

**“A CROWD OF GORGONS AND WINGED HORSES”.  
A CRITIQUE OF SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHERS  
IN ATHENAEUS’S *THE DEIPNOSOPHISTS***

FRANTIŠEK ŠKVRNDA<sup>1</sup>

Department of International Political Relations, Faculty of International Relations,  
University of Economics in Bratislava, Slovakia, [frantisek.skvrnda2@euba.sk](mailto:frantisek.skvrnda2@euba.sk)

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**Abstract:** The study analyses the critique of the Socratic philosophers in Athenaeus’ *The Deipnosophists*. The main goal of the study is to assess its overall quality, argumentative structure, historical relevance and interpretative plausibility. The first part of the study briefly outlines the main characteristics and features of the anti-philosophical literature in antiquity. The second part examines Athenaeus’ argumentative methods and techniques of textual criticism. In the following parts of the study, we scrutinise Athenaeus’s overall critical assessment of Socratic literature and compare it with extant philosophical, biographical and doxographical evidence. In conclusion, we answer the question of to what extent is Athenaeus’ critique relevant and substantiated by available textual evidence.

**Keywords:** Athenaeus; Socratic literature; critique of philosophy; ethics; shame; lack of self-control

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Philosophers in classical antiquity were often ridiculed and criticised by a wide range of authors, from comic poets, politicians and orators to religious zealots and rival members of different philosophical schools. Out of these bold caricatures, heated debates and controversies arose a whole anti-philosophical literary tradition, extremely broad, pluralistic and popular in Classical and Christian antiquity.

Today, only a few fragments of this literature survive, with Aristophanes’s *The Clouds* being the first and only fully preserved work. Other important sources that contain fragments from earlier, now-lost works are frequently cited by authors such as Plutarch, Clement of Alexandria, Diogenes Laertius and Athenaeus of Naucratis. The following study focuses solely on Book V of Athenaeus’s work *The Deipnosophists*, which contains a rare critique of Socratic philosophers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2573-3409>.

<sup>2</sup> The origins of Athenaeus’s critique of philosophers have been traced to Herodicus’s lost work *Against The Man Who Loved Socrates* (Düring 1941, 12). In the following study, we will focus solely on its content, leaving behind a difficult and labyrinthine discussion about Athenaeus’s original sources. For other possible sources alongside Herodicus (Theopompus of Chios, Hegesander of Delphi, Demochares etc.), see the last parts of Book XI of *The Deipnosophists*. It is reasonable to suppose that Athenaeus compiled evidence from different accounts and did not rely on Herodicus only. For the structure of Athenaeus’s work and methods of composition, see Jacob 2013.

Our main goal is to analyse the internal logic and methods of critique of Athenaeus's text and assess its coherency and overall historical value. This text has been hitherto largely overlooked by modern scholarship. Those modern scholars who have paid attention to it have expressed in the past serious doubts about the veracity and plausibility of Athenaeus's text and denounced it as a product of "irrational fanaticism" and *chronique scandaleuse*.<sup>3</sup> In the following study, we will also try to re-evaluate their conclusions and offer a new interpretative perspective on the issue.

### A brief characterisation of the anti-philosophical tradition in antiquity

Anti-philosophical literature can be divided into three main groups of texts and authors. The first group of testimonies can be characterised as external. Critics of philosophers had motivations to enter the polemics for various subjective reasons. In the case of comic authors, it was the desire to entertain the audience by means of parody and caricature; in the case of politicians, it was the struggle for power; and rhetors and sophists struggled with philosophers to attract an audience and potential pupils. The oldest pieces of anti-philosophical literature are undoubtedly the works of old comedigraphy. The figure of the pretentious and boastful philosopher was, alongside the cook, the military officer and the doctor, one of the main characters of the Doric comedy, embodying the archetypal trait of "hypocrisy" (*alazoneia*) (Konstantakos 2020, 8). Attic comedy took over the picture of the philosopher as *alazōn* and made it more complex. In Aristophanes's play *The Clouds*, Socrates and his pupils embodied virtually all the vices in society – they were at the same time aggressive and cowardly, profiteering and poverty-stricken, gluttonous and sturdy, lazy and inventive, truth-seeking sages and unscrupulous liars, etc.<sup>4</sup>

The second group of anti-philosophical literature, the internal, consists of critiques of philosophers by other philosophers who criticised their predecessors or contemporaries. Heraclitus's fragments B 81 and B 129 are perhaps the oldest pieces of evidence for anti-philosophical discourse and tradition. Heraclitus mocks Pythagoras as the "chief of swindlers" (*kopidōn archēgos*) and brands his fake philosophy as "malevolent art" (*kakotechniē*). As noted by Leonid Zhmud, Heraclitus's "biting criticism was a part of his philosophical method" concerning mainly epistemological issues (Zhmud 2017, 171–173). However, philosophical polemics often merged with personal animosities and *ad hominem* argumentation. Almost every philosopher had at least one great personal rival, a sort of *doppelgänger*. By the time philosophy flourished in classical Athens, it was not uncommon for pupils to leave their teachers, renounce their doctrine and establish their own school. Personal animosities went hand in hand with the critique of theory, as well as the philosophical way of life of their predecessors.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that the internal group of anti-philosophical literature and authors is not anti-philosophical *in senso strictu*. It does not criticise philosophy as such but focuses only on individual figures or tenets of individual schools. Internal and external groups complement each other.

The third group of testimonies is delimited rather chronologically. Since the middle of the 3rd century BCE, philosophical doxography and biography were formed within Aristotle's school as new literary genres. Although the objectivity of early doxographers and biographers remains the subject of continuous debates, some modern scholars have convincingly demonstrated that

<sup>3</sup> See Düring 1941, 13–17; Chroust 1962.

<sup>4</sup> On the dual features of philosophy and philosophers in ancient comedigraphy (not only in Aristophanes), see Casanova 2019, 707–709.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., reasons why Aristotle founded the philosophical school in *Lykeion* (Chroust 1973, 117–124). For a complex interpretation of polemics and networking in the ancient philosophical tradition, consult works by D'Hoine, Roskam, Schorn, Verheyden 2021 and Weisser, Thaler 2016.

we should not underestimate their testimonies as biased and malign gossip.<sup>6</sup> What may seem to older scholars as an expression of irrational fanaticism, *chronique scandaleuse* or *bösartigen Klatsch*, may, in fact, be an attempt to give a historically accurate description of philosophers' lives and thoughts. Adherents of philosophical sects tended to idealise the images and lives of their own authorities. It was also common for philosophers to justify their own attitudes through the theories and concepts of their predecessors. Philosophical doxography and biography could therefore have arisen from the need to distinguish between idealised and realistic pictures of philosophers, although we do not dispute the fact that numerous doxographers and biographers may have had their own prejudices or used their sources in very indiscriminate ways, thus reproducing older gossip or malevolent lies about philosophers.

### ***Ad hominem* argumentation in Athenaeus**

The common feature of all three groups of anti-philosophical literature is the use of *ad hominem* argumentation, which is based on the distinction between words and deeds (*logos* – *ergos*). The main fault of philosophers under this prism is that they do not live up to their standards and betray their own principles.

Modern authors point out that this distinction is a crucial topic in Socratic practical philosophy and ethics. The inconsistency between words and deeds is a manifestation of the cardinal vice, a lack of self-control (*akrasia*) (Woolf 2002, 233–235). The scheme *logos* – *ergos* is also employed in the dramatical structure of dialogues, where the figure of Socrates is traditionally portrayed through a perfect unity between his words and deeds, which distinguishes him from other figures unable or incapable of achieving this unity (Press 2012, 43). In Plato and Antisthenes, practical exercise (*askēsis*) is the only mean for the transformation of *logos* into *ergos*. It is also a necessary condition for achieving the cardinal virtues, whether self-control (*enkrateia*), soundness of mind (*sōphrosynē*) or excellence (*aretē*) (Suvák 2010, 247; Wollner 2010, 233–237). From the viewpoint of Classical Greek culture down to Homer, every virtuous man is virtuous by means of his actions. If someone is virtuous only in words, he is considered to be either a liar, an unworthy and idle talker or a pretentious braggart.

It is precisely this method of refutation *ad hominem* that forms the backbone of Athenaeus's text. Philosophers were not good advisors, wise generals, respectable teachers, helpful poets or rational people. They were “a crowd of Gorgons, winged horses, and other impossible creatures, and a bizarre collection of monstrous forms” (Athenaeus 220f–221a).<sup>7</sup> The main reason for such a harsh evaluation of philosophers is that philosophers simply did not live up to the high moral standards which they represented. The quote from orator Demochares is mentioned twice: “A spearhead cannot be made out of savoury, and neither can a good man be produced from *logoi* like these” (Athenaeus 187d). The second, slightly altered quote indicates that philosophical *logoi* are those of Socrates: “A spearhead could not be made out of savoury, and neither could an irreproachable soldier be made from Socrates” (Athenaeus 215c).

Athenaeus characterises philosophers as weird people (*atopoi*) who are devoted to “self-important fault-finding” and censure others for their own misdeeds or ignorance. In reality, they are more slanderous and have abusive tongues (*kakēgoroi*) (Athenaeus 220a). They lie about everything and are not consistent in their own accounts, and – what is worse – their behaviour and true intentions are disgraceful and shameful. Most of these *vituperationes* are aimed at Plato and Xenophon, and to some extent also at Antisthenes, Epicurus and lesser-known pupils of the

<sup>6</sup> See the discussion about Aristoxenus's biographical methods in Schorn 2012; Huffman 2012. For Theophrastus's doxography, consult Mansfeld & Runia 2009.

<sup>7</sup> All English citations are taken from the new Loeb edition of Athenaeus's text (translated and annotated by Douglas S. Olson).

Peripatetics, Stoics and Epicureans, who have gained notoriety for their unvirtuous behaviour as minor tyrants, thieves or spendthrifts (Athenion, Apellicon of Teos, Diogenes of Babylon, Lysias of Samos).<sup>8</sup> We will focus solely on the two famous Socratics to whom Athenaeus devotes the most attention.

Plato and Xenophon are not consistent in their portrayal of Socrates. The first main problem for Athenaeus is the inconsistency in the account of Socrates's austerity (*asymfōna tē austērotēti*). On the one hand, Socrates's lifelong task is to attract young men towards virtue. On the other hand, according to Athenaeus, there are numerous passages in Plato and Xenophon where Socrates acts exactly the opposite. Our investigation will start with these inconsistencies, which can be restated into two kinds of reproaches: philosophers are (1) liars whose accounts are at odds with historical circumstances and figures, and (2) shameful perverts who hide their own mundane desires and appetites behind lofty talks about virtue and education. We will now proceed with these allegations and investigate whether they are sound and textually plausible or whether they are just a product of irrational fanaticism and scandalisation.

### Philosophers as liars

A rather long and perplexed passage in Athenaeus (215d–220f) contains a dense refutation of the historical authenticity of Plato's and Xenophon's dialogues. The philosophers are criticised for committing blatant anachronisms and failing to portray the characters who appear in dialogues in accordance with historical circumstances. The whole genre of *Sokratikoi logoi* is "fictitious misrepresentation" (*pseudografia*) and "gibberish nonsense" (*holōs d' lēros*) (Athenaeus 216c, 217a). Athenaeus and his sources amassed 13 theses where Socratics lied about their master:

#	Thesis
1.	Socrates did not participate in the battles of Delium (424 BCE) and Potidaea (432/1 BCE)
2.	The famous oracle which Pythia gave to Chaerephon about Socrates is an arrogant fable.
3.	Socrates was not the son of a burly midwife.
4.	Xanthippe was not a difficult wife who used to pour washing water over his head.
5.	The dramatic date of Plato's <i>Gorgias</i> is anachronic because the deaths of Archelaus I (399 BCE) and Pericles (429 BCE) are incommensurable.
6.	Contrary to the information in Plato's <i>Gorgias</i> , Socrates knew how to put a question to the vote in Prytaneum.
7.	The dramatic date of Xenophon's <i>Symposium</i> is anachronic because Xenophon was too young to participate in it.
8.	Plato's account of Pausanias's speech in <i>Symposium</i> contradicts Xenophon's account of Pausanias's speech in <i>Symposium</i> ; therefore, one or both accounts must be fictitious.
9.	The dramatic date of Plato's <i>Symposium</i> is anachronic because Plato was too young to participate in it.
10.	Contrary to Plato's <i>Symposium</i> , Socrates did not sleep with Alcibiades under one cloak.
11.	Contrary to Plato's <i>Symposium</i> , Socrates is not himself the quarry caught in Alcibiades's net because Socrates himself is the hunter.

<sup>8</sup> This list of names can be further extended by the wicked pupils of Plato mentioned in Athenaeus (508d–509b).

12.	The dramatic date of Plato's <i>Protagoras</i> is anachronic because it is highly unlikely that Hippias from Elis could stay in Athens in the time of war between Sparta and Athens.
13.	Protagoras came to Athens sometime between 423 – 421 BCE, and he could not have been present there during the dramatic date of Plato's <i>Protagoras</i> .

We can expand this list of theses against the authenticity of Socratic dialogues by additional items,<sup>9</sup> but it suffices to say that it is clear, under closer scrutiny, that Athenaeus and his sources are pushing it too far. Athenaeus's biased stance is also untenable when we look at particular theses in detail. Theses #1–4 and #13 are partially based on the arguments *ex silencio* – ancient historians and comic authors do not mention it at all, and for Athenaeus, it is therefore not true. Thesis #6 may be read off as Platonic irony, which is simply overlooked by Athenaeus (Socrates just pretended he did not know how to put a question to the vote). Thesis #9 pre-supposes that Plato is the spokesperson in his own dialogue, which is clearly not the case (the spokesperson in *Symposium* is actually Apollodorus). The rest of the theses are based on speculative conjectures and dubious arguments, which, due to poorly preserved primary sources and principally unverifiable chronological problems, cannot be conclusively confirmed or refuted.

The dramatic dating of Platonic dialogues and various anachronisms in *Sokratikoi logoi* have been the subject of continuing debates for a long time. It is clear that *Sokratikoi logoi* was a mimetic literary genre. Its main purpose and aim were to elaborate theoretical and philosophical inquiry rather than a historically accurate and objective description of characters, locations and scenery.<sup>10</sup> Athenaeus's approach is hyper-critical, inaccurate and itself anachronic. Calling Plato or Xenophon “a liar” can, therefore, really be evaluated as a display of irrational fanaticism. What Athenaeus and his sources denounce as “lies” may be read under more charitable view as minor inaccuracies or *licentia poetica*, a standard literary tool in the mimetic form of literature.

### Philosophers as shameful pervers

Only a few historians of ancient philosophy held the hostile Athenaeus view that Socrates was *nec officiosus maritus nec laudandus paterfamilias*.<sup>11</sup> And even fewer authors assume that ancient philosophers, in general, were a crowd of shameful pervers who pretended to be virtuous in public but in private led debauched lives. In spite of these unsettling allegations, Athenaeus's argumentation seems to be more substantiated and sound in this second case than in the above-mentioned theses about philosophers as liars.

Athenaeus's text is clearly dependent on the lost work by Herodicus the Crateteian, *Against The Man Who Loved Socrates*. Herodicus (fl. 2 century BCE) was an illustrious member of the Pergamene School and a pupil of the famous Stoic grammarian Crates of Mallus. Their doctrine was based on the assumption that the main source of all knowledge and the first philosopher was the divine Homer. As Düring pointed out, Herodicus's attack on Plato and other lovers of Socrates may be the consequence of his inability to forgive Plato for the exclusion of Homer from the ideal *polis* in his *Republic* (Düring 1941, 13). Be that as it may, the critique in

<sup>9</sup> E. g. the contradictions between Plato's *Apology*, in which Socrates proposes to pay a fine (Plato, *Apol.* 38b), and Xenophon's *Apology*, in which Socrates refuses to propose himself a fine because such an action would be a sign of admission of guilt (Xenophon, *Apol.* 23); the contradictions between Plato's claim that Socrates went out of Athens only once, to Isthmus, and Diogenes Laertius's statements that Socrates travelled on Samos and to Delphi (DL *Vit.* 2.23).

<sup>10</sup> Most recently, on the historical veracity of *Sokratikoi logoi*, see Suvák 2022.

<sup>11</sup> See e. g. Montuori 1981; Chroust 1957.

Athenaeus proceeds from (a) praise of philosophers for their works and austerity on symposia to (b) a description of normative theory of the Homeric symposia, which consequently forms the basis of (c) a thorough critique of Plato's and Xenophon's sympotic writings and allegations from shameful practices, ranging from the unrestricted "love of wine" (*oinofilia*), "love of women" (*gynaikomania*) and "love of boys" (*paiderastia*).

a) The introductory passages of Book V in Athenaeus start with a positive evaluation of the philosophers and their sympotic culture: "Many philosophic groups, for example, get together in the city, such as the Diogenists, the so-called Antipatrists and the Panaetiasts. Theophrastus even left money behind for this sort of meeting, not, by Zeus, in order that they could get together and run wild, but so that they could do everything proper symposium procedure requires in a decent, educated way" (Athenaeus 186a). Xenocrates and Aristotle even produced works on the rules for symposia, and stoic Antipater once organised a symposium to discuss philosophic quibbles. Platonist Arcesilaus, founder of Stoicism Zeno, and even Socrates himself proved their wits on various symposia, "reproaching gluttons for their indecent manners at the tables" (Athenaeus 186b-d).

b) The theory of Homeric symposia is subsequently elaborated with the help of philosophical terminology. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Homer is said to have described four types of symposia, differing in the degree of frugality and moderation of their attendants. The most disgraceful are the symposia of Suitors, who indulge in low pleasures, such as sexual love, immoderate eating, drinking wine and excessive singing, dancing and laughing. Next are the symposia of the Phaeacians, characterised by a "love of pleasure" (*philēdonia*). The third kind of symposia are the modest military feasts that take place during military campaigns. The most graceful is the fourth type of symposia, the civic symposia, where guests behave in a moderate manner (*sōphronōs*) (Athenaeus 177b). The moderate symposia (*sōphrona symposia*), where the amusement unfolds in a graceful manner (*symmetrōs*), Homer reserved for virtuous kings and sages, such as Nestor or Menelaus (Athenaeus 180b, 186a-b).<sup>12</sup> Immoderate symposia, which lack the right measure (*ouden emmetron*), Homer ascribed to Suitors and the Phaeacians (Athenaeus 180b). The main criterion for distinguishing between disgraceful and graceful symposia is the philosophical category of temperance or, more precisely, its opposite, a lack of self-control. The vocabulary of practical Socratic philosophy is applied to Homeric texts, which is subsequently prioritised as the umpire evaluating the Socratic sympotic literature. This is a clever method of applying the theories of the philosophers to their own texts, from which these theories were originally derived. Surprisingly, judging by Herodotus's criteria, the banquets depicted by Plato, Xenophon and Epicurus belong to disgraceful kinds of symposia, that of Suitors and Phaeacians.

c) Plato lets his guests drink unmixed wine until exhaustion: "Look how disgracefully Alcibiades behaves when he wanders in drunk, while the others drain a cooler that holds 8 *kotulai* and offer the excuse that Alcibiades led them to do it."<sup>13</sup> Homer's characters behave differently" (Athenaeus 180a-b). Socrates is also acting in a disgraceful manner. He does not want to leave the party when the other guests have gone but stays awake and drinks unmixed wine from a monstrously large drinking cup named the "silver well" (*argyrou phreatos*) with the two greatest drunkards, Aristophanes and Agathon. After Socrates outdrinks both of them, he gets up and goes off to the gymnasium in a somewhat Laestrygonian fashion, "where a man who did not sleep could earn double wages" (Athenaeus 192a-b). If Socrates behaved as Homer recommends, he would obey the wise council of Athena: "For now the light is gone into the

<sup>12</sup> Athenaeus also praises Egyptian symposia in ancient times because they were conducted in a restrained manner (*sōphronikōs*) (Athenaeus 191f).

<sup>13</sup> 8 *kotulai* = a half-gallon. Cf. Plato, *Symp.* 213e–214a.

darkness, and it is not proper to sit for a long time at the gods' feast, but to go home" (Athenaeus 191e = Homer, *Od.* 3. 335–6).

Another reason for reproach is the impoliteness in interactions between the guests at the philosopher's banquet, which is full of sneerers mocking each other. Plato lets Aristophanes hiccup because he wants to mock and ridicule him. For the same reason, he makes fun of Agathon's balanced clauses and antitheses later in the dialogue. Also, Alcibiades is brought on the scene afflicted with lust. Athenaeus is ready to bring a crowd of other people from Plato's dialogues who had been ridiculed by him in one way or the other – Charmides, Euthydemus, Aristides the Just, Themistocles, Pericles etc. "Plato was, in fact, inimical toward everybody", and this is proof of his malignity (Athenaeus 187c-d; 506a). Antisthenes is also subjected to this type of criticism – he had rudely ridiculed not only all the Athenian politicians but also other philosophers, including Plato himself (Athenaeus 220c-e).

Athenaeus, or his sources, may implicitly suggest that behind Plato's (or Socrates) irony lies no sublime philosophical motive but rather a malicious character with a homoerotic tendency involving sexual resentment. The problem with Socrates's sexuality looms large in Athenaeus's text. In Xenophon's *Symposium*, Socrates proposes a beauty contest with a young boy and proposes that the prize be the right to kiss him and another beautiful young slave girl (Athenaeus 188d = Xenophon, *Symp.* 4.19–20). The crux of Socrates's perverse proposal is that when he loses the contest, he will kiss the young people, while when he wins it, they are going to kiss him. He also conspicuously fixes his attention on a young, beautiful boy while his father is still sitting next to him. Plato also represents Socrates's sexuality inconsistently, once as dizzy and drunk with his love for Charmides and at the same time as full of contempt for the boy's beauty (Plato, *Charm.* 154d-155d = Athenaeus 187e-f).<sup>14</sup>

Athenaeus's critique is carried out in the spirit of the above-mentioned distinction between words and deeds. Philosophers are champions of moderation only *prima facie*. When we look at how they behave at symposia, we see that they have many vices, intemperance and malignity being at the forefront. The *ad hominem* argumentation exploits a clever double-edged comparative method: on the one hand, it compares philosophical texts with philosophical concepts of self-control and virtuous behaviour; on the other hand, it compares texts of Socratics with Homeric epic.

The question is whether this critique bears the same mark of *chronique scandaleuse* and irrational fanaticism as the previous one. We may argue that Plato and Xenophon wanted to depict Socrates in a looser manner and in a different social context, where a philosopher had to be more relaxed and cheerful. Moreover, the image of philosophers lusting after carnal pleasures and getting drunk in convivial amusements shows that they were normal people of flesh and blood, not the perfect, divine paradigms of heroic epics and poems. What Athenaeus and his sources intentionally overlook is that philosophy was, first and foremost, a way of life (*filosofikos bios*) whose aim was to constantly improve oneself and gain control over oneself. By comparing philosophers with Homeric ideals and gods, Athenaeus simply puts too much emphasis on excellence and presupposes a much more idealised portrait of philosophers than we find in philosophical texts. In a sense, therefore, we assert that Athenaeus and his sources inadequately hypostasise the ideal of the philosophical life and forcibly criticise philosophers. In this case, Athenaeus is closer to the internal type of anti-philosophical literature because it, too, postulates a highly idealised ascetic way of philosophical life veiled in a Homeric mantle. Athenaeus draws here primarily on a wider Socratic philosophical tradition (Stoicism).

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Athenaeus 219c-d, where unknown verses addressed to Socrates by Aspasia are cited (coming probably from the dialogue by some minor Socratic, maybe Aeschines of Sphettus).

In one aspect, Athenaeus's critique is nonetheless suggestive and thought-provoking: by distinguishing between words and deeds, it points to the need for a more detailed examination of the possible contradictions between philosophical doctrines and their real-life personas. The image of Socratic philosophers as people fond of wine and sexual pleasures was indeed prevalent in ancient literature. If we were to regard his criticism as the product of sheer fiction and malignity, we might run into the problem of other comparative evidence which supports rather than refutes his findings. In the next part of the study, we, therefore, take a closer look at other textual evidence that addresses the issue of two cardinal vices of the Socratics in order to decide the question of whether Athenaeus's criticism is at least partially substantiated and justified.

### Comparative evidence for *gynaikofilia*

Socrates was pictured as a man of uncontrollable sexual appetite (*mulierosus*, *libidinosus*) by his pupil Phaedo of Elis in the dialogue *Zopyros*. Aristoxenus of Tarentum also mentions that Socrates was known to be “a womaniser” (*gynaikomanēs*).<sup>15</sup> There are even multiple doxographic testimonies informing us that Socrates's wife, Xanthippe was once a prostitute and that he also kept a second wife, named Myrto, in the household (Fitton 1970; Woodbury 1973; Bicknell 1974). In the Socratic literature, we find some passages where Socrates appears as an expert in the art of “pimping” (*mastropeia*) and “erotic seduction” (*ta erōtika*).<sup>16</sup> Socrates is also said to have maintained close relations with several famous hetairai, including the famous Aspasia and Theodote.<sup>17</sup>

In Plato's erotology, the love of the body is rather unplatonicly conceived as a necessary and fundamental condition for the love of the higher order – that is, the love of true wisdom. The same idea is presented in a different context in the dialogue *Phaedrus*, where erotic madness and physical, sexual love gives the soul the germs of wings. Without these wings, the soul cannot ascend to the higher realms of non-corporeal existence.<sup>18</sup> Plato concedes, albeit dimly and discreetly, that love of other people's bodies is very beneficiary for the soul and for philosophical progress in general. Love of body is the first step on the ladder of love, and without it is impossible to ascend towards Idea.

In Socratic philosophy, erotology can also be developed in a very different, more mundane manner. Cynics and Cyrenaics frequently visited public houses and did not recognise the institution of marriage. Some modern authors have hypothesised that an unconventional attitude towards women and sexual intercourse was taken over by the Cynics directly from Socrates (Maier 1913, 412). Diogenes of Sinope argued that marriage is against human nature. He recommended, exactly in the spirit of Antisthenes and Aristippus, the advice that any man should have sex with any woman if she agrees with it.<sup>19</sup> Crates of Thebes organised the notorious “dog marriage” (*kynogamia*) with her consort Hipparchia of Maroneia. They practised sexual intercourse in open public sites so that everyone could watch them and understand what is in accordance with *fysis* and what is imposed by *nomos*.<sup>20</sup> One of the most shameful cynic practices was Diogenes's *cheiourgia*, described in one of his purported letters. When a certain hetaira was late for an appointment, he rubbed his genitals with his own hand

<sup>15</sup> For primary evidence and interpretations, see Huffman 2012, 270; Zelinová 2021, 8. There is no plausible reason to consider these testimonies as biased or products of fanaticism/scandalisation.

<sup>16</sup> Xenophon, *Symp.* 3. 10, 4. 56; Plato, *Tht.* 151b; Plato, *Symp.* 193e, 198d.

<sup>17</sup> Xenophon, *Mem.* IV. 11; Plato, *Menex.* 236b. Socrates's erotic qualities and abilities were also reflected by other Socratic authors, namely Aeschines of Sphettus, see Zelinová 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Symp.* 210a-c; *Phdr.* 256b-e.

<sup>19</sup> DL *Vit.* 6. 72. Cf. Xenophon, *Symp.* 4. 38. For Diogenes's sexual practices and philosophy, see Kalaš 2016.

<sup>20</sup> The relationship between Crates and Hipparchia is further analysed in the study Cepko – Kalaš – Suvák 2021.



and thus expelled the semen. After she arrived, he told her: “My hand forestalled you in singing the marriage song before your arrival, being aware that the satisfaction of sexual needs can be contrived with greater ease than those of the stomach” (Diogenes of Sinope, *Ep.* 42).<sup>21</sup> In the minds of ordinary people, such practices must stir contempt. Being a Socratic philosopher in the 4th century BCE Greek world was naturally associated with prostitution and prostitutes, as is evident from the following words of the hetaira Glycera to Stilpon: “You and I are accused of the same thing, Stilpon; for they say that you corrupt all who come to you, by teaching them profitless and amorous sophistries; and they accuse me of the same thing: for if people waste their time, and are treated ill, it makes no difference whether they are living with a philosopher or with a harlot” (Athenaeus 584a). This repartee may come from some comic play, but it also reflects the close and intimate relationship between philosophers and prostitutes.

The cohabitation of prostitutes with philosophers and non-traditional forms of male-female unions can be traced back to early Pythagoreanism and its strange communistic way of life. The common sharing of women between members of the sect may be practised in the spirit of saying “friends have everything in common” (*koina tōn filōn*).<sup>22</sup> In the philosophical schools of Athens, unorthodox attitudes towards the relationship between man and woman fell on fertile ground. There is some evidence that hetairai attended lectures in Plato’s Academy, and even sadomasochistic practices could take place there, though rarely; also, Aristotle’s second wife was reported to have been a hetaira, and Epicurus’s garden was an oasis of free love – Epicurus himself lived in *ménage à trois* with Metrodorus and the hetaira Leontis (*cf.* Kapparis 2018, 128-137). Even one of the most puritan philosophers of antiquity, Zeno of Citium, “once or twice indeed might have a young girl to wait on him in order not to seem a misogynist” (DL *Vit.* 6. 13).<sup>23</sup> Indeed, this was surely a moderate form of philosophical *philantropia* and a display of self-control!

### Comparative evidence for *paiderastia*

As the scholarship on ancient sexuality expanded in the period between the 1960s and 1980s, the study of homoerotic and homosexual relationships among philosophers began to be taken more seriously. The teacher-pupil homosexual relationship is attested in the cases of many philosophers.<sup>24</sup> The earliest mention of homosexual relationships among philosophers is found in Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides*, where it is stated that Zeno of Elea was not only a disciple of Parmenides but also his “lover” (*paidika*). The same term was also used by Aristoxenos to describe the relationship between Socrates and his teacher Archelaus (Plato, *Parm.* 127b; DL *Vit.* 2. 19).

At first glance, from the viewpoint of contemporary norms and morale, it does not seem to be in any way strange or disgraceful. Athenaeus and his sources, however, criticised not so much the homosexual inclinations and practices *per se* but rather the fact that they exceeded the right measure. Let’s return to Herodicus’s bitter quote about Socrates’s laestrygonianism: what almost all Platonic scholars unanimously overlook is the fact that in Plato’s *Symposium*, Socrates, quite intoxicated from drinking wine all night long, at the dawn of a new day, heads

<sup>21</sup> Transl. R. Hard. *Cf.* similar story in Galen, *De loc. affect.* 8. 419.

<sup>22</sup> See the sceptical account of the whole issue in Rowett 2014, 122. According to her *in passim* remark, ancient testimonies from a peripatetic biographical and doxographical milieu (Dicaearchus, Clearchus) may be taken from comic sources. More extensive remarks and complex overviews are offered by Kapparis 2018, 126-127, who refrains from the judgement whether it is historical or not.

<sup>23</sup> Transl. R. D. Hicks.

<sup>24</sup> In the *Vitae* of Diogenes Laertius, we can identify more than nine such pairs, including Plato – Dion, Aristotle – Hermias, Xenophon – Critobulus, Arcesilaus – Crantor, Betion – Bion of Borysthenes etc. For a general summary of homoerotic relationships between males in classical antiquity, see Keuls 1985, 276; Kapparis 2018, 187.

straight to the gymnasium to watch naked beautiful young boys taking exercises. Xenophon's *Symposium* also ends in a very similar fashion: while other attendants of the banquet are going home to please their wives and female lovers, drunken Socrates is eager to see the beautiful young son of a certain Lykon and is going to visit him directly (Plato, *Symp.* 223d; Xenophon, *Symp.* 9. 7).

We can also glimpse Socrates's overly homoerotic inclinations in additional passages in Plato and Xenophon, which openly mention Socrates's great weakness for the beautiful bodies of young men, verging on the psychopathological. In the opening scene of *Charmides*, Socrates describes his violent and uncontrollable desire for the body of young Charmides in the following words: "he came and sat down between me and Critias. But here, my friend, I began to feel perplexed...ah then, my noble friend, I saw inside his cloak and caught fire, and could possess myself no longer...beware of coming as a fawn before the lion, and being seized as his portion of flesh; for I too felt I had fallen a prey to some such creature" (Plato, *Charm.* 155c-d).<sup>25</sup> In Xenophon's *Memorabilia* we find only one passage in which the author recalls how he once annoyed Socrates so much that he started to yell at him and insult him: this was immediately after Xenophon told him about his desire to kiss the young, beautiful Critobulus on the lips. Socrates's rant against Critias's affair with young Euthydemus was probably triggered by the same cause – Socrates's own jealousy.<sup>26</sup> Ancient doxographers also recall how Socrates used to take his youthful lovers straight to his house, where his furious wife lurked at them and interrupted their amorous designs in a quite disgraceful way (Plutarchos, *De ire* 461d; Athenaeus 643f).

In Plato, homoerotic inclinations also found metaphysical expression in the form of the myth of anthropogenesis. Two human beings were originally united in a composite being and coexisted in three kinds of species: male (man + man), androgynous (man + woman) and feminine (woman + woman). For undisclosed reasons, the gods decided to punish these primordial composite beings and cut them into two separate parts. This separation is the reason why every man and woman on earth is looking for his lost second part and falls in love either with a man or woman. Plato does not forget to emphasise that men who are sections of the male are the finest and have the manliest nature: "Some say they are shameless creatures, but falsely: for their behaviour is due not to shamelessness but to daring, manliness and virility, since they are quick to welcome their like...So when they come to man's estate they are boy-lovers, and have no natural interest in wiving and getting children" (Plato, *Symp.* 192a-b). This is a clear indication that for Plato, homoerotic love and male homosexuality, particularly *paiderastia*, was the expression of the noblest class of mankind – the lovers of wisdom.

Textual evidence for such unorthodox attitudes and sexual practices is abundant, and it could hardly be lumped together as inventions and fabrications. Of course, not every doxographical or biographical report has to be taken as historical fact, but the line between fact and fiction is here inadvertently blurred, and modern historiography is not in the position to come to a categorical verdict. If we take into consideration Plato's and Xenophon's texts alone, Athenaeus's critique seems to be at least partially plausible.

## Conclusion

Numerous ancient philosophers were ousted from society not only for introducing new gods but also for corrupting the youth (Filonik 2013). The birth of philosophical schools in Athens in 4th century BCE meant a revolution in social and political thought. Philosophic

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<sup>25</sup> Transl. W. R. M. Lamb.

<sup>26</sup> Xenophon, *Mem.* 1. 3. 13 (Xenophon and Critobulus; Socrates called Xenophon "a moron"), *Mem.* 1. 2. 30 (Critias and Euthydemus; Socrates called Critias "swinish").

schools were the most progressive centres not only in the realm of theoretical knowledge but also in more practical, down-to-earth affairs. Instead of following old customs and traditions, philosophers premeditated alternative social orders and often chose to live life behind the walls of their schools, where they formed familial relationships with their teachers and fellow students or cohabitated with unmarried women in loose love relationships. What was perceived by ordinary people in antiquity as a temporary or regional educational practice or an institution with a clearly defined temporal duration and social purpose (such as *paiderastia*) was, in the case of some philosophers, hyperbolised and taken to the extreme. Some philosophers remained in a love relationship with their darlings and did not establish regular families. From the viewpoint of ancient Greek morale, this must have been highly unusual and odd. The conservative society may easily have directed its attention to it and considered such practices as shameful and degenerate.

We can understand the spread of anti-philosophical literature and its hostile attitude towards philosophers much better if we take into account the wider picture of the related social and cultural context in which philosophers co-existed with the rest of society. This does not simply mean that the anti-philosophical critique is right and substantiated. Philosophers were not outright liars, villains or shameful perverts. However, their innovative attitude and experimental approaches led them not only to formulations of different conceptions and theories about the universe and nature but also to reformulations of traditional conceptions about morality, the good life and happiness.

If we bluntly reject Athenaeus's testimony and the whole corpus of anti-philosophical literature as scandalmongering and irrational fanaticism, we throw the baby out with the bath water. His subtle attack on philosophers is carried out cleverly, utilising the theoretical framework and vocabulary of philosophy combined with a meticulous philological and comparative approach. It opens before us a new interpretative horizon which, instead of idealised and romanticised interpretations infused with Christian asceticism, offers a more realistic interpretation of ancient philosophy in its own *Lebenswelt*, an interpretation that acknowledges the fact that a considerable part of ancient society had its own reasons to perceive philosophers as a crowd of Gorgons, winged horses and other hardly conceivable beings living in their own strange world, where words could sometimes significantly differ from deeds.

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