

**SOCRATES' *MAIEUTICS* AND THE ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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Abstract

Since Homeric times, psychotherapy has been an essential part of the medical act. Initially, the word of physicians had a magical character. Plato rationalizes this in many of his Dialogues. In “Charmides” he dives deeper into this matter and proposes to apply it to

every disease. Analysing this Dialogue has fundamental consequences for psychotherapy: 1. Remedy and *epodé* (charm) must be applied in every doctor-patient relationship. 2. The body can only be healed if the soul is cured first by a charm. Patients must “offer” their souls to the physician, which implies the need for confidence and the unavoidable asymmetry which characterize doctor-patient relationships. 3. The openness of the patient’s soul to the physician and the physician’s beautiful speech to the patient will enable the latter to reach the state of *sophrosyne* (temperance), the condition of the possibility of true health. In the discussion of the meaning of *sophrosyne*, Socrates questions every of the disciples’ propositions and concludes that the only thing one can be sure of is that *sophrosyne* is a way of searching virtue (*areté*). Later, in *Thaetetus*, Plato adds another element: temperance is a *homoiosis theó*, that is, the assimilation of patient to God. With this, Plato seals the ethical character of psychotherapy for ever.

Keywords: The role of psychotherapy in medicine, the concept of temperance in Plato’s Dialogue *Charmides*, the ethical foundations of psychotherapy

Objectives

Introduction

The word *maieutics* derives from the Greek *máia*, which means mother, wet nurse, and midwife. The goddess who bears her name was Hermes’ mother, the messenger between men and gods. Two important nouns derive from *máia*: *máieiuma* and *máieia*, which respectively mean childbirth and art of obstetrics; besides, two verbs derive from *máia* as well, *máieusis* and *máeionuai*, which mean giving birth, bringing into the world, and easing childbirth respectively. A synonym with the same etymological root of *máieia* or obstetrics,

is *techné maieutiké*, which leads to *maieutics*, a concept employed by Socrates, who was the son of a midwife, to describe the form in which he, through dialogue, intended to give birth to the truth in the other, concretely in the young Athenians. *Maieutics* was the second and last stage in the framework of his method of philosophic teaching called dialectics. The first was irony, a method of questions and answers through which Socrates led his disciples to recognize their own ignorance. Let us remember his famous phrase: “I only know that I know nothing”. The two meanings of the word dialectics are found in this sentence: the dialogue loaded with irony which shows ignorance as knowledge and, at the same time, the negativity implicit in every question about what is real, which is proper of dialectic thinking, from Heraclitus to Hegel (to see Gadamer, 1965, p. 283; 344-360 / 2004, p. 298; 356-371).

The healing power of physician’s word

Well, the Socratic method was the opposite of the teaching of the sophists, supposedly wise men who travelled through Greece teaching youth about the most different matters. For sophists, the pupil was the one asking and the teacher answering and giving the interlocuter his knowledge, while in the Socratic method the teacher was the one questioning until the pupil would recognize his ignorance. Having eliminated the mistakes and affirming himself in this “knowing” about his own ignorance, the disciple was in conditions to find the way toward the truth. Socrates employed this method to teach the Athenian youth not only specific knowledge, as the sophists intended, but above all, to know and to practice the virtues and, thus, to model their soul to become good citizens. Because for Socrates every education should be political. He felt himself called to educate the youth to govern or to be governed. Socrates designed this education for abstinence and self-control with the Greek word *ascesis*, which is not equivalent to the asceticism of monastic life. The self-control that rulers as well as citizens needed and which he called *enkráteia* was, according to his disciple Xenophon, the fundament of all virtues, since it “is equivalent to emancipating the reason for the tyranny of man’s animal nature and stabilizing the legal empire of the spirit over the instincts” (quoted by Jaeger, p. 432).

“To give birth to the truth in the other”, as Socrates intended with his *maieutics* is not very different from what modern psychotherapy professes. Whether psychoanalytic, systemic or existential, the aspiration of every psychotherapeutic method will always be to broaden the limits of consciousness, to recognize hidden or denied conflicts and to increase with it the scope of personal freedom. Does this mean that it was Socrates who invented psychotherapy or did, before him, exist some forms of “treatment by the word” used by medicine? In fact, since Hippocrates, psychotherapy has been an essential part of the medical act. But already before, in Homeric medicine, the act of healing diseases or wounds was accompanied by a spell, charm or incantation, which had the function of attracting the benevolence of the gods toward the patient and at the same time exercising a suggestive effect. “Since the *epodé* with which Autolycus’ sons healed Ulysses’ wounds, the mention of this therapeutic rite became frequent in Greek literature (...) It is, as we know, a verbal formula of magical character, of variable content as per the cases, and recited or sung in front of the patient in order to obtain their healing” (Láin Entralgo, 1958, p. 46). But with Plato the sense of the charms changed completely. He rationalized them, freeing them from their magical connotation. That is how both in *The Republic* and in *Laws*, Plato expressed himself harshly against those who deceive their fellow creatures, be these patients or afflicted beings, through false speeches of pretended magical power. In his ideal state he suggested that one should even condemn those who deceive the others, pretending that one “can conjure the dead and promise to charm the Gods with sacrifices and prayers...” (*Laws X*, 909, p. 770). For Plato the *logos* of the physician were truly *kalós* (beautiful) when its content and its form were adequate to the peculiarity and to the situation of the patient’s soul: “... having classified men and speeches, and their kinds and affections, and adapted them to one another, he will tell the reasons of his arrangement, and show why one soul is persuaded by a particular form of argument, and another not” (*Phaedrus* 271, p. 137; Láin Entralgo, 1958, p. 175-176).

We are interested in outlining how, since the beginning of scientific medicine, the word of physicians has played a fundamental role. It is likely that in the centuries after Hippocrates, and up to the arrival of Freudian psychoanalysis, medicine did not achieve a theoretic elaboration of the healing by the word superior to the Greek; but undoubtedly that that verbal moment continued to exist in all the forms of medicine, even in the most scientific, at least as a suggestion. Just remember that, to recognize the efficacy of a medicine, it must

overcome the so called “placebo effect”, which is estimated at around 40%. Let us also think of the family doctor, whose word not only helps to heal pain or to diminish the fear of death when it is on the lurk, but also becomes the source of relief and advice for all family happenings. That enormous contingent of patients that somatic medicine calls “functional” sometimes get better only when the physician listens to them and speaks words of consolation.

Well now, the need of psychotherapy is based on that fundamental anthropological fact that human beings never completely know themselves. There is a kind of ontological difference between being and appearing (Sartre, 1948/1966, p. 85-93), not only with respect to others, but also with respect to oneself. Since ancient times, in Delphos the phrase “know yourself” had been stated and this motto was transformed, as we have seen, into one of Socrates’ most important tasks: to demonstrate to the people, and especially to the youth, that they do not know themselves and then to help them walk the arduous road of self-knowledge. And precisely that is, as we have seen, *maieutics*, the art of Socrates’ *maieutics* as psychotherapy giving birth to the truth in the other. In the dialogue “Meno” Plato makes Socrates say: “Certainly we shall have to look to ourselves and try to find someone who will help in some way or other to improve us” (96, p. 188). Here Socrates raises to us the need of knowing ourselves and of searching the teacher (and, in medicine, the therapist) who can help us reach that goal. The problem is to find out who and how.

Plato’s Dialogue Charmides and the doctor-patient relationship

To answer the question raised, we will appeal to the help of Plato himself. He was always interested in medicine and, in many of his dialogues, he took position in the problem of treatment by words, today called psychotherapy. In the dialogue “Charmides” he treated this issue in the most detailed way. In summary, the story goes as follows: young Charmides, who in reality was Plato’s cousin, suffered from strong headaches and had heard that Socrates had a herb, a *pharmakon*, which could relieve pains without any particular procedure. He went to Socrates to ask him for the remedy and Socrates said to him that, indeed, it was a healing method that he himself had learned about “from one of the physicians of the Thracian

king Zamolxis, who are said to be so skillful that they can even give immortality” (156, p. 3); but this herb turned out not to have any effect if not accompanied by a *epodé*, a beautiful speech: “For all good and evil, whether in the body or in human nature, originates, as he declared, in the soul, and overflows from hence, as if from the head into the eyes” (156, p. 3). “And, therefore, if the head and body are to be well, you must begin by curing the soul; that is the first thing. And the cure, my dear youth, has to be effected by the use of certain charms, and these charms are fair words; and by them temperance is implanted in the soul, and where temperance is, there health is speedily imparted, not only to the head, but to the whole body.” (157, p. 3).

Before we go into a more detailed analysis of this beautiful text, I would like to indicate the parallelism between the treatment of diseases by means of the word described here and the Socratic *maieutics* explained at the beginning. In *maieutics* it is a matter of giving birth to the truth in the other to transform them into a good citizen. In psychotherapy, the objective lies in discovering what it is that really afflicts the patient (their deep truth) in order for them to be able to reestablish the balance lost due to the illness. Let us remember that health was for the Greeks the balance of moods, but also the harmony of the subject with themselves, with the community, with nature and with the gods. In both methods, it is a matter then of reaching the truth: in one aiming at coming to knowledge and to virtue, in the other reaching the state of health. But what do the art of curing and true health consist of? Let us see what Plato teaches with respect to it:

1. That remedy and *epode*, or beautiful speech, must be applied in the same context of the doctor-patient relationship, because the body cannot possibly heal without first achieving the healing of the soul, but nor can the soul heal without a healed body. The idea of the whole, of the soul-body unity, is always present when Plato speaks of the medical act. And this could then be an ethical imperative for the exercise of psychotherapy: never taking too much distance from the body! In other words, psychotherapy must remain close to medicine, integrated in the treatment of the person as a whole: “For this’, he said, ‘is the great error of our day in the treatment of the human body, that physicians separate the soul from the body’. And he added with emphasis, at the same time making me swear to his words, ‘Let no one, however

rich, or noble, of fair, persuade you to give him the cure, without the charm’.” (Charmides, 157, p. 3).

2. That in the framework of this unity a precedence does exist, because “without the charm the leaf would be of no avail” (155, p. 2) and Socrates says a little later: “And he who taught me the cure and the charm at the same time added a special direction: ‘Let no one’, he said, ‘persuade you to cure the head, until he has first given you his soul to be cured by the charm’” (157, p. 3)”. And then: “Now I... must keep my oath, and therefore if you will allow me to apply the Thracian charm first to your soul, as the stranger directed, I will afterwards proceed to apply the cure to your head. But if not, I do not know what I am to do with you, my dear Charmides.” (157, p. 3) Here, like nowhere else, the importance of psychotherapy for medicine is underlined and, even more, its primacy over other forms of treatment. According to this text, psychotherapy would represent an essential part of every medical act. Expressed in another way: besides the existence of psychotherapy as an independent technique, every medical intervention should be psychotherapeutic to reach a true curative effect. However, Plato teaches us even more about the respective attitudes the patient and the physician should adopt. He tells us that the patient must “offer” their soul to the physician so the latter can speak to them with a “beautiful speech”, which implies two things: first, the need for the patient to have confidence and second, the unavoidable asymmetry characterizing the doctor-patient relationship. In the dialogue “Phaedrus” (271, p. 137) Plato indicates the conditions the charms or beautiful speeches should meet in order to be true and effective, since also false charms exist: “... because medicine has to define the nature of the body and rhetoric of the soul – if we would proceed, not empirically but scientifically, in the one case to impart health and strength by giving medicine and food, in the other to implant the conviction or virtue, which you desire, by the right application of words and training.” (Phaedrus 270, p. 136). For him the *epodai* or charms are not merely rationalizing words anyone could say, they must possess a “demonic power” (Lain Entralgo, 1958, p. 173) which is what finally causes the curative modification in the patient. Let us remember that the demonic is the “intermediate between the divine and the mortal... and through

him the arts of the prophet and the priest, their sacrifices and mysteries and charms, and all prophecy and incantation find their way” (Symposium, 202, 203, p. 163).

3. The openness of the patient’s soul to the physician and the latter’s beautiful speech will allow the patient to reach the state of *sophrosyne*, condition of possibility of the health of the whole and, therefore, of the body as well. The question would be then: what does the *sophrosyne* consist of? The rest of the dialogue is about the discussion of this problem. Charmides and Critias propose several definitions. Charmides begins by saying that temperance is “doing things orderly and quietly, such things, for example, as walking in the streets, and talking, or anything else of that nature. In a word, I should answer that, in my opinion, temperance is quietness.” (159, p. 4). Socrates, with his usual dialectic ability, questions him with respect to the definition given and makes him fall in progressive contradictions, until Charmides himself ends up rejecting it. At the request of Socrates, he makes an attempt at a new definition of *sophrosyne* (since, initially, he had affirmed to already possess the prudence it derived from and that he did not need Socrates’ charms for recovering): ”My opinion is, Socrates, that temperance makes a man ashamed or modest, and that temperance is the same as modesty” (160, p. 5). It did not go better for the young Charmides with this new definition, and he had to abandon it too to make a third attempt: “I just now remember to have heard from someone, who said that ‘temperance is doing our own business’.” (161, p. 5).

Temperance as condition of possibility of true health

In the discussion it is made evident that there would be strictly nothing against those occupying themselves with the things of others also being temperate (163, p. 6). The discussion continues with Critias since from him Charmides had heard about the selfish definition of *sophrosyne* (temperance) being used in good form with the own business and certainly Critias has to undergo Socrates’ intelligent irony even worse than Charmides. Then the dialogue begins to gradually define the *sophrosyne*, temperance, as the capacity of knowing oneself and knowing others (164, p. 7 – 166, p. 8). But despite the depth and beauty of this last definition, Socrates is not satisfied with it and falls into further incertitude and

ends up saying: “I only dare to predict that temperance is something useful and good” (169 b), since all the other definitions, when analyzed, prove insufficient or contradictory. Towards the end of the dialogue, he manifests with resignation: “But now I have been utterly defeated and have failed to discover what that is to which the imposer of names gave this name of temperance or wisdom” (175, p. 13). Charmides ends up accepting that he does not possess the temperance he thought he did and that he does need Socrates’ charm, with which the *pharmakon* can achieve its effect and he can be relieved of his headaches.

I believe that in this dialogue Plato wants to teach us, among many other things, something very fundamental, which is that human existence, even in its most elevated states such as that of the *sophrosyne*, is and continues to be an open question. There is no formula, no prescription by means of which the human being can reach their full realization and/or happiness, as have claimed almost all well-known psychotherapeutic systems and their underlying worldviews (Doerr-Zegers, 1972, 1996). The *sophrosyne* has been shown to us as the maximum virtue, however, we miss its very essence. In summary, it is only possible to reach true health through *sophrosyne*, but its knowledge is denied to us. Does this mean we have arrived at a dead-end situation? Yes and no. Yes, because this platonic text indeed does not offer us a solution to the problem. No, because, further on, Plato does suggest an answer: the *sophrosyne* is a way, is a search of *areté*, of virtue, or, better expressed, it is the state which allows us to throw ourselves into looking for it. Regarding this conception of psychotherapy and of the doctor-patient relationship, the present psychotherapies, both the orthodox and the heterodox, seem clumsy and pretentious. In any case, the wide horizon Plato placed healing by the word in represents a kind of protection barrier against many of the breaches of ethics frequently seen in the exercise of psychotherapy and, at the same time, a challenge for the future development of this type of treatment (to see J. Masson, 1974).

Years later, in the dialogue “Theaetetus”, Plato added another element to true health and its condition of possibility, the *sophrosyne*: the way towards the true health is a *homoiosis theó* (176, p. 530). This means that in the root of every therapeutic process is hidden the approach, or rather the assimilation of the person of the patient to God. It is impossible to imagine a higher place than the one which Plato gave to psychotherapy. This would not only be a method of healing diseases of the soul and, at the same time, those of the body, but also

a way of ascending towards divinity. Plato's text is the following: "Wherefore we ought to fly away from earth to heaven as quickly as we can; and to become like God, as far as this is possible; and to become like him, is to become holy, just and wise" (176, p. 530). With this, the ethical dimension inherent to the encounter of the patient with the physician in general, and with the psychotherapist in particular, as well as to the subsequent process of healing, was established once and for all.

Psychotherapy would be, hence, a *maieutics* in the sense of giving birth to the truth in the other, such a truth that allows achieving that balance or temperance, the *sophrosyne*, which would be the condition *sine qua non* of true health. But what does truth mean? We cannot start a philosophical discussion of this topic, but indeed at least signal that for centuries the Aristotelian principle prevailed, according to which truth was the adequacy, or better said, the concordance of thought and thing, until Heidegger (1927/1963, pp. 214-226 / 2008, pp. 256-269) revolutionized the Western conception of truth by rescuing the old Greek idea of **the truth as illumination**. For this, he only needed to appeal to the etymology of *aletheia*, truth in Greek, formed by *Lethe*, concealment, and the prefix of negation "a", thus, originally meaning "un-conceal", bring to light, therefore, "give birth".

And the circle is closed here: Socrates, son of a midwife, intuited early that the art of his mother was much more than helping a child to be born. There was something tremendously profound in that act, something that perhaps enclosed the mystery of human existence itself. In the first place, the mystery of its biological condition, so different from the rest of the mammals, which is helplessness. No other being in the universe is born as helpless as the human being and, consequently, the phenomenon of being born and the art of who helps, the *techné maieutiké*, must be infinitely delicate and complex. Nonetheless, this helplessness requires the existence of a maternal role much more potent and prolonged than in the animal kingdom and, likewise, the presence of a father (role non-existent in other species), a father who is not only protector and sustainer, but also contributes to the *logos*, the word, condition of possibility of the gestation of identity and language (Hermann Lang, 2011, pp. 62-93, in particular p. 80). Without the word of the father, the child could not be differentiated from the mother, in fact, a child could not even know where he ends and she begins. **The child is the truth of the mother and the father the truth of the child**, by obliging the father to the

child to take the road toward themselves, a road we deviate from so many times in life. Those deviations underlie many of the earlier so-called neuroses and are, for the Greeks, the background of any somatic disease. That is why Socrates warns Charmides that the pharmakon will have no effect on his headaches, if he does not open his soul first, so that he, Socrates, with his word, his *logos*, can help him to know his truth, in other words, the *maieutics* as psychotherapy and the psychotherapy as *maieutics*.

However, these deviations that lead us to anxiety and depression have to do with another mysterious characteristic of the human being, which is its liberty, acquired by language but related, in turn, to our condition of historical and political beings. Heidegger himself (1954/1976) later approached the topic of truth again, discovering, through new etymologic investigations in Greek, Latin and archaic German, its relation to liberty (pp. 15-19). Because liberty would not mean doing what one wants, but rather “letting” the entity “be”, both the other and the things, in German, *sein-lassen*. But this “letting-be” is not to be understood as indifference, of not occupying oneself with the other or of not caring what the other does or does not do, but, on the contrary, as the verb *sich-einlassen-auf etwas*, which means giving or compromising (with the other).

Conclusions and perspectives

When reflecting about what Socrates understood by *maieutics*, we found that an essential bond exists between *maieutics* and the doctor-patient relationship in general, and psychotherapy in particular. In Dialogue Charmides, Plato develops this topic in depth and states that every medical act must be also psychotherapeutic if its intention is really to heal the patient. Well then, true health does not consist only of the absence of disease but requires reaching a special state called *sophrosyne* by the Greeks. In Charmides, neither Socrates himself nor his disciples managed to arrive to a satisfactory definition of this state. The question remains as open as human existence itself. However, the fact that in Theaetetus Plato does define “*sophrosyne*” as assimilation to God, seals the ethical dimension inherent to every psychotherapy. Another interesting bond that results from analyzing this dialogue is the following: like we said, Socrates was the son of a midwife and for many years he helped

out and participated in the mysterious phenomenon of giving birth. It occurs that the etymologic origin of the word “truth” (in Greek, *a-letheia*) is almost identical to giving birth, since it means dis-concealment, bringing to light. Psychotherapy, therefore, would be a method for helping in giving birth to the truth in the other. Now, according to Heidegger, truth is closely linked to liberty, to the point of considering it “the essence of truth” (1954, p. 13). Its meaning is “letting be” (“*sein lassen*”), not in the sense of indifference, but as “*sich einlassen auf*”, that is, as getting involved with the other. A future task will be then to develop the context of psychotherapy-liberty, given the fact that one could consider the limitation of liberty as a common element of almost all the psychopathological syndromes.

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