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Socrates and Confucius: Tradition, Innovation and Value Redefinition in Higher Cultures of Strong Identity

Socrates is an enigmatic historical personality of great importance. He was brought up intellectually, and most influenced, by both main currents of thought prevalent at his time, the old “Presocratic” philosophy in its most developed Anaxagorean form, and the new Sophistic movement revolutionizing thinking in the second half of the 5th century. Plato presents a picture of him that not only is highly influenced by the Platonic perspective of 4th century developments in philosophical thought, but is itself problematic and even partly contractual. The other pupils of Socrates, each one the founder of a so-called Minor Socratic School, appear to have drawn different, diverse, seemingly contradictory lessons from their master, or at least to have emphasized opposing Socratic tendencies as foundational principles of the new philosophy. The devastating attack of comic poets, primarily Aristophanes, gives a totally opposing portrayal of the mysterious thinker, who on the other hand was a most public figure, to an extent unheard of in the intellectual circles of Greece up to that time, a philosopher really in, and of, the market place. Even the Delphic Oracle took cognizance of the man, testifying to his fame beyond the borders of Attica. His juridical condemnation in a people’s court on imprecise grounds of impiety, calls for a thorough examination, given also the when and by whom of the accusations brought against him. Finally, Aristotle’s testimony on the man and his philosophy has to be carefully taken account of.

A complex figure in a very complex situation. The personality question in Socrates’ case helps focus the investigation and clarify the nature of significant aspects of the history of ideas and of ways of thought in the classical age. In the paper I shall try to shed light, if not solve, the enigma of Socrates. Central to my concern will be his apparently ambivalent ways to traditional ways of understanding the world and man’s position in it, that were defining the cultural milieu in which he operated, and the real impact of his innovations in that context. On both counts, a comparison and contrast to Confucius and the Chinese classical thought developments are of paramount comparative and systemic value, as I’ll try to show. The both endeavoured to develop an autonomous theory of human action, relationships and societal integrals that would recreate embedded values in their respective cultural systems. Problems, tensions, challenges and perspectives generated by such long-ranging and systematic revalidations are of paramount importance esp. in ages of transition towards a new era, like our own.