reality. Aristophanes’ words about the “abortion” of a thought (*phrontid’ exēmblokas*) prove to be one of the most important

texts for the history of philosophy from the end of the 5th century to the beginning of the 4th century.

Périllié's interpretations exhibit in all parts great philological accuracy and an admirable knowledge, both of the older and the recent international scholarly work on Socrates and Plato. In sum, this book operates on an exceptionally high intellectual level.

Precisely because of their potential of revolutionizing our picture of Socrates, Périllié's results are likely to be met with strong and passionate opposition. After all, the conventional picture of Socrates the rational, modest, law-abiding and democratic citizen is much easier to digest. But why the Athenians should put to death a citizen of this kind, remained a riddle. This is not the case for Périllié's 'esoteric' Socrates: he would have been a sure candidate for capital punishment from the very beginning.

But even for those who tend to reject Périllié's basic hermeneutic decision to take as historical evidence what Aristophanes and the Platonic figures Alcibiades and Socrates say about Socrates' status as head of an esoteric *hetairia*, at least three important insights will emerge from his book:

Socrates was as much a religious figure as he was a master of dialectical method and conceptual argument. The belief in immortality of the soul was as unquestionable for him as it was for Plato.

Socrates and Plato were far from using the (oral) tradition only in order to refute and to overturn it – both tended to *conserve* the oral traditions of Greek religion.

Socrates was by no means the intellectual force in Greek philosophy opposed to the older tradition of the eudemonistic mysteries.

These three points correct the influential interpretations of Gregory Vlastos, Monique Dixsaut and Friedrich Nietzsche respectively. If Périllié would have achieved nothing more than these corrections of current views, his book could count as an unusually valuable contribution to our knowledge of Socrates and Plato.

But the reader will easily recognize that the importance of this study goes far beyond that. Périllié's both patient and intense interpretations of texts we believed to know compel us to read them with new eyes and to put the validity of our hermeneutic decision to a radical test.

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