

The Platonic Socrates and the ‘Science of Nature’: a Parallel Reading of the *Apology* and the *Phaedo*

1. Introduction

Among Plato’s writings, a serious divergence seems to oppose two specific textual segments: Socrates’ defense against the ‘first accusations’ in the *Apology* (18a7-20e3) and his ‘autobiography’ in the *Phaedo* (96a6-99c9). In the *Apology*, Socrates appears to deny, at first sight, that he ever had any involvement with what may be called the ‘science of nature’, or ‘physics’. Socrates’ tale in the *Phaedo* sounds altogether different: in his youth, he had made some serious attempts to practice this science, and then had desisted thoroughly. By taking into account Aristophanes’ portrait of Socrates as an omniscient *sophos* and thus as a ‘scientist’, the contrast grows even bitter: since this Socratic portrait is as resolutely constructed in the *Clouds* as it is rejected in the *Apology*, either Socrates did get involved in ‘physics’ (somehow, sometime), and the *Apology* includes a lie, or he did not, and the *Phaedo* includes a relate which is as much an invention as the *Clouds*¹. According to a standard view, both the *Clouds* and the *Phaedo* may hold more than a grain of truth, while the denial of the *Apology* does not deserve too much attention: it is just a by-product of Socrates’ usual irony, it is merely instrumental to Socrates’ defense, or it only adds a negligible detail to the Platonic portrait of Socrates². Or it is just an anticipation of what the *Phaedo* will explain more exhaustively³.

But which Socrates? Both the *Apology* and the *Phaedo* can be read, with all due precautions, as historical documents of sorts: certainly not factual reports, yet (more or less) reliable depictions of what only a man like Socrates might have said or done, obviously in Plato’s opinion; in this case, what is at stake is the historical truth of Socrates’ ‘scientific’ experiences. A second approach consists in using these texts in order to discriminate between the different roles Socrates is called to play within Plato’s philosophical elaboration: a master, a model, a mouthpiece, an antagonist of the author, and so on; in this case, Socrates’ involvement with ‘physics’ (or lack of it) needs to be read as a cipher of Plato’s own, possibly evolving, philosophical appreciation of the ‘science of nature’. A third approach consists in considering ‘Socrates’ as a purely literary persona, an actant in the overall narrative which unfolds

¹ For a recent restatement of this traditional dilemma, see e.g. Zuckert 2009, 182 n. 4: «[In the *Phaedo*,] Plato’s Socrates seems to acknowledge what he is at pains to deny in the *Apology* – namely, that there is a basis for Aristophanes’ depiction of a philosopher named Socrates as a student of nature in his *Clouds*».

² Among others, see respectively Burnet 1926, 82 (with the critical remarks by Stokes 1997, 108); Cerri 2003, 51; and Guthrie 1971, 103 on Socrates’ apparent denial at *Ap.* 19c that he ever practised ‘physics’: «It is reasonable to claim that these words of Socrates cannot annihilate all the rest». For Morrison 2006, 103, the contradiction opposes the *Apology* and the *Clouds*, while the *Phaedo* may reconcile both portraits.

³ Cf. Rowe 2007, 102: «Socrates of course claims in the *Apology*, with his human jurors as audience, that he knows nothing about physics at all (19c)... he repeats the same claim in the *Phaedo*, albeit in a different form.»

along Plato's dialogues: in this case, Socrates' attitude towards *περὶ φύσεως ἰστορίας* is to be considered as the result of a textual strategy aimed at creating an absolutely exceptional character.

Following the latter approach, the present essay argues that the sections of the *Apology* and the *Phaedo* describing Socrates' position in respect of 'physics' are together apt to produce a single, well-articulated, wholly homogeneous representation. A parallel close reading of the relevant passages may not only dissolve some apparent 'contradictions': it may also bring to the light a mutual cooperation. These texts obey one same authorial intention. Far from endangering the overall consistency of the Platonic Socrates, they indeed support and clarify each other. What they produce, to employ an image which is given some relevance in the *Phaedo* (100a5, 101d5), is not a *diaphonein* but a *symphonein*.

There is no need here to raise such intricate questions as the internal stratification of the Platonic corpus or the evolution of Plato's thought. Even the possibly unproblematic assumption that the *Apology* is chronologically prior to the *Phaedo* is not really indispensable to the present reading. As for the 'real' Socrates, he must remain out of the picture, although even the following strictly textual discussion may indirectly contribute to his identification.

2. *Apology*, 18a7-20e3: what Socrates really denies

2.1.

One of the first defensive moves made by Socrates in the Platonic *Apology* consists in denouncing the slander that has been directed against him since years. A large part of the public opinion, by now, identifies Socrates as a *sophos aner*, one among those habitual debaters of extravagant questions who are a current feature of the Athenian life. This kind of *sophia*, the capacity to investigate all things that are both 'aloft' and under the earth (τά τε μετέωρα φροντιστής και τὰ ὑπὸ γῆς πάντα ἀνεζητηκῶς: 18b7 f.)⁴, also implies the ability to turn the worse into the better speech (και τὸν ἥττω λόγον κρείττω ποιῶν: 18b6-c1 = 19b5-c1), which is a most suspicious one: common opinion has it that such studies imply an effective disregard for the gods (19c2 f.).

Socrates explains that this is just an equivocation (18a6-e4). Everything was started long ago by some well-known comic authors, who introduced a patently absurd Socrates in their plays⁵. The appearance of such a ridiculous, yet obviously fictitious, character was exploited by some anonymous slanderers who spread around their malevolent allegations against the real man. Gradually, even people in good

⁴ On this couple, see Burnet 1926, 75; Brancacci 1997, 308 and n. 5 f. According to Taylor 1911, 137 f. and Burnet 1926, 76 f., the word φροντιστής (18b7) directly points to Aristophanes' comic terminology (cf. Aristoph. *Nub.* 94). The textual construction τὰ ... μετέωρα φροντιστής is unusual: see Stokes 1997, 104 f., supporting the excision of φροντιστής proposed by Bamberg; Heitsch 2002, 61 n. 50.

⁵ This is one of the very few surely historical data likely to be reproduced in the *Apology*: cf. Patzer 1994 for the treatment of Socrates in Attic comedy.

faith became persuaded in increasing numbers⁶. Socrates, therefore, is now facing an impossible situation: a huge amount of damning public rumors, but not a single individual accuser. Having nobody to address, he has nobody to refute (18d5, d7): he is reduced to fighting with a shadow (18d6). When he challenges the jury to produce just one single witness in support of the 'first accusations' (19d1-7), he does more than playing «a trick of the trade»⁷: he is in fact stressing that the Athenian public communication system has been working against him in a most perverse way⁸. Anonymous calumny, he declares in other words, could be successful only because it circulated within an extra-dialogical environment. No dialogue, no truth.

In order to defend himself, Socrates, for the moment, omits any reference to his opinions (he comes back to the specific issue of his θεοὺς νομίζειν only when discussing the 'second', or formal, accusations: 26b9-28a1) and concentrates on his activities, his *pragma*⁹. In the terms he lends to his accusers, he «willfully produces damage (ἀδικεῖ) and makes a public nuisance of himself (περιεργάζεται) by researching what is under the earth and in the sky, and by giving victory to the worse discourse against the better one; he also teaches all such things to others» (19b4-c1)¹⁰. Socrates' awful reputation is described in terms which are conveniently uplifted from Aristophanes' *Clouds*¹¹. To take that comedy as an hypotext is likely to produce a powerful defensive implication: the 'first accusations' against Socrates are just as serious and reliable as the fiction upon which they ultimately rely. The popular vision of Socrates as a *sophos aner* is entitled to the same degree of truth of a comic play: that is, none.

This is not to mean that such a popular vision has no consistency at all. Indeed, Socrates denial has a double aim. It invests the assimilation of the real Socrates to the fictitious buffoon who is given the same name by the comic authors. At the same time, it also invests the assimilation of the living Socrates to all those living individuals who purport to devote themselves to learning. Socrates is at once denying that he behaves as the fictitious 'scientists' of comedy and as the real 'scientists' of contemporary Athens.

⁶ The whole process thus develops in some successive phases: cf. Archer-Hind 1894, 89 n. 2; Taylor 1911, 158 n. 2; Burnet 1926, 75; de Strycker – Slings 1994, 256, 259. In any case, Socrates' reconstruction (18b1-e4) gives the comic authors as the initiators of the whole process, yet puts all the blame on the anonymous initial slanderers only.

⁷ In the words of Burnet 1926, 83, who refers to Andoc. 1.37, 69; Demosth. 47.44, 50.3. Cf. Stokes 1997, 109: «a disreputable orator's device».

⁸ Socrates has already stressed that he is being accused «in the absence of any defender» (ἐρήμην 18c7): cf. Stokes 1997, 105.

⁹ *Ap.* 20c4-8 (cf. πρῶγμα, c5; πραγματευομένου, c7; ἔπραττες, c8). Cf. Pucci 1961, 318; de Strycker – Slings, 50 f.

¹⁰ This translation makes the most of the remarks by de Strycker – Slings 1994, 50 f.: by themselves, all such (presumed) speculations are no crime (it is up to the formal accusations, which are inspired by the 'first' ones, to detail Socrates' properly criminal actions: corrupting youth, and practising and spreading 'atheism': see *Ap.* 23d2-24c2). On the charge of 'atheism' against Socrates, see Jedrkiewicz 2008.

¹¹ Cf. Burnet 1926, 75; Stokes 1997, 105. The term 'sophist' is not used in this passage: Edmunds 2006, 417 f. and Edmunds 2007, 184 f.

2.2

The three allegations against Socrates may look disparate at first sight. In fact, they are strictly connected:

a) Popular opinion endows the kind of *sophos aner* to which Socrates is being identified with an exclusive competence: the contents of this wisdom owe nothing to usual experience; they don't satisfy any normal curiosity or usual need. Strepsiades' vicissitudes emphasize that, whatever it is that such 'wise men' do know, it is pretty valueless, when not outright harmful, to any ordinary human being;

b) Any particular *sophia* needs to be articulated by means of an apposite discourse. This one, uncanny as it is, defies common sense and honest belief and produces some preposterous assertions: for instance, that sun and moon are nothing else than stones or pieces of earth (*Ap.* 26d4 f.). Rhetorical manipulation (turning the worse *logos* into the better) is therefore the indispensable instrument for displaying and asserting such an arcane learning. Competence in 'eristics' needs to be the other face of competence in 'physics'¹². Once again, Strepsiades provides the evidence in reverse: he just wanted to acquire as much rhetorical ability as needed to silence his creditors, and discovered that he also had to study *ta meteora* and all that stuff (*Aristoph. Nub.* 239 ff.).

c) In connection to the knowledge of those things that remain inaccessible to the inferior mind of a mere mortal, an *hephemeros* as the comic Socrates calls Strepsiades (*Aristoph. Nub.* 223), the capability to produce an irresistible discourse confers special prestige and authority to the wise man. A *sophos aner* is by definition somebody able to teach his *sophia*¹³. He may therefore appear as a dispenser of human and political excellence¹⁴. Quoting the foremost contemporary experts in the activity of *paideuein*, Socrates makes the names of Gorgias, Prodicus and Hippias, and tells an anecdote about the well-known millionaire Callias recruiting a self-proclaimed omniscient teacher, Evenus, in order to impart the best available *paideia* to his two sons for a high fee (19e1-20c).

Apparently a digression, this episode adds an essential feature to the Socratic rendering of the 'wise man'. Socrates has so far been referring to this depiction as to a mere stereotype, manufactured by comedy and adopted almost at face value by public opinion. He is now proceeding to suggest that such comic clichés are also being translated into reality. The characters whom he mentions as examples of such extraordinary paideutic abilities, Evenus among them, are all perfectly real¹⁵. On the other hand, Callias, who is only too happy to share such beliefs, is at the same time a comic character in his own right¹⁶. Socrates' implicit point is that the confused, uncritical and finally utterly groundless notion of *sophia* which is spread by comedy and accepted at face value by public opinion is in fact being shared even by those who might know better, the members of the social élite and the real 'wise men'

¹² *Ta meteora* need to be the object of a specific discursive practice, *meteorologia*: cf. Edmunds 2007, 184 f.

¹³ See Brancacci 1997, 310 and n. 11.

¹⁴ Cf. *Ap.* 20b4 f.: τίς τῆς τοιαύτης ἀρετῆς, τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης τε καὶ πολιτικῆς, ἐπιστήμων ἐστίν;

¹⁵ At *Phd.* 60d3, Evenus is again mentioned among Socrates' contemporaries.

¹⁶ See Nails 2002, 68-73. In particular, Eupolis' *Flatterers* (421 B.C.) points to Callias' fancy for meddling with 'intellectuals', a trait apparently picked up by Plato in the *Protagoras*.

themselves. Evenus and Callias shape their respective behaviour according to prejudice. The intrinsically comical, unrealistic portrait of the 'intellectuals' circulating in public opinion becomes true to a degree. In their actual *pragma*, all these 'wise men' turn out to be almost like that in reality.

In all its various manifestations, this weird *sophia* rejected by Socrates has an invariable property: it operates in an extra-dialogical dimension. First, when acting as a teacher the 'wise man' infuses *paideia* into a duly receptive, that is passive, pupil. Secondly, the layman is hardly in the condition to discuss, even less to contradict, all those abstruse *logoi* about *ta meteora* and the like. If he is unwilling to defer to such sapiential authority, he may only refuse to listen, or laugh the whole mumbo-jumbo away, or eventually drag the *sophos aner* into court under a charge of impiety. It is either total submission or total refusal: once again, this is how Strepsiades respectively started and ended. Finally, the technique allowing the worse *logos* to overpower the better one promotes conflict, not cooperation; 'eristics' aim at silencing interlocutors, not at persuading them. To practice dialogue by such instruments and to such ends is in fact to practice no dialogue at all.

Socrates disclaims possession of all such abilities: (i) in respect of 'eristics', he has declared from start that he owns no special rhetorical competence, speaks only the simplest language, and is just able to state the plain truth (17a1-18a6); (ii) in respect of *paideia*, he is about to declare that he is no teacher, for he has almost nothing to teach (19c1-20c3); (iii) as for 'physics', he utters a most categorical denial.

2.3

This denial is issued by means of a rather complex passage (19a8-d7). The text stresses Socrates' spontaneity, yet its construction also conveys some important implications which may not be immediately apparent. At first view, Socrates seems to produce an energetic speech-act whose denotational content is vague at best.

Socrates' argument evolves in four steps:

A) 19a8-c1: Socrates sums up the first accusations as if they were formal charges (they have indeed inspired Meletus, one of the three accusers); he lists their three different points: in short, 'physics', 'eristics', and 'paideutics'.

B) 19c1-c5: He equates all such charges to Aristophanes' comic fiction depicting a character who pours forth a flood of ludicrous nonsense, *phlyaria*. He obviously has absolutely nothing to do with 'those things' (cf. ὅν ἐγὼ οὐδὲν οὔτε μέγα οὔτε μικρὸν περὶ ἐπαίω, 19c4-5).

C) 19c5-8: He suddenly explains that, by such a refusal, he does certainly not mean to disparage 'that kind of knowledge', provided that somebody is competent in it (cf. καὶ οὐχ ὡς ἀτιμάζων λέγω τὴν τοιαύτην ἐπιστήμην, εἴ τις περὶ τῶν τοιούτων σοφός ἐστιν, c5-7). But he can solemnly attest that he has nothing to share with 'those things' (cf. ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἐμοὶ τούτων, ὃ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, οὐδὲν μέτεστιν, c8). For the moment, Socrates' other interjection – he wishes that Meletus may not take him to court under the charge of 'slandering *physics*' (cf. μή πως ἐγὼ ὑπὸ Μελήτου τοσαύτας δίκας φεύγοιμι, c7) – sounds like a somewhat gratuitous jibe.

D) 19d1-7: Socrates finally asks his judges to review all that they may have heard him saying, and challenges them to produce the slightest evidence that he ever took ‘such things’ as the subject of his well-known, distinctive activity: to conduct dialogues in the open (cf. εἰ πάποτε ἢ μικρὸν ἢ μέγα ἤκουσέ τις ὑμῶν ἐμοῦ περὶ τῶν τοιούτων διαλεγομένου, d4-5).

Within this paragraph, two stylistic features are specially relevant:

a) Two idiomatic sentences, ὧν ἐγὼ οὐδὲν οὔτε μέγα οὔτε μικρὸν πέρι ἐπαίω (19c4-5) and ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἐμοὶ τούτων... οὐδὲν μέτεστιν (19c8). Both are used to produce denials so radical that they dispense Socrates from naming their precise object.

b) Four pronominal occurrences, which designate the objects of Socrates’ repeated denials: ὧν (19c4) may only refer to Aristophanes’ comic depiction of Socrates; τῶν τοιούτων (19c6), to the contents of the *episteme* Socrates has just mentioned. But the proper reference of τούτων at 19c8 and of τῶν τοιούτων at 19d5 is by no means obvious. The reader may respectively take Socrates to declare that (1) he has nothing to share with ‘physics’ as such, and that (2) nobody has ever seen him behaving in public as Aristophanes pretends.

It is precisely the first of such two readings, however, that risks pitting the *Apology* against the *Phaedo*: were he to deny literally that he ever had ‘anything to do with physics’, Socrates would flatly contradict his own ‘autobiographical’ tale. But such reading would raise an internal problem as well: for Socrates is soon depicted as having something, and indeed more than just something, to share with ‘physics’. This happens in the only other passage of the *Apology* where ‘physics’ come into play once again, and Meletus is on stage in person. At 26d1-e2, Socrates easily refutes Meletus’ allegation that Socrates holds (and declares in public) the ‘atheistic’ view that the sun and the moon are just some pieces of earth: these are Anaxagoras’ theories. Socrates must therefore have some sound information about what Anaxagoras asserts (a considerable amount of bizarre statements, he says). He even knows how that is asserted (in writing), and how it could be learned (by buying the book in the *orchestra*, for a few drachmas). By itself, this scene would be enough to prove that Socrates has indeed gained some rather precise information about ‘physics’ (with his usual irony, Socrates however disclaims any special expertise: all the present members of the jury, he suggests, may have as much)¹⁷.

But Socrates’ familiarity with ‘physics’ is attested by the very form of his denial. At 19c5 f., Socrates formally asserts that he does respect ‘physics’ as an *episteme*, i.e. as an investigation about the physical world having the intention to produce some effective knowledge¹⁸. He immediately adds a substantial qualification (19c6

¹⁷ Provided that they had read Anaxagoras’ book, however, and this action may not be taken for granted. This scene does not seem to imply in earnest that Anaxagoras’ prose was accessible to all and sundry in Socrates’ times. Cf. Barnes 1989, 249: «if that is so, times have changed: of all Pre-socratics Anaxagoras is the most difficult». According to Shero 1942, 219, this passage depicts Anaxagoras as an outmoded author. But Socrates’ point here is his fundamental one: he is not wiser than anybody else.

¹⁸ This meaning of *episteme* becomes apparent in Socrates’ repeated use of the verb *epistamai* shortly after. At 20b4-8 and 20c2 f., Socrates declares that one can only teach the knowledge one as really acquired (see the use of ἐπιστήμων, 20b5; ἠπιστάμην, ἐπίσταμαι, 20c2 f.), for one cannot teach what one does not know (cf. also ἐπίσταμαι at 20e2). He also gives the teacher the punning label of *epistates* (20a8, b4).

f.): in order to practice such an investigation, one needs to be adequately *sophos*, and there may be no one owning such a level of competence. Now, the existence of such an *episteme* is the speaker's invention (neither the comedians nor the public voice had any use for that word). Is this surprising declaration of respect for 'physics' just an improvised joke? It indeed turns the 'first charges' upside down: the crime now consists in disparaging 'physics', not in practising them¹⁹... Yet Socrates' jokes usually introduce a substantial point. In this case, Socrates asserts that comic *phlyaria*, and its derivation in real life, are not all: there seems also to be something else, namely a serious *episteme* about 'physics' – so serious that it may demand an impossibly high level of *sophia* from its practitioners. What has emerged may then work as a potentially serious epistemological principle.

Socrates is thus uttering some fairly clear ideas of his own about 'physics'. How can he therefore conclude that he has 'nothing to do with those things (τούτων)' (19c9), if 'those things' are understood to consist in 'physics'? But the term τούτων may have a different reference, the same reference as ὧν at 19c4: 'those things' Socrates has 'nothing to do with' consist in playing the scientific buffoon of the sort portrayed in the *Clouds* (this is indeed the substantial charge he has to ward off). By denying that his behavior has anything in common with that ridiculous model, Socrates, by the same token, also denies having anything in common with those contemporary 'wise men' who tend to behave in a similar way. His words, as they run from 19c4 to 19c8, may then be rendered in the following extended paraphrase: «I am not the scientific fool whom Aristophanes describes in his play. But I mean no offense to 'science' (Meletus could lay another charge against me for that!). Far from it: to me, 'physics' are not the nonsense depicted in comedy. They are something serious, an *episteme* (whether there is anybody with enough *sophia* for that is another question). So, really, I have nothing to do with either Aristophanes' antics or the posturing of the 'wise men' we all know».

As for the real antecedent of τῶν τοιούτων at 19d5, the evidence Socrates challenges the jury to produce (19d1) may relate to what he has just denied, namely that he behaves in public as a sort of clown. However, it may also relate to something different, which he is going to deny right now (αὐ̃ at 19d1 may be adversative²⁰), namely that his public practice ever dealt with the 'serious physics' whose possibility he has just asserted. At 19c6, the same form refers to the *episteme* of 'physics' twice: as an adjective (τὴν τοιαύτην ἐπιστήμην) and as a pronoun (περὶ τῶν τοιούτων). Socrates' point is that he would never discuss such things in his public *diagesthai* (note that even in his exchange with Meletus, at 26d1 ff., Socrates refrains from expressing any personal view about the nature of such 'meteorological' entities as the sun and the moon²¹). Of course, the reader is left at freedom to sur-

¹⁹ About this utterance, see de Strycker – Slings 1994, 53 f. (a purpose-clause); Stokes 1997, 108 (a wish). Stokes' supposition that Socrates might be referring to «the law cited in Demosth. 57.30 forbidding disparagement of the work of any citizen, male or female» in the *agora* would indeed confirm 'physics' as an activity requiring a specific kind of competence (*sophia*). Socrates speaks as if the *episteme* of 'physics' really had some living practitioners in Athens (whatever the results).

²⁰ 19d1: μάρτυρας δὲ αὐ̃ ὑμῶν τοὺς πολλοὺς παρῆχομαι.

²¹ His restraint is dictated by some excellent reasons: cf. Jedrkiewicz 2008, 172 f.

mise that Socrates may still discuss ‘physics’ in private²². The ‘first accusers’ would however be utterly indifferent to that: what they target is Socrates’ public *pragma*²³. Nevertheless, this unspoken proviso points to an important component in Socrates’ effective stance towards ‘physics’, and the *Phaedo* makes the most out of it.

The conspicuous use of relative forms within this passage, therefore, confers the largest possible extension to Socrates’ disclaimers, while preserving the loophole that will safeguard truth. Socrates issues not one, but three different denials: (i) he is absolutely not like Aristophanes’ fictional character; (ii) he is absolutely not like the real *sophoi* who busy themselves with ‘physics’, not to mention ‘eristics’ and ‘pau-deutics’ (he soon expands that at 19d8-20c3, with specific reference to teaching). (iii) As for practising ‘physics’ as an *episteme*, he never did that either. He means, never in the open.

For sure, this latter negation anticipates the central theme of the *Apology*, the idiosyncratic nature of Socrates’ own brand of knowledge. It is soon amplified at 20d7-e2, where Socrates declares that whatever *sophia* he may hold is an exclusively human one: to claim some effective knowledge in ‘physics’ is to claim possession of a supra-human *sophia* (the description of Socrates’ only too human *sophia* follows immediately: 20d6-23b7)²⁴. Yet that does *not* imply that Socrates never attempted to practice ‘physics’ as an *episteme*. That he may have practiced ‘serious physics’ (in private) is precisely what he does not deny. In a sense, as already noted, he has no need for that, given that his strictly private activities have no relevance to the ‘first charges’. In another sense, his argument as a whole presupposes that he *is* somehow knowledgeable in ‘physics’. Since he can discriminate such an *episteme* against its comic or popular misrepresentations, and qualify this discipline as a highly demanding one, Socrates needs to have acquired some rather precise notion of what ‘physics’ are about. In order to know that he has no *sophia* in such matters, and that nobody may have, he needs to have engaged into some investigation of sorts about ‘those things’, achieving no result that he would rate as substantial ‘knowledge’²⁵. This kind of conclusion must result from experience; and the undeniable circumstance that he never made such an experience in the presence of anybody else means that he conducted it by himself²⁶.

²² Cf. de Strycker – Slings 1994, 53.

²³ Taylor 1911, 159 reads Socrates’ denial at 19d1-7 as «an ingenious evasion of the issue». But the ‘first accusers’ are described as being unconcerned by what Socrates might have researched or believed in private (the ‘second accusers’ too, for that matter): they only care for what they assume Socrates is doing in the open. As Socrates himself remarks, if he would just abandon his usual behaviour in public, and stop chiding the Athenians, his fellow-citizens would let him go unscathed: cf. *Ap.* 29c6-d1. Plat.*Euthyphr.*3c6-d9 makes a similar point: the Athenians may remain indifferent to any individual opinion, so long as the author doesn’t attempt to spread it all around.

²⁴ At 20d9-e2, Socrates repeats that to charge him with the possession of such a *sophia* (which he has never ‘learned’: cf. οὐ γὰρ δὴ ἔγωγε αὐτὴν ἐπίσταμαι, 20e2) would be tantamount to slandering him. He is of course referring to the sham *sophia* of the ‘wise men’ who pretend to be competent in ‘physics’, not to the authentic *episteme*.

²⁵ Cf. Brancacci 1997, 326 f.: ‘physics’ are one of the subjects about which Socrates knows he has no knowledge.

²⁶ There is nothing in such denials to suggest that they refer exclusively to Socrates’ *present* condition. Nothing implies here that in some distant past Socrates did practise some ‘physics’ in public, in such a way as to offer a golden occasion for fun to the contemporary comic authors (cf. e.g.

This leaves the door open to the 'autobiography' of the *Phaedo*. Within the *Apology*, it actually leaves Socrates with a fair amount of sound information about 'physics'. His ironical wish that Meletus may not criminalize him for disparaging the discipline (19c7) anticipates the scene where Meletus' ignorance is displayed to the full (26d1-e2). Socrates has already drawn a clear line between 'physics', an impossibly arduous *episteme*, and the posturing of the 'wise men'. Socrates now proves that he also knows his Anaxagoras. As he declares, the young people gathering around him certainly know as much and even his judges may eventually be able to check the contents of that book. This leaves out Meletus as the one who has 'nothing to do with physics': this ignoramus has obviously never laid his hands on Anaxagoras' writings, has no idea of what a genuine *episteme* should be, and can only perceive Socrates as the *sophos aner* of vulgar prejudice. He is the sort of fool liable to exclaim that Socrates, when remarking that the *sophoi* are represented in comedy as actual clowns, 'denigrates Science'.

3.4

To sum up, in his defense against the 'first accusations' Socrates seems to make the following points in respect of 'physics':

a) He does consider 'physics' as a respectable, i.e. genuine, *episteme*, which has nothing to do with the activities which are considered typical of the 'wise men', both in real life and in comedy²⁷.

b) As far as he is concerned, he nowhere declares, nor even implies or suggests, that he did not attempt to investigate such an *episteme*. On the contrary, he must have held some (strictly personal) investigation on the related subjects. He gained no knowledge from them, but became aware that he had no adequate *sophia* for these investigations, and that nobody might have (even the famous Anaxagoras failed, and just left a book behind him).

c) The reference to Aristophanes' *Clouds* is essential as a first step in order to define Socrates' own kind of *sophia*. It marks at once what Socrates is not: (i) not the wise man of comic fiction; (ii) not the equal of any of the contemporary *sophoi* (he has no rhetorical skills, does not discuss *ta meteora* and the rest, cannot teach anything at all). The 'first accusations' are therefore turned against the 'wise men': the comic paradigm applies to them, not to Socrates.

d) Socrates does surely not practice 'physics' as an *episteme* in public. The latter statement is the precondition of the whole action of the *Apology*, which describes how Socrates' own competences enable him to conduct a dialogical activity raising some unusual questions about human action and human values.

Burnet 1926, 82; Brickhouse – Smith 1989, 17, following Lacey 1971, 326 f.; Brancacci 1997, 311 and n. 16): Socrates is adamant that he *never* took any kind of 'physics' as the object of his public *dialegesthai*.

²⁷ His namesake in Xenophon's writings (e.g. *Mem.* 1.1.11-5) does not: he asserts that Anaxagoras became crazy for pursuing such studies beyond any practical purpose (*Mem.* 4.7.4-7). Cf. Vlastos 1991, 161 f. On the notable divergences running in general between Plato's and Xenophon's respective representations of Socrates, see Dorion 2004, 95-113.

3. *Phaedo* (96a6-99c9): how Socrates dealt with ‘physics’ (and why he was obliged to fail).

3.1

In his ‘autobiographical’ tale, Socrates gives a full relate of his involvements with ‘physics’. As a young man, he felt an intense curiosity for the material *aitiai* (‘causes’ or ‘reasons’) and thus became acquainted with Anaxagoras’ theories. In the *Apology*, the extremely swift depiction of Socrates’ stance towards ‘physics’ is instrumental in refuting the ‘first accusations’ and in paving the way to the deployment of the Socratic *sophia*. The ‘autobiography’ expands on this sketchy presentation; it explains, in retrospect, how Socrates came to acquire that familiarity with ‘physics’ which the *Apology* just suggests with no further explanation, and depicts a coherent existential experience. The self-contained tale of the *Phaedo* plays a strategic function: on the one hand, it highlights a major turning-point in Socrates’ life-long search for knowledge; on the other, it gives a new start to the collective philosophical investigation which is presently taking place, only to be interrupted, yet not ended, by Socrates’ death²⁸.

Socrates explains that his vicissitudes (cf. *τά γε ἐμὰ πάθη*, 96a2) were triggered by a ‘marvelous desire’ (cf. *θαυμαστῶς ὡς ἐπεθύμησα*, 96a7) to investigate the *aitiai* of generation, corruption, and being, at their most general (95e9-96a1)²⁹. He therefore considered some of the most intriguing puzzles formulated at that time (96a6-c1). This first phase ended in failure: Socrates was left to his own resources in order to solve his persisting problems (96c6-97b6). A second phase consisted in studying Anaxagoras (97b8-98b6), and ended in disillusion as well (98b7-c2). Socrates could nevertheless point to a major conceptual equivocation: all such theories assimilate the merely material preconditions of a given change to the genuine ‘cause’ of it (98c2-99b2), and therefore trigger a pointless search that systematically asks the wrong questions (99b2-c6). Eventually, Socrates persuaded himself that he had better to abandon all such investigations and to attempt a ‘second navigation’ by ‘taking refuge in *logoi*’ (99c6-e6).

This description is strongly linked to the little that had been said about ‘physics’ in the *Apology*. It expands, first of all, on Socrates’ suspicion that nobody may own the *sophia* which could enable him to solve any such problem. It also gives a formal name, *περὶ φύσεως ἰστορία* (96a8), to the anonymous *episteme* Socrates abruptly mentions during his process, and reasserts that, whatever its final results, this is indeed an investigation, a *skepsis*³⁰. Above all, it confirms that Socrates’ performed

²⁸ See Hackforth 1955, 129-32, for a review of the three traditional interpretations of the ‘autobiography’: (a) an abstract paradigm of an evolution from ‘science’ to ‘philosophy’ (b) an indirect description by Plato of his own philosophical evolution; (c) the report of a genuinely Socratic experience. For a recent specification of the latter view, see Ebert 2004, 346-9, who also suggests that this fictitious tale may address the concerns of a specifically Pythagoric public. Cf. also Schäfer 2005, 420.

²⁹ Such terminology suggests compulsion: cf. Cerri 2003, 54 who qualifies *pathe* as the «semantema della sofferenza». The notion of *thau*ma recurs 96a7 f.; 97a1 ff.; 98b7.

³⁰ Cf. *σκοπῶν*, 96b1, b5; *ταύτην τὴν σκέψιν*, 96c2; *ταύτης τῆς σκέψεως*, 96c5; *οὐ γὰρ πάνυ συγχωρῶ τὸν ἐν λόγοις σκοπούμενον τὰ ὄντα ἐν εἰκόσι μᾶλλον σκοπεῖν ἢ τὸν ἐν ἔργοις*, 100a1-3.

this individual search strictly by himself (the *περὶ φύσεως ἱστορία* has obviously nothing to do with «those things we keep repeating among us» which he mentions at 76d7-9). This is the first and only occasion when Socrates mentions the serious involvement he had in his youth with 'physics': what he issues is a confession³¹. Before reaching the last day in his life, he had apparently never shared this personal experience, fundamental as it might have been, with anybody.

3.2

From 96a10 onwards, Socrates mentions some current puzzles about *aitiai*. He begins with two direct questions, respectively about the role of hot and cold in the generation and growth of living things, and about the production of thought; he subsequently mentions corruption in general, and finally the conformation of sky and earth (the latter, a 'scientific' subject already mentioned in the *Apology*: 18b7 f., 19b5). While musing about the origin of thought, he hypothetically mentions *episteme* (96b9) as the final result of a complex mechanism. But knowledge is precisely what Socrates, as he soon concluded, would never achieve through any such speculation. He came to disbelieve the very plain explanations that he had considered so far, in accordance to common sense and current views, as being beyond question, about nutrition for instance («the more you eat and drink, the more you get fat»)³². He concluded that he was *πρὸς ταύτην τὴν σκέψιν ἀφυῆς* (96c1 f.), and could not persuade himself that causation may indeed be produced as 'physics' have it (97b3-6). Of course, to 'shift back and forth' among some conventional problems tackled in no special order could hardly result in a progress³³. In the end, Socrates could not even address his more idiosyncratic problems; the operations of adding and detracting, which for all their apparent obviousness he had always found difficult to understand, now became definitely incomprehensible to him (96d8-98b3)³⁴. But failure resulted precisely from the use of the procedures currently followed (τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον τῆς μεθόδου, 97b6). The term *methodos* appears here for the second time within the *Phaedo*: as at 79b3, it conveys the idea of chasing an elusive prey³⁵. So

³¹ Cf. Cerri 2003, 53; Hoinski 2008, 351.

³² *Phd.* 96c6-8: ἀπέμαθον καὶ ταῦτα ἃ πρὸ τοῦ ᾧμην εἰδέναί, περὶ ἄλλων τε πολλῶν καὶ διὰ τί ἄνθρωπος αὐξάνεται. τοῦτο γὰρ ᾧμην πρὸ τοῦ παντὶ δῆλον εἶναι, ὅτι διὰ τὸ ἐσθίειν καὶ πίνειν. Cf. Loriaux 1975, 71: these are the «positions de l'homme de la rue». Rowe 1993, 237 draws the same implication from παντὶ δῆλον εἶναι at 96c7 f., as well as from Socrates' subsequent playful exchange with Cebes at 96d5-7 («don't you think I was right? - Sure you were!»). Cf also Sharma 2009, 160 (Socrates produces wholly ordinary explanations and examples). If Anaxagoras' principle «like grows out of like» (cf. fr. 10B D.-K.) is to be intended as the butt of this humorous theory of nutrition (cf. Loriaux 1975, cit.; Rowe 1993, 232; Ebert 2004, 341), the joke may go on: Anaxagoras' learned doctrines are as valuable as any vulgar view.

³³ Tr. C.J. Rowe (ἐμαυτὸν ἄνω κάτω μετέβαλλον, 96b1). The idiom ἄνω κάτω denotes a disorderly activity producing no progress whatever: cf. also *Phd.* 90c4 f., and 4.2. *infra*.

³⁴ Cf. Ebert 2004, 343: the objections Socrates raises when considering arithmetical operations (96e6-97b3) belong exclusively to him; nobody else may be able to see the problem.

³⁵ Vlastos 1994, 1 and n. 5, considers this use of *methodos*, frequent in the Platonic dialogues of the «middle and later periods» as «an important terminological coinage» which makes its first apparition here (these evaluation rests on Vlastos' construction of the chronology of Plato's works).

crates was left to sort out the mess by his own limited means as best as he could, and did it by making up «a confused jumble of his own»³⁶.

At no time, however, did Socrates share his inquiries with anybody else. He acted *en solitaire*. He kept ruminating about the physical ‘causes’ in the isolation which is attested by the almost obsessive use of reflexive pronominal forms in this part of the tale (cf. μοι, 96a8, d8, e1; ἐμαυτὸν, 96b1; ἐμέ, 96e6; ἐμαντοῦ, 96e7; ἐμαυτόν, 97b4). Although it might be perfectly possible to identify a given thinker (or more than one) as the respective author of any of the various problems Socrates considered, and of the tentative solutions he thought of, this textual segment includes no names (Anaxagoras will soon prove the only exception)³⁷. A deliberate authorial intention seems to be at work: Socrates must appear to have no interlocutors at all. In the *Apology*, the narrative strategy requires the identification of some well-known personalities, so that the reader may understand at once that all these living individuals are indeed behaving not so differently from the popular stereotype of the *sophos aner*, and that Socrates is definitely not one of them. In the *Phaedo*, complete anonymity is required in order to stress an equally essential fact: when Socrates was dealing with ‘physics’, he was engaging in no dialogue.

3.3

Then Socrates attended a public reading of a text by Anaxagoras (in itself, another accidental, therefore wholly passive experience), and immediately felt that he needed to search no more (cf. οὐδὲν ἄλλο σκοπεῖν προσήκειν, 97d2 f.). The universal principle that «*Nous* is the ultimate source of all order and causation» (νοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ διακοσμῶν τε καὶ πάντων αἴτιος: 97c2 f.) seemed to provide an exhaustive explanation: Being is organized as a whole along an optimal pattern (cf. 97c4-d3). To Socrates, the principle that the actual modalities of any given entity are the best opened the possibility of a genuine science of the good and the bad (the notions of *eidēnai* and *epistēmē* make their reappearance at this stage of Socrates’ tale: 97d4 f.) and of a special mode of discourse, teleology³⁸.

Socrates’ acceptance of Anaxagoras’ notion of *Nous* resulted from a wholly idiosyncratic decision. Socrates had finally heard of an *aitia* that had pleased him

However, the word does not need to denote a specific procedure that Socrates would consider as his own: see Brickhouse – Smith 1994, 5.

³⁶ Following Burnet’s translation of ἄλλά τιν’ ἄλλον τρόπον αὐτὸς εἰκῆ φύρω, 97b6 f. By such words, Socrates anticipates the need for an alternative, which he fully expounds from 99c8 onwards. The accent is on method: cf. Babut 1978, 54: what Socrates rejects here is not ‘physics’ as such, but only the methodological fallacy which is typical of this approach («la physique est un discours sur le *comment* indûment substitué à la recherche du *pourquoi*»).

³⁷ For two detailed lists of such likely personalities, cf. Burnet 1911, 100-2 and Ebert 2004, 340 f.

³⁸ On the philosophical content of Socrates’ expectations towards Anaxagoras, such as described in the *Phaedo*, cf. Babut 1978, 56-8. As may be expected, the rendering of Anaxagoras’ theories in the *Phaedo* obeys first of all to Plato’s authorial intentions (as in the *Apology*). Some subtle verbal variations are put to work: for an instance, the term διακοσμεῖν belongs to Anaxagoras (cf. πάντα διεκόμησε νοῦς, fr. B12 D.-K.), but διακοσμῶν is Socrates’ (Plato’s) term (97c2): see Loriaux 1975, 76-8. Plato obviously needs to describe Anaxagoras’ ‘teleology’ as being inadequate in itself and inferior to his own: see Laks 2000, 531-3; Laks 2002, 9 f. The term may also take various specifications of meaning: see notably Graham 1991, 4-6 and Laks 2002, 6-10.

(ταύτη δὴ τῇ αἰτίᾳ ἦσθην) and had formed the subjective opinion (ἔδοξέ μοι) that this *aitia* was the right one (97c2 f.). He also felt happy to have finally met a 'teacher' who suited his own mental orientations, his own personal *nous* (ἄσμενος ἠύρηκέναι ὄμην διδάσκαλον τῆς αἰτίας περὶ τῶν ὄντων κατὰ νοῦν ἑμαυτῷ, 97d6 f.). He also anticipated that this *didaskalos* would provide him with absolutely everything one may need to know to understand the reasons for the actual shape and central position of the earth (97d8-e4), as well as all other entities within the cosmos (97e4-98a6)³⁹. All in all, what Socrates anticipated from Anaxagoras was a fully exhaustive 'revelation' (cf. ἀποφαίνου, 98a1), specially tailored to fit his own individual expectations⁴⁰.

With such 'marvelous hopes', Socrates proceeded to read Anaxagoras' books in full (98b3-7). He soon realized that, by assorting *Nous* with all sort of additional 'causes', Anaxagoras undermined his very position and betrayed an inconsistent notion of *aitia*. In the function of 'causes', air, water and the whole multifarious lot appeared as utterly 'strange' to Socrates as they had in the *Apology*⁴¹. Socrates did already own some fairly precise notions about human anatomy, both in its structure and as an instrument for motion and action (cf. 98c6-d6)⁴²; he was also fully aware that the mere 'preconditions' for change are not to be confused with the effective 'causes' of it (99b2-4). He presently comments that any agent, either the Athenians, Socrates, or Socrates' own body, would obviously chose to implement the specific course of action which he considers the best: if Socrates' actions, therefore, were truly 'caused' by his bones and nerves, he would presently be in Megara or Boeotia, rather than waiting for death in an Athenian jail (98e1-99a4). According to the model of causation which obtains in 'physics', Socrates present *dialegethai* (the word comes up again at 98d6) could simply not happen. This is a sudden flash of authorial irony within the tale of the last Socratic round of *dialegethai*: if Anaxagoras' theories were true, the *Phaedo* could not have been written at all ...

In a marked contrast to the anonymous thinkers whose names the text deliberately leaves in the dark, 'Anaxagoras', in the *Phaedo* as in the *Apology*, is expressly identified as the author of some distinctive *logoi* which exist, by now, in writing only⁴³. Yet the *Phaedo* soon assimilates this character to a collective subject, οἱ πολλοί (99b4 f.). The term recalls the ignorant multitude of the *Apology* whose typical offspring is Meletus: Socrates declares that, by mixing up the preconditions and the causes of events the way Anaxagoras finally did, 'the many' keep groping about in the dark (as Socrates himself at 96c5: no sight, no progress). Cosmological theories are thus being produced by means of such notions as the 'vortex' (cf. δίνην, 99b6) or the 'flat kneading-through' (cf. καρδόπω πλατεία, 99b8). Popping up at once,

³⁹ The exhaustiveness anticipated by Socrates is marked by the verb φράσσειν ('to say it all': 97d8) and by the iteration of the verb ἐπεκδηγήσασθαι ('to produce successively detailed explanations') at 97e1, 97e3, and 98b3.

⁴⁰ Cf. again the reflexive use of the first pronominal person: μοι (97c3, d8, e4) and the frequency of verbal forms marking Socrates' evaluations as subjective: ἦσθην (97c2), ἠγησάμην (97c4), λογιζόμενος (97d6), ὄμην (97d6; 98a7, b2), κατὰ νοῦν ἑμαυτῷ (97d7), παρεσκευάσμην (98a1).

⁴¹ Cf. 98c2, καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ καὶ ἄτοπα; cf. 99a4-5: αἴτια μὲν τὰ τοιαῦτα καλεῖν λίαν ἄτοπον. Cf. the use of ἄτοπα at *Ap.* 26e2 to qualify Anaxagoras' ideas.

⁴² Cf. Burger 1984, 142.

⁴³ *Ap.* 26d8 and *Phd.* 98b4 refers to Anaxagoras' books in the plural, *Phd.* 97b8 to a single book.

Aristophanes' grotesque renderings of meteorological *sophia* directly support Socrates' suggestion: all such theories are worthless, no more valuable than any current popular idea of the sky and the earth⁴⁴. All such arcane learning, in other words, has the same cognitive value as vulgar prejudice (one more reason for segregating its authors into anonymity)⁴⁵. Socrates is thus reiterating his mischievous suggestion of the *Apology*, that the *sophoi* of comedy are not really dissimilar from those of real life. He argues now (*Phd.* 99c1-6) that the latter simply do not consider the real problem, how things should actually be organized if they were organized for the best⁴⁶. Socrates would have gladly accepted anybody's teaching in order to learn how to tackle that problem, but in such an ambiance he could neither find out anything by himself nor be taught by anybody (cf. οὐτ' αὐτὸς εὐρεῖν οὔτε παρ' ἄλλου μαθεῖν οἷός τε ἐγενόμην 99c8 f.)⁴⁷.

3.4

Socrates gives two explicit reasons for the abject failure of his confrontation with 'physics': he was following the wrong method, and Anaxagoras' *logoi* lacked consistency. The text also suggests a third explanation.

Socrates confronted Anaxagoras' doctrines in the same isolation surrounding him as he pondered some authorless 'physical' problems⁴⁸. He never considered Anaxagoras the author as an interlocutor to whom he might address his comments, questions or objections. To be sure, the man was not there, and extra-textual evidence may suggest that Anaxagoras' written prose aimed at causing the reader to acquiesce to the author's assertions, rather than at eliciting a critical response⁴⁹. But it is Socrates himself who never considered dialogue as an option in this occurrence. He progressively abandoned his misplaced hopes for a revelation by producing what amounted to a monologue refuting the ready-made theories exposed in the book⁵⁰.

⁴⁴ For δῖνος, see Aristoph. *Nub.* 380, with the comic confusion with an earthenware vessel at 1470-3; cf. Dover 1968, 380 for its possible allusion to various cosmological theories. For καρδόπη, see Aristoph. *Nub.* 678 (Aristoph. *Ran.* 1159 gives the literal sense). On the ironical use of the latter term in the *Phaedo*, see Loriaux 1975, 85, referring to Guthrie 1962, 294 (who considers it as a «contemptuous mention» of the theory of the earth as a disk with a concave surface by Archelaos [fr. 60A D.-K.]).

⁴⁵ As stressed by Rowe 1993, 237.

⁴⁶ They seem to believe, in Socrates' once again ironical words, that one needs a sort of daemonic perseverance to tackle this specific question, and thus agree to leave it to some absolutely strong and immortal Atlas; therefore, they don't have the faintest idea how to connect the 'positive' and the 'necessary' in order to produce truth (cf. ὡς ἀληθῶς τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ δέον συνδεῖν καὶ συνέχειν οὐδὲν οἴονται 99c5 f.).

⁴⁷ That is, failure was complete: the couple εὐρεῖν-μαθεῖν exhausts all possible modalities for acquiring knowledge: cf. the remark by Simmias at 85c7 f.

⁴⁸ Cf. καὶ μοι ἔδοξεν, 98c2; ὡς ἐγὼμα, 98e5.

⁴⁹ For an accurate discussion of Anaxagoras' style, cf. Ugolini 1985 (see notably 326 f. for a discussion of fr. 12B D.-K., which describes *Nous* as the ultimate source of order and causation). The style of the 'scientific' writings that were available at Socrates' times might not have been very dissimilar: see Rossetti 2006, 12-6, 22-4.

⁵⁰ At *Phd.* 108c5 and ff., Socrates does produce a description of the 'real earth' which has been passed onto him by a (once again) anonymous informant. Does that imply that Socrates has been

When he moved 'up and down' among the various questions that were usual in 'physics', he never attempted to share his perplexities with anybody; as he engaged in the process of producing his critical assessment of Anaxagoras' written contradictions, he did not even think of addressing the lecturer whose performance had caused such great expectations to him, and who may presumably have been familiar with the authentic textual meaning, in the hope to appease his doubts and remove his objections. That reader too, in fact, is nameless: no personality, he simply cannot be made to act as an interlocutor to the benefit of Socrates⁵¹. Nor has 'Anaxagoras' any personality either: in the *Phaedo* as in the *Apology*, only his book matters. Individuals can be engaged in a dialogue; books (and 'problems') cannot. The *Phaedrus* exposes this idea in full⁵².

The act of reading a book could only further confine Socrates into the non-dialogical isolation he had already practised in his initial dealings with 'physics'. The denial of the *Apology* is thus given a far wider extension and a much deeper qualification: Socrates by now excludes 'physics' as such not just from his own *public* dialogical activity, but from *any* of his dialogical activities. The very form of the Socratic 'autobiography' points to such an exclusion. It consists of a practically uninterrupted monologue, with only two minimal interventions by Cebes at 96d6 and 96e5. This monologue interrupts the flow of the dialogical exchange which had been developing up to 96a6, and which will start again from 100a8 onwards⁵³. Form is here specially appropriate to content: both when musing over the most disparate 'physical' problems and when elaborating Anaxagoras' written *logoi*, Socrates produced a monologue as well. He asked questions to himself, could find no answer, and finally had to reject even the 'solutions' provided by the book. Of course, that couldn't work. No dialogue, no truth.

able to acquire some knowledge by drawing on somebody else's ready made opinions? Certainly not: what he recounts is a 'myth', not a *logos*: it brings no literal truth by itself (cf. 110b1, 4): see Rowe 2007, 102.

⁵¹ The text is not suggesting, still less demanding, an identification of this character with Archelaos: cf. e.g. Burnet 1911, 103 f. (on the belief that the 'real' Socrates may have been a disciple of Archelaos, see moreover the critical views by McDiarmid 1953, 149 f. n. 143). The reader is obviously free to produce such an identification (especially if he reads Socrates' 'autobiography' as a kind of 'historical' report), but the text is plainly not requiring him to do as much (as noted by Loriaux 1975, 76). In fact, this anonymity results once again from an authorial intention.

⁵² Cf. in part. Plat. *Phaedr.* 275d4 ff. It may be no coincidence that the discussion about the written book comes shortly after a mention of Anaxagoras' stylistic excellence (*Phaedr.* 269e4-270a8). Such mention gives 'Anaxagoras' the very features that define the *sophos aner* in the *Apology*: an outstanding ability for *meteorologia*, going on a par with special rhetorical expertise (ironically defined as an *adoleschia*, the very competence Socrates disclaims in *Phd.* 70b10-c3: see n. 65 *infra*) and fully corresponding to his qualification as a teacher (he provided Pericles with outstanding *paideia*).

⁵³ Socrates begins with «just listen to what I am going to tell you» (Ἄκουε τοίνυν ὡς ἐροῦντος, 96a6). This is however not the only monologue produced by Socrates in the *Phaedo*: see Ebert 2004, 338.

4. Philosophy as navigation

4.1

The failure of his engagement with the *περὶ φύσεως ἰστορία* directed Socrates into devising a wholly different procedure, the only one that he had been practising since then (99b1-3): the *Phaedo* describes him as he still implements it in his last dialogue with his friends, as he always had up to now. He calls it a ‘second navigation’, a *δεύτερος πλοῦς*. This nautical metaphor originally designates navigating by the row when sailing has become impossible; in the present context, it suggests that progression can be achieved only by the hard toiling of the sailor himself, rather than by the comfortable exploitation of some favorable wind; in more general terms, it marks exogenous propulsion as impossible and endogenous propulsion as necessary⁵⁴. What Socrates realized, in other terms, was that he should not expect to be imparted any knowledge through the effect of some external agency. Neither the current speculations nor the available written *logoi* would provide any effective impulsion to his search for truth. He could progress only by his own means: that is, by following a method of his own.

4.2

Socrates’ idiosyncratic *modus operandi* consists in investigating the truth of things exclusively by means of *logoi* (99e5 f.). The present discussion can have no claim to provide an adequate description of this approach. It will just refer to four specific aspects of it, which qualify this method as dialogical and may all be described by means of the metaphor of the *δεύτερος πλοῦς*.

a) Socrates uses discursive consistency as the instrument for identifying *aitiai*⁵⁵. His *logoi* will first of all define the essence of the entity whose cause is taken into consideration, thus providing the basis (*hypothesis*) upon which the ensuing discourse may be constructed⁵⁶. Truth may eventually be asserted if these *logoi* are consistent, both with the initial definition (cf. the use of *συμφωνεῖν* 100a3-7) and among themselves (cf. the alternative *συμφωνεῖ ἢ διαφωνεῖ* mentioned at 101d5)⁵⁷. *Aitiai* will thus be identified by means of a discourse propelled by its inner cohe-

⁵⁴ Cf. Menander fr. 241; Cic. *Tusc.* 4.5; Eusth. *in Od.* 1453.20; *Suid.* s.v. *δεύτερος πλοῦς*: see Loriaux 1975, 88 f. and cf. Hoinski 2008, 352. With lesser precision, the phrase is given the meaning of «a second attempt (to a failed journey)» in other Platonic contexts: see *Phileb.* 19c1-3 and *Pol.* 300c1-3. For the interpretation of the phrase as ‘a second best’ (in opposition to some unspecified *protos plous*), see notably Murphy 1936, 40-4; Shipton 1979, 33 f., 50 f.; Ross 1982.

⁵⁵ Cf. 99e4-6: *ἔδοξε δὴ μοι χρῆναι εἰς τοὺς λόγους καταφυγόντα ἐν ἐκείνοις σκοπεῖν τῶν ὄντων τὴν ἀλήθειαν*. Ebert 2004, 351-2 qualifies Socrates’ ‘flight into *logoi*’ as «ein Verfahren... bei dem am Ende wie am Anfang eine Aussage steht» and so points to the dynamic nature of Socrates’ discursive procedures.

⁵⁶ This procedure ultimately rests on the so-called ‘doctrine of Forms’, which will not be discussed here.

⁵⁷ On both occurrences, see Dancy 2004, 296 f.; and Bailey 2005 for a full treatment. Ebert 2004, 351-4 provides a full discussion of the logical difficulties arising from the consequences respectively attached to *symphonein* and *diaphonein* at 101d5, as well as a possible solution.

rence. The metaphor of the δεύτερος πλοῦς conveys the idea of such an endogenous and dialogical impulsion.

b) The Socratic procedure, at first view, seems to have no need of a dialogue with the practitioners of the περὶ φύσεως ἰστορία: these *sophoi* deal with material causes, Socrates deals with notional constructions⁵⁸. When implementing the latter method, as Socrates recommends to Cebes, one may just «bid farewell to all the rest» (cf. τὰ μὲν ἄλλα χαιρεῖν ἔῶ, 100d2). Socrates has already used this colloquialism to explain that the soul can reason best when remaining alone by itself («it bids the body farewell»)⁵⁹, and now resorts to it twice again (100c9-102a1):

- (i) The *sophoi* are wont to assert their own reasons, and a dialogical confrontation with them cannot be avoided⁶⁰. However, none of their subtle arguments is likely to invalidate the causes identified by the Socratic kind of *logos*: such niceties may appear to denote a superior learning, but one should simply not mind them (cf. τὰς ἄλλας τὰς τοιαύτας κομψείας ἐφῆς ἂν χαιρεῖν, παρεῖς ἀποκρίνασθαι τοῖς σεαυτοῦ σοφωτέροις, 101c8 f.), especially when the Socratic discursive consistency has managed to reach some sure result by itself (cf. ἔως ἐπὶ τι ἱκανὸν ἔλθοις, 101e1).

- (ii) The challenger may however aim his criticisms at the very *hypothesis*⁶¹, calling into doubt its intrinsic value. In all such cases too, his Socratic opponent may feel dispensed from uttering a direct answer, and should once again 'bid farewell' to the objection (cf. χαιρεῖν ἐφῆς ἂν καὶ οὐκ ἀποκρίναιο, 101d3 f.). However, he may certainly operate a thorough, fully autonomous reexamination of the consistency of all consequences deriving from the *hypothesis* in question. This inner dialogue may eventually lead to replacing that specific *hypothesis* being criticized with a better one⁶². This process may be reiterated as many times as need be (101d3-7).

The Socratic discourse, therefore, is by itself incompatible with the discourse produced in the framework of the περὶ φύσεως ἰστορία. Yet it cannot totally refuse dialogical confrontation with 'physics', and may even benefit from it. The criticisms that the *sophoi* may possibly utter against a given *hypothesis* may eventually lead to producing a better one. The δεύτερος πλοῦς may move further ahead precisely thanks to such peculiar dialogical procedures.

c) Of course, some of these objections may be not much of a threat⁶³. Those who try to contrast the Socratic pattern of discourse deserve to be called *antilogikoi* (101e2): their discursive practices have already been branded as fruitless, since they implement no appropriate *technē* (cf. 89d1-90d7). Still, they are dangerous: they may instill 'misology', the aversion against human speech as the instrument for stat-

⁵⁸ Cf Heinaman 1997, 346 (*dialegesthai* as the opposite of empirical investigation) and Sharma 2009, 168 (Socrates argues that materialist explanations are «completely unworkable»).

⁵⁹ 65c7 f.: μάλιστα αὐτὴ καθ' αὐτήν γίγνηται ἔῶσα χαιρεῖν τὸ σῶμα.

⁶⁰ They are consistently described in the act of *legein* or as they produce their own *logos*: see 100b10, 100e8, 101a f., 101c9, 101d3.

⁶¹ Either by refusing to consider any implication unless it is given some better justification (if one reads ἔχοιτο, 101d3), or directly 'attacking' its phrasing (if one reads ἔφοιτο as suggested by Madvig): see Burnet 1911, 113; Rowe 1993, 247.

⁶² On the role of the challenger, see Gentzler 1991, 274-6; on the whole procedure, Loriaux 1975, 94-100; Ebert 2004, 360 f.

⁶³ They may even sound amusing (see Rowe 1993, 244 on *Phd.* 101a5-b3)

ing truth, the negation of the very possibility of knowledge⁶⁴. When being confronted to the Socratic method for assessing *aitiai*, these *sophoi* will just mix up all causes and effects in the same bag (cf. ὁμοῦ πάντα κυκῶντες, 101e5). Exactly as they do at 90b9-c6, they will keep moving *ano kato*, back and forth, like the current of the Euripus, so rendering progression impossible. The reader may remark that this is the opposite of a straightforward navigation; Socrates remarks that here we have precisely those who ‘do not mind’ at all (cf. ἐκείνοις μὲν γὰρ ἴσως οὐδὲ εἷς περὶ τούτου λόγος οὐδὲ φροντίς, 101e4-5). What the *antilogikoi* ‘do not mind’ is truth: «their wisdom (*sophia*) enables them to mix everything up together, yet still be pleased with themselves» (101e5 f. – tr. D. Gallop). Again, this is the same half-comical, half-realistic image the *Apology* derives from Aristophanes, of the *sophos aner* deploying his confusing rhetorics in order to proclaim his individual excellence in an arcane science⁶⁵.

d) By contrast, the Socratic procedure might appear just good for simpletons. Socrates gladly accepts such a qualification⁶⁶. In fact, his simplicity is the opposite of real ignorance: for it is the mark of the ‘complete ignorant’ to discuss in order to win the argument, without a thought for what he may actually declare, and no love for authentic *sophia* (cf. οὐ φιλοσόφως ἔχειν ἀλλ’ ὅσπερ οἱ πάνυ ἀπαίδευτοι φιλονίκως, 91a2 f.). Socrates, on the contrary, keeps plodding ahead by his own means. To exploit the metaphor of the δεύτερος πλοῦς for the last time: speedy and effortless sailing won’t bring the ship to destination, slow and laborious rowing will. The metaphor also emphasizes effective against apparent dynamism, or, in other words, the awareness that one always lacks an absolutely satisfactory knowledge against the self-delusion that one does already possess it. Such awareness is the fundamental prerequisite of the Socratic kind of investigation, and can only be implemented by those who permanently long for a knowledge which still eludes them, the philosophers (101e6).

⁶⁴ On ‘misology’ as a typical product of this discourse, see Shipton 1979, 44 f. The Platonic Socrates pits the triad ‘eristics-antilogy-misology’ against his own method in the *Meno* as well (cf. 81d6-e1).

⁶⁵ Morrison 2006, 103 f. and Rashed 2009, 107 f. and *passim*, both argue, from different viewpoints and to different aims, that the depiction of Socrates in the *Phaedo* is substantially derived from the comic character depicted Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. However, the *Phaedo* seems explicitly to *contrast* the Socratic method for producing *logoi* to the real practices that provide the comic authors with such an amount of ammunition: cf. Bluck 1955, 21. In the *Apology*, the rejection of the comic image of Socrates was applied to the contemporary ‘wise men’, whose practices were described as being substantially similar to those of their comic duplicates. In the *Phaedo*, this rejection is again expressed at 70b10-c3: Socrates assures his public that nobody, not even a *komoidopoios*, may challenge the full seriousness of the *logoi* he will utter from now on (he is embarking on a discussion about the soul). Comic *adoleschia*, as he calls it, may belong to other *sophoi*, but not to himself, however strange his own arguments may sound at first.

⁶⁶ Cf. such phrases as ταράττομαι γὰρ ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις πᾶσι, 100d3; τοῦτο δὲ ἀπλῶς καὶ ἀτέχνως καὶ ἴσως εὐήθως ἔχω παρ’ ἑμαυτῶ, 100d3 f.; Οὐ τοίνυν... ἔτι μανθάνω οὐδὲ δύναμαι τὰς ἄλλας αἰτίας τὰς σοφὰς ταύτας γινώσκειν 100c9 f.; τὰς τοιαύτας κομψείας, 101c8; τοῖς σεαυτοῦ σοφωτέροις, 101c9.

4.3

The implementation of such a program, according to the *Phaedo*, has been Socrates' main concern up to the present day. Socrates has been practising his method ever since he abandoned the *περὶ φύσεως ἰστορία* and started being the Socrates everybody knows: he is presently discussing what he has always been discussing within the circle of his friends⁶⁷. Yet neither in the *Phaedo* nor in the *Apology* is Socrates a teacher: he always is a philosophical example. Had Socrates adhered wholeheartedly to Anaxagoras' doctrine, as he had initially intended, he would have been obliged to turn a blind eye towards the inconsistency of adjoining a multiplicity of individual and material causes to the teleological *Nous*. What Socrates learned from his reading was precisely that authority is something one should criticize, not obey⁶⁸. Nobody may achieve any substantial knowledge just by learning what he is being taught. Knowledge needs to result from a search, it cannot consist in a possession. Specifically, it may only emerge from a collective dialogical elaboration which may eventually produce a consistent discourse⁶⁹.

This is the reason why, as the *Phaedo* insists, all of Socrates' present efforts are being deployed within the circle of his friends, and why Socrates needs to explain to his present interlocutors that he could have no real interlocutor in his past, failed efforts to extract some knowledge out of 'physics'. Socrates' ironical remark that he would presently be performing no *dialegesthai* at all, had he accepted Anaxagoras' materialistic theory of the individual causes (98d6 ff.), may now be taken literally. Since the failure of all his attempts to reach knowledge by means of the *περὶ φύσεως ἰστορία*, Socrates has been conducting his investigation only by means of an argumentative exchange, a procedure which is only possible within the philosophically oriented group that presently surrounds him⁷⁰. The dialogical nature of philosophical research was already apparent in Socrates' prolonged exchange with Simmias and Cebes about the immortality of the soul (64a1-96a1). It becomes apparent once again in the way Socrates concludes the argument deriving his own notion of *aitia* from the theory of Forms (100c3 ff.): he is almost the only speaker (Cebes is just allowed to express his agreement), yet he clearly aims at involving his interlocutor in his reasoning, so that any conclusion may be a fully shared one⁷¹. The text has already exposed the underlying methodological principle twice. First at 75c10-d3: the definition of an essence may be finally assessed by the twin activities of asking questions and providing answers⁷². Then at 78c10-d3: within the Socratic circle, *both* the actions of asking *and* of answering questions concur to produce the

⁶⁷ Cf 100b1-3: Ἄλλ', ἢ δ' ὅς, ὃδε λέγω, οὐδὲν καινόν, ἀλλ' ἅπερ αἰεὶ τε ἄλλοτε καὶ ἐν τῷ παρεληλυθότι λόγῳ οὐδὲν πέπαυμαι λέγων.

⁶⁸ Gower 2008, 330-31 identifies the subversion of the «very notion of a philosophical authority-figure» as the main purpose of the 'autobiography'; cf. also 332, 335 f.

⁶⁹ Schäfer 2005, 420.

⁷⁰ On the necessity of such a surrounding for the philosophical activity of the Platonic Socrates, see Rowe 2007a, 66 f.

⁷¹ He thus evolves from an initial «I say» through the intermediate stage of «you would think/say/argue», up to the conclusion of «we believe»: Ebert 2004, 355.

⁷² Cf. notably 75d2 f.: περὶ πάντων οἷς ἐπισφραγίζομεθα τὸ "αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστι" καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἐρωτήσεων ἐρωτῶντες καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἀποκρίσεων ἀποκρινόμενοι.

specific *logos* which may explain the essence of a given reality⁷³. No dialogue, no truth.

This progression is open-ended. Its specific stages may hardly be planned in advance⁷⁴. It produces no results that may be consigned to some *logoi* inscribed into a book⁷⁵, nor, for that matter, into a single formula⁷⁶. Socrates agrees with Simmias that human epistemic resources are limited and that even the best formulated *hypothesis* should be submitted to continuous verification – as far as human resources allow (107a8-b10)⁷⁷. This is Socrates' conclusive message to his friends. When he momentarily leaves the scene in order to prepare himself for his physical death and to meet his family for the last time (116a1-b6), the message seems to have reached its intended destination. As they wait for their spiritual guide to reappear for the last time, his friends, soon to be orphaned, plunge themselves into dialogical investigation: once again, they take up all the arguments which have been produced during the day (cf. περιεμένομεν οὖν πρὸς ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς διαλεγόμενοι περὶ τῶν εἰρημένων καὶ ἀνασκοποῦντες, 116a4 f.). This wholly spontaneous dialogue obeys an autonomous collective impulsion: the friends of Socrates have now taken philosophical initiative into their hands. And this is exactly what Socrates intended them to do. He can now make his final exit⁷⁸.

4. Conclusion

The *Apology* describes Socrates' own *sophia* as highly idiosyncratic. The *Phaedo* moves further ahead in describing how Socrates proposes a fully-fledged epistemic model of his own making. Both depictions rely on two different oppositional couples: ignorance, both real and presumed, is pitted against knowledge, both real and presumed as well; productive, dialogical procedures are pitted against sterile, non-dialogical procedures. The *Phaedo* stresses such notional contrasts by describ-

⁷³ Cf. notably 78d1 f.: αὐτὴ ἡ οὐσία ἧς λόγον δίδομεν τοῦ εἶναι καὶ ἐρωτῶντες καὶ ἀποκρινόμενοι.

⁷⁴ The strong association of such an open-endedness with the metaphor of navigation at sea, and with the Theseus myth such as alluded in the opening of the *Phaedo*, is stressed by White 2000, 158, and Kuperus 2007, 199, 203 f. and *passim*.

⁷⁵ With the exception, of course, of Plato's own books describing Socrates in action. In the words of Gill 2006, 144, the 'shared search' implemented under Socrates' main impulsion throughout the Platonic dialogues «is a continuing one which the reader is invited, explicitly or implicitly, to continue».

⁷⁶ When Socrates proposes a specially elaborated formulation at 102d3 he apologizes with a smile for producing what looks like a binding legal stipulation (cf. συγγραφικῶς ἐρεῖν). Socrates apparently means that the reciprocal relations he is assigning to the various terms entering in his present utterance should now be considered as having being definitely fixed (cf. Archer-Hind 1894, 106 n. 11; Loriaux 1975, 112). 'To speak like a book' (cf. Rowe 1993, 251) is an alternative, possibly slightly less precise rendering (cf. also Kahn 1996, 357: 'like a textbook'). Burnet 1911, 116 detects an allusion here to the balanced style of the professional *logographoi*.

⁷⁷ Cf. Gallop 2002, 172: «The Theory [of Forms] offers only a provisional solution, which is in itself in need of further exploration».

⁷⁸ Schäfer 2005, 409-12 highlights the special relevance of a message stressing the philosophical need of individual initiative and dialectical participation as a means of contrasting the wholly different principles (tradition, authority) of the Pythagoreans.

ing Socrates' dealings with the 'science of nature' as a strictly monological, indeed almost solipsistic activity.

In both dialogues, Socrates rests his search for knowledge on some declaredly 'naive' assumptions, and contrasts his own approach to the apparently elaborate learning and sophisticated rhetorics of all those who practice the *περὶ φύσεως ἰστορία*. He also suggests that the latter doctrines, for all their apparent intellectual refinement, may eventually prove to be as remote from truth as the unlearned and uncritical beliefs produced by popular opinion. The Socratic familiarity with 'physics' is thus described in wholly consistent terms, and, in the *Apology* as in the *Phaedo*, is set as one necessary precondition for Socrates' commitment to philosophy.

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Abstract: This essay opposes the view that a contradiction needs to be perceived between Socrates' defense in regard of the 'first accusations' in Plato's *Apology* (which apparently denies any personal involvement in the 'science of nature') and the Socratic 'autobiography' in the *Phaedo* (which relates such an involvement in full detail). A closer examination can dispel this apparent incongruity. Indeed, the textual construction of the *Apology*, while categorically rejecting Aristophanes' portrait of Socrates and denying any similarity of this character to the contemporary *sophoi*, needs to imply an effective Socratic interest for 'science'. Both texts therefore concur in producing a homogeneous depiction of Socrates' attitude in respect of the περί φύσεως ἱστορία, which is in turn fully consistent with the implementation by Socrates of a dialogical method of investigation within the circle of his friends such as described in the *Phaedo*. Socrates' overall consistency thus results from the deliberate authorial strategy implemented by Plato.

Keywords: Socrates, Plato, dialogue, science of nature, *sophia*.