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THE ROLE OF THE OLD INTERLOCUTORS IN PLATO'S DIALOGUE. A NEW PHILOSOPHICAL MEANING OF OLD AGE

ABSTRACT. Candiotto Laura, The Role of the Old Interlocutors in Plato's Dialogue. A New Philosophical Meaning of Old Age.

This paper highlights the platonic conception of old age as very different from the traditional one. In order to demonstrate it, the *Parmenides* and the *Laws* will be analyzed as key texts to understand the new philosophical meaning of old age that finds his main characterization in connection with young age. The topic of old age will be discussed along with youth training and the birth of the philosopher as a “result” of a proper philosophical education. At length, well-educated youths will be able to become philosophers who, in turn, will evolve into masters of others.

Keywords: Plato, old age, *Parmenides*, *Laws*, Plato's political philosophy, *paideia*.

INTRODUCTION

My intention is to analyze the role of the old interlocutors in Plato's dialogues through a literary and maieutic approach, in order to highlight how Plato develops a philosophical conception of old age which differs from the traditional one. To this aim, I will analyze the role of the elderly in two texts in particular: the *Parmenides* and the *Laws*, as they address the role of old people in relation to youths and clearly outline their pedagogical and political function.

In the *Parmenides*, for example, the figure of the old Parmenides, in contrast to the youth of Socrates and Aristotle, reaches an exceptional philosophical significance regarding the necessity of philosophical exercise. In the *Laws*, the Athenian represents wisdom at the service of a good constitution. Socrates himself, usually represented as an old person, expresses the perfect philosophical maturity that can be accomplished through philosophical practice.

The topic of old age will be discussed along with youth training and the birth of the philosopher as a “result” of a proper philosophical education. At length, well-educated youths will be able to become philosophers who, in turn, will evolve into masters of others.

1. ANALYSIS OF THE INTERLOCUTORS

Over the last few years Platonic dialogues have been increasingly interpreted through a literary analysis¹ capable of underlining stylistic and dramaturgical elements that cast a new light on the author’s writing.

In addition, there has been a development of maieutic approaches² that emphasize the transformative effects of the dialogue on interlocutors and readers. An analysis of the interlocutors that includes biographical details is therefore crucial to grasp their role within the dialogue.

In accordance with this perspective, in this paper I will use textual analysis to discuss the role of the elder in Platonic dialogues.

Socratic interlocutors in early platonic dialogues are historical characters and can be categorized as follows:³ aristocrats, sophists, orators, politicians, members of Socrates’ and Plato’s entourage, representatives of a trade or of a *techne*. The age and the relationship between the interlocutors (fathers/sons, lovers/loved, masters/disciples) are elements that transcend these categories.

In the dialogues, old age appears in contrast to youth. Socrates’ favorite interlocutors are young people,⁴ whilst he plays the role of the elder. Arguably – I will further explore this point later – this underlines the educative and political task that the elders are called to perform. In the early dialogues Socrates’ only old interlocutor is Cephalus, who features in the first book of *Republic*, but as soon as Socratic confutation becomes serious, he is replaced by Polemarchos, his son. It seems thus that the method of confutation is not directed to elders, but to youths, except for an interesting counter-example represented by Parmenides’ confutation of young Socrates. In that case, however, the confutation differs from the typical Socratic model: it is in fact expression of Parmenides’ teaching, which will be exemplified in the second part of the *Parmenides*.

Important elder interlocutors appear in later dialogues, which are referred to as dialogues of maturity or late dialogues. More specifically, in the *Parmenides*

¹Already in the first half of the 20th century some interpreters pointed out the necessity of a philosophical and literary scrutiny of the dialogues. In particular, the works of Goldschmidt, Schaerer, Merlan and Tarrant demonstrate a specific attention to the relation between dialogical structure and conceptual elaboration in the Platonic texts. See Candiotta 2012b.

²I refer to the interpretation suggested by Gill, cf. Gill 2006: 53–75.

³See Candiotta 2012a.

⁴See Candiotta 2013.

and in the *Laws* we find elder interlocutors who play a central role: they replace Socrates' elenctic method with Parmenides' dialectic and with the affirmative-legislative method proposed by the Athenian.

2. THE ROLE OF THE ELDERS. PLATO'S TRANSFIGURATION OF TRADITIONAL VALUES

What is the role of old interlocutors in Plato's dialogues?

The answer to this question requires an analysis of both the terms adopted by Plato and the texts in which they are inserted. Of the two terms used by Plato to name the elders, one recurs more often than the other. *Gheron-gherontos* recurs 39 times, mainly in the *Republic* and in the *Laws*. The term *presbys-presbytes* recurs 222 times, with a peak of the comparative form in the *Parmenides* 140e1–155d1, 58 times within the First Hypothesis.

The word *gheron-gherontos* is typically adopted by comedians to represent the character of the elder. In the Homeric lexicon it indicates the "royal counselor". It comes from the stem *gere*, which means "to become mature". Similarly the term *presbys-presbyteron* indicates a political role, especially in Thucydides and Aeschylus, and can be translated into "magistrate".

However, compared to *gheron-gherontos*, *presbys-presbytes* explicitly conveys an idea of excellence, superiority and wisdom. At the same time it defines a guiding role, as it refers also to the person leading the cattle. Etymologically, it comes from *pre-pros-pro* that means "ahead" and from *gytes* that, in turns, comes from the stem *ga*, indicating the act of being born. The *presbys* is thus "the one who is born ahead".

The use of the comparative form underlines the relational aspect of the term: the elder is so in relation to the youth. We will come back to this point since it is very important in the *Parmenides*. In summary, the two aspects mentioned above emphasize the political and educative role of the elder.

Why does Plato prefer *presbys* to *gheron*?

In my opinion, this is the case as Plato transforms the meaning of the concept of old age elaborating upon the situation of his times, characterized by both the tradition of the old aristocracy and the power of the new democracy.

As we will see by analyzing various passages, Plato cannot accept that old aristocrats are considered wise merely on the basis of their age (e.g. Critias in the *Critias* and in the *Timeous*) or that an old new rich (e.g. Cephalous in the *Republic*) holds political power. By contrast, the elder is considered wise and can play a political and educative role only as a result of a lifelong commitment to philosophy. To sum up, in Plato's passages, the term *presbys* is associated to the political and educative function of philosophical wisdom.

Plato rethinks the traditional conception of seniority: this point is supported

by the fact that the term *gheron* recurs more often in the *Republic* and in the *Laws*, which are the more eminently political and educative among Plato's texts. Thus, it is possible to maintain that the interesting semantic shift from *gheron* to *presbys* implies a reformulation of the conception of old age as wisdom.

3. CASE 1: PARMENIDES

Again, what is the role of elder interlocutors in Plato's dialogues?

In order to answer this question I am going to analyze some elder characters.

In the *Parmenides* we find an old Parmenides dialoguing with young Socrates. It is worth noting that this is the only appearance of Socrates as a youth in the Platonic dialogues. Here Socrates plays the role of interlocutor rather than that of guide. This last function is performed by Parmenides. His old age, highlighted in many occasions, is linked to his role as a philosopher and a guide. Moreover, in contrast with the figure of Socrates in Plato's dialogues, Parmenides is a carrier of knowledge. Although Parmenides plays the role of the confuter in the first part of the dialogue, he suggests to Socrates an exercise (*gymnasia*) to moderate the enthusiastic soul of his young interlocutor. The proposed gymnastic is explained in the second part of the dialogue through an example. In *Parmenides* 136 d1, Parmenides recognizes that he is asking Socrates a huge effort, given his age. It is thus emphasized that the exercise is dedicated to young people and that it is very strenuous. In 135 d4–6 Zeno mocks Socrates for not understanding the wearisomeness of the exercise.⁵

In *Theaetetus* 183e5–6, Parmenides is called “venerable and awesome” on the basis of his age. The elder, traditionally conceived as a wise and knowledgeable man who transmits wisdom to the community by means of myth-telling, is now a philosopher who must be confuted. Because of his old age the confutation is far from being easy – young people are the usual target of confutation. Nevertheless Plato, in the *Sophist*, thanks to the Stranger from Elea, commits to this purpose. However, the meaning of the confutation becomes different from that of the Socratic method: the Stranger says he is loyal to the father and exposes a philosophical proposal that originates from Parmenides' teaching.

On the one hand, the confutation of the old philosopher demonstrates Plato's will of questioning the *auctoritas* that is accorded to the elders just on the basis of their age. On the other, the confutation is reformulated in a positive light, as an attempt to pursue the philosophical tasks initiated by the father. The traditional

⁵For an interpretation of this passage cf. Migliori 1990 and my article *The education of the youth in Plato's Parmenides*, which will be soon published in the proceedings of the conference “O Parménides de Plato”, Coimbra University, 14–16 June 2012, promoted by the International Plato Society.

role of the elder in ancient Greek culture is preserved, as far as it is related to the transmission of knowledge. At the same time, however, this transmission is re-conceptualized: it implies an advancement of knowledge which originates from the bases posed by predecessors, where critical judgment assumes a constructive role. Crucially, this process is based on philosophical *logos* rather than myth. In oral societies in fact the elder⁶ narrates myths in order to transmit the traditional culture and to reinforce a specific reading of reality. The aforementioned Critias who narrates the myth of Atlantis is an example of these dynamics.

Mais il faut aller plus loin, car l'imitation, mise en oeuvre par le poète ou par les interprètes de ses oeuvres, a pour but ultime de susciter l'identification du public aux êtres évoqués devant lui. Or, cette volonté de modifier le comportement d'une masse d'êtres humains pose d'emblée un problème éthique et politique. Là se situe la véritable enjeu. Parce qu'il veut modifier le comportement du public auquel il s'adresse, en lui donnant pour modèles les êtres qu'il évoque, le poète peut être considéré comme un véritable éducateur.⁷

4. CASE 2: THE ATHENIAN

In the *Laws*,⁸ the character of the Athenian who dialogues with two other elders (the Spartan and the Cretan) reflects to a certain extent the new role of old age proposed by Plato. Here we witness peaceful discourses among elders, where the tone itself is that of old age. It is interesting to notice how the discursive style of the elderly substantially differs from that of the young. This aspect emerges clearly if we confront, for example, the enthusiasm of young Socrates with the calmness of old Parmenides in the first part of the *Parmenides*. More generally, it is possible to detect a shift in the dialogical tone also in the passage from the first platonic dialogues – defined, consistently with this distinction, as youthful – to those of old age. Whilst the reasons for this change cannot be explained completely through an interpretative scheme opposing youth to old age, I believe that such scheme might provide an interesting avenue of analysis.

However, the role of the elders is explicitly defined through the formulation of the “Nocturnal Council”,⁹ book XII, 960b-968e. The Council aims at safeguarding the laws and the constitution and must be composed of divine elders (966–967) and some youths. The essential role of divine elders consists in safeguarding the laws and the constitution. Moreover they are responsible for completing and amending the laws and for education. The divine elder is thus

⁶See Plat. *Leg.* 664c4-d4.

⁷Brisson 1996: 15.

⁸Note that according to Gill the *Laws* can be read as an actual dialogue and therefore share some typical features of socratic dialogues. See Gill 2003.

⁹See Brisson 2001a.

a magistrate who oversees the youths and their masters and controls the influences which might corrupt them, that is to say contents transmitted by poets or coming from abroad. The elder's functions include also observing foreign traditions (thus he must travel abroad to observe and then report his findings) and controlling the courts. As they have a "verifying role", the elders perform also a religious function and must demonstrate the excellence of their values. The council is thus divided in 5 groups, of which 4 are composed by elders:

1. The ten oldest Guardians of the Laws;
2. The Minister of Education and his retired colleagues;
3. The Scrutineers;
4. The Observers;
5. Young people.

Education is central both to the relationship between the elder and the youth within the council and to the personal development of the elder. Is the elder divine *per se* or does his divinity depends on the extent to which he has exercised philosophy during his lifetime?

Laches 188b1–4 is extremely clear:

And I think that there is no harm in being reminded of any wrong thing which we are, or have been, doing: he who does not fly from reproof will be sure to take more heed of his after-life; as Solon says, he will wish and desire to be learning so long as he lives, and will not think that old age of itself brings wisdom.

The elder is divine if he is a philosopher, that is to say someone who is willing to research and question himself over the span of his whole life. Possessing specific knowledge is thus not enough (968 a-e): it is necessary to combine the Socratic conception of philosophy as research with a Platonic philosophy focusing on the knowledge of contents.

Unfortunately the text stops here, but Luc Brisson¹⁰ tracks in *Epinomides* (through a comparison with the 7th book of the *Republic*) the characteristics of education which have been lost in the text of the *Laws*. The elder must excel in the following disciplines: arithmetic, geometry, stereometry, harmonics, astronomy, and dialectics.

Memory, traditionally linked to old age, assumes a new meaning. It is not only the ability that enables old people to narrate fables, but also the ability through which they can approach the divine.

Memory is both an element open to the intervention of education (books 5–7 of the *Republic*) and a divine and eternal part of the soul, which connects the earthly and the divine by assimilating the former into the latter.¹¹

¹⁰ See Brisson 2001a:176.

¹¹ To further explore this thread of analysis, cf. Brisson 2003; Pradeau 2003; Lavecchia 2006.

Laws 966 d9-e2 points out that the soul is the oldest element that presides over the birth of the body. The divine elder is the philosopher¹² who took care of his own soul (see *Phaedrus* on this topic) and, freed from bodily passions related to youth, expresses the divinity of the soul. The body of the elder – free, thanks to age, from material necessities – is similar to those of Gods.¹³

The elder is therefore a link, or we could say a *metaxy o daimon*, between the divine world reached in the afterlife and life on earth. Death for the philosopher becomes a glorification, as much as it is for a warrior in battle. The best example in this respect is the role played by old Socrates in the *Phaedrus* and the *Crito*: he embodies in fact the wise philosopher who hopes for eternity. Old age should be lived in the sign of philosophy; otherwise it makes the elder a child instead of enabling him to approach the divine. In the passage 646a4–5 of the *Laws* Plato emphasizes the situation in which the elder returns a child, due to an illness that, like drunkenness, impairs his reasoning.

It is possible to notice again how, on the one hand, the concept of old age acquires its meaning in relations to youth, on the other, it needs to be associated with philosophy.

To sum up, the old philosopher, not just the old man, is the best candidate to perform an educative role for youths and a political role towards the city.

5. CONCLUSION: THE MODEL OF THE WISE ELDER PHILOSOPHER

Socrates, who – with the exception of the *Parmenides* – is always depicted as an elder, represents the philosopher who is committed to an educative and political function. At the same time, however, he incarnates some subversive features different from those of the Athenian. These features make him an awkward character, who will be therefore killed by the *polis*. In the shift from Socrates to the Athenian we can grasp a change in Plato's political orientation.

For the re-foundation of the *polis*, the divine elder must be included in the constitutional bodies, must be an example of tolerance and balance rather than of polemical verve, must be capable of preparing, proposing and safeguarding the laws.

Although Socrates is an elder, he represents the key functions of youth: enthusiasm, critique, questioning, and research. This is how Plato represents him in the *Parmenides*, after the Socratic dialogues: a youth.

The Athenian, by contrast, represents the Platonic reformulation of old age

¹²“[...] the Nocturnal Council corresponds to the philosophers in the *Republic*”, Brisson 2005: 111.

¹³Brisson 2003.

as a resource at the service of the polis: frugal, balanced, proponent and warrant of the law.

Both play an educative and political role, but eventually Plato seems to prefer the method of the Athenian and the judiciary, explicitly linked to the elders, in the Nocturnal Council. The education of youths is not anymore delivered by means of Socratic confutation or through a life lived at the Academy, but through a preferential relationship between the best elders and the best youths within the Council.

Also in this case, Plato presents himself as the grand reformist capable of proposing the new by combining traditional models with novel categories. The particular relationship between elders and youths within the Nocturnal Council replicates the elitist and elective features of the traditional pederastic model, but it adds the fundamental innovative element of a philosophical education of the soul.

In conclusion it is crucial to emphasize how the model of the old wise man is neither the traditional one (old people are wise *per se*) neither that of the new democracy (e.g. the rich Cephalous in the first book of the *Republic*). Moreover, the analysis of the old and wise philosopher let us problematize the interpretation that would understand Plato's political philosophy as totalitarian. By contrast, the best model is that of the philosopher who committed his whole life to philosophy and, by doing so, could nurture the divine character of his soul and assume an eminent role in the polis. His task is the education of the youth, the political administration of the polis and the safeguard of laws. It is not a coincidence that this is the purpose that directed Plato's entire life and that inspired him, as an old man, to write *the Laws* – after having tried to build a perfect city in Sicily and having founded and directed the Academy.

The glorification of the wise and old philosopher appears thus, in the last instance, as Plato's glorification of himself and his own life.

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