Aristoxenus on Socrates

Alessandro Stavru
Università Bocconi Milano

1 Introduction

With very few exceptions in modern scholarship, Aristoxenus’ Life of Socrates has been thought untrustworthy as a source of information about Socrates.\(^1\) This is not surprising, since the Socrates described by Aristoxenus appears at odds with the one generally reconstructed from the first-generation Socratic, our main sources for his thought. Most scholars have claimed that Aristoxenus’ portrait is hostile toward Socrates, and thus incompatible with the “idealized” accounts of earlier sources, especially Plato and Xenophon. Recent studies have assessed Aristoxenus’ report more positively, pointing out that it relied on oral accounts, and was therefore likely to reflect features of the historical Socrates.\(^2\)

This chapter will follow this newer trend of studies. I will first dwell on the peculiar features of Aristoxenus’s report on Socrates, which is closely linked to the development of the biographical genre in antiquity. It is important to see that Aristoxenus’ cultural background is not that of the Sôkratikoi logoi, but that of the Pythagorean and Peripatetic milieux. His way of dealing with Socratic literature is altogether different from that of the first-generation Socratics, or even of Aristotle. Nevertheless, most of what he writes seems to be related, explicitly or implicitly, to that literature. The accounts of the Socratics do in fact feature, at once, an “idealized” Socrates, whose intellectual abilities make him a model of virtue and philosophical inquiry, and a highly realistic Socrates, whose most peculiar and “positive” qualities turn out to be closely connected to the “negative” and critical aspects of his character.\(^3\) Aristoxenus’ character-

---

\(^1\) For different reasons these scholars reject Aristoxenus as a trustworthy source of information about Socrates: Leo 1901; Dittmar 1912; Heiberg 1913; Maier 1913; Burnet 1914; Schmid 1920; Zeller 1963 (\(^9\)1922); Stuart 1928; Geffcken 1928; Wehrli 1967; Dihle 1970; Fitton 1970 (who, however, accepts Aristoxenus’ account of Socrates’ two wives); Guthrie 1971; Woodbury 1971; Momigliano 1993; Mansfeld 1994; Sonnabend 2002; Patzer 2006; Barker 2007. Exceptions: von Mess 1916; Joël 1921; Minar 1979 (\(^1\)1942); Fortenbaugh 2007; Zimmermann 2014. I am thankful to Christopher Moore and Livio Rossetti for their precious remarks. They have substantially improved this chapter.

\(^2\) Döring 2007; Schorn 2012; Huffman 2012.

\(^3\) On the realistic features of a “Socrates in action” see Rossetti 2011. Rossetti reconstructs these
ization of Socrates as an ignorant, irascible, sex-driven man who dominates his licentiousness through education while remaining constantly exposed to violent emotions is not at odds with the depictions of the first-generation Socratics. I will deal with Aristoxenus’ connections with the Sôkratikoi logoi (in particular with Antisthenes, Plato, Xenophon, and Phaedo) as well as with other biographical material that circulated within the Peripatus, and conclude that Aristoxenus’ understanding of Socrates as a “living contradiction,” far from being “polemical” or “unkind” toward Socrates, is not even an idiosyncratic position: in most cases it is explicit or implicit in earlier literature.

2 Sources

Aristoxenus was an erudite and prolific writer: 453 books were attributed to him, dealing with a complex range of subjects. A substantial part of his work takes on Pythagorean issues, such as harmony and music, while a smaller portion, mostly of an historical character, seems to be influenced by topics studied in the Peripatus. This fact is important for understanding what in antiquity has been praised as one of Aristoxenus’ greatest achievements, namely the artful description of the “lives” (bioi) of famous personalities. We know about his lives of Pythagoras, Archytas, Socrates, Plato, and the poet Telestes, and hear tell of books in which, probably, whole series of personalities were depicted. Such accounts were complete portraits of the life and the character of important persons of the past. Of these works only the portions excerpted by later authors remain, the transmission of these texts being often indirect, through late antique sources.

features through an intertextual study of parallel passages in the Comics, the Sophists, and the first-generation Socratics, and relates them to Socrates’ way of living, behaving, and dealing with others. Rossetti shows that a number of parallel texts refers to a clearly recognizable “Socratic character” whose communication strategies aim not at imparting wisdom but at changing the interlocutor’s mind through psychagogic, protreptic, and maieutic means. This chapter endeavors to show how these traits belong to the complex personality into which Aristoxenus gives insight, albeit from a different angle than the Socratics.


6 Fr. 10a–b Wehrli.

7 On Pythagoras and His Pupils, On Aulos Players and On Tragedians (see Kaiser 2010, xi).