

GERMANY (Allemagne)

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*“If you think what I say is true, agree to it, and if not,
oppose me with every argument you can muster ...”*
(Plato, *Phaedo*, 91B/C)

SOCRATES IN SUPPORT OF TODAY’S EUROPE?

1. PROPOSITION

For many years there have been complaints that the centrifugal tendencies in Europe are posing an ever-greater threat. Anti-European nationalism is on the rise. The metaphor of Europe teetering on the edge of an abyss is already widely accepted. We need to strengthen the forces that bind Europe together – this demand has long since become a commonplace.

What has been lacking so far is a convincing public answer to the question of what means can be used to reinforce European cohesion.

I would like to look for an answer from a Central European and German perspective. As we all know, a review of German history reveals not only periods of peace, stability and cultural florescence, but also catastrophic plunges into barbarism and war. During the Nazi period (1933-1945), horrendous crimes were committed in the name of Germany, most notably the mass murder of Jews. Much research has been done on the causes of these catastrophes.

Our study, however, will not focus on the causes of such events. We want to ask the opposite question: what factors have made it possible, in the past, to overcome those dark phases of hatred, violence and barbarism? How were people able to progress once again towards civilization and culture?

For this retrospective, we will take our lead from the research findings of the British-American political scientist Leslie LIPSON (1912-2000), who clearly saw civilizing potential in the study of “the Greeks”. He wrote:

“But the Greeks were the teachers in all matters artistic and intellectual; and when one drinks from that source, the creative powers of the human mind are invariably unleashed” (*The Ethical Crises of Civilization*. Newbury Park, London, New Delhi 1993, p. 64).

At the end we will turn to the question of whether and how the findings from this historical retrospective can be utilized, now and in the future, for the stabilization of Europe.

2. CIVILIZING POTENTIAL IN PLATO'S DIALOGUES?

Let us begin by considering some extracts from ancient Greek literature which contain significant European moral concepts:

Text 1. PLATO, *Crito* 49B

(I. Burnet, *Platonis opera*. Tomus I. Oxford 1900;
translated by H. Meissner, based on H.N. Fowler, London 1971)

Socrates is in prison, awaiting his execution. His friend Crito visits him there and urges him to flee from prison. Socrates refuses. His detailed rationale contains the sentence:

Οὐδὲ ἀδικούμενον ἄρα ἀνταδικεῖν, ὡς οἱ πολλοὶ οἴονται...
And we ought not even to repay crime with crime, as the world thinks...

Moral concept in text 1: A rejection of revenge

Text 2. PLATO, *Phaedo* 91B/C

(I. Burnet, *Platonis opera*. Tomus I. Oxford 1900;
translated by H. Meissner, based on H.N. Fowler, London 1971)

Shortly before his execution, Socrates talks to friends about whether the soul is immortal. Before starting a new attempt to convince his friends of the immortality of the soul, he invites them:

Ἦμεῖς μέντοι, ἂν ἐμοὶ πείθησθε, σμικρὸν φροντίσαντες Σωκράτους, τῆς δὲ ἀληθείας πολὺ μᾶλλον, ἐὰν μὲν τι ὑμῖν δοκῶ ἀληθὲς λέγειν, συνομολογήσατε, εἰ δὲ μή, παντὶ λόγῳ ἀντιτείνετε...

But you, if you do as I ask, will give little thought to Socrates and much more to the truth; and if you think what I say is true, agree to it, and if not, oppose me with every argument you can muster ...

Moral concepts in text 2: Basic principles on understanding:

- truth;
- openness towards the opinions of others;
- reason-based argument (παντὶ λόγῳ ἀντιτείνετε);
- a friendly conversational tone.

Text 3. PLATO, *Protagoras* 314D/E

(I. Burnet, *Platonis opera*. Tomus III. Oxford 1903;
translated by H. Meissner, based on B. Jowett, London 1953)

The Platonic dialogue *Protagoras* depicts how Socrates deals with a slave who provocatively refuses to admit Socrates and his companion to the house of a wealthy acquaintance, Callias; at the time, Callias is hosting a famous guest,

Protagoras. This slave is clearly very ill-humoured because a large number of visitors (“Sophists”) have already come to see Callias on that day:

ἐπειδὴ γοῦν ἐκρούσαμεν τὴν θύραν, ἀνοίξας καὶ ἰδὼν ἡμᾶς “Ἐα”, ἔφη, “σοφισταὶ τινες· οὐ σχολὴ αὐτῷ.” καὶ ἅμα ἀμφοῖν τοῖν χεροῖν τὴν θύραν πάνυ προθύμως ὡς οἶός τ’ ἦν ἐπήραξεν. καὶ ἡμεῖς πάλιν ἐκρούομεν, καὶ ὃς ἐγκεκλημένης τῆς θύρας ἀποκρινόμενος εἶπεν, “ὦ ἄνθρωποι,” ἔφη, “οὐκ ἀκηκόατε ὅτι οὐ σχολὴ αὐτῷ;” “Ἀλλ’ ὠγαθέ,” ἔφην ἐγώ, “οὔτε παρὰ Καλλιᾶν ἤκομεν οὔτε σοφισταὶ ἐσμεν. ἀλλὰ θάρρει· Πρωταγόραν γάρ τοι δεόμενοι ἰδεῖν ἤλθομεν· εἰσάγγελον οὖν.” μόγις οὖν ποτε ἡμῖν ἄνθρωπος ἀνέφωξεν τὴν θύραν.

When we knocked at the door, and he opened and saw us, he grumbled: “They are Sophists, he is not at home”; and instantly gave the door a hearty bang with both his hands. Again we knocked, and he answered without opening: “Did you not hear me say that he is not at home, fellows?” “But, my friend”, I said, “you need not be alarmed; for we are not Sophists, and we are not come to see Callias, but we want to see Protagoras; and I must request you to announce us.” At last, after a good deal of difficulty, the man was persuaded to open the door ...

Moral concepts in text 3: Solving conflicts by means of persuasion (ἀλλ’ ὠγαθέ) rather than force.

Conclusion: So far it is hardly possible to give a convincing answer to the question of the civilizing potential of such literature. There should at least be general agreement, however, that the extracts quoted tend to help pacify a society rather than divide it.

In order to be able to make more in-depth statements about this literature, we will now consider a few more extracts:

Text 4. PLATO, *Apologia* 29C/D

(I. Burnet, *Platonis opera*. Tomus I. Oxford 1900;

In his speech of self-defence, Socrates calls on the Athenians:

εἰ μοι πρὸς ταῦτα εἶποιτε· “ὦ Σώκρατες, νῦν μὲν Ἀνύτῳ οὐ πεισόμεθα ἀλλ’ ἀφιεμέν σε, ἐπὶ τούτῳ μέντοι, ἐφ’ ὅτε μηκέτι ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ ζητήσῃ διατρίβειν μηδὲ φιλοσοφεῖν· ἐὰν δὲ ἀλῶς ἔτι τοῦτο πράττων, ἀποθανῇ” – εἰ οὖν με, ὅπερ εἶπον, ἐπὶ τούτοις ἀφίοιτε, εἶποιμ’ ἂν ὑμῖν ὅτι “Ἐγὼ ὑμᾶς, ὡ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, ἀσπάζομαι μὲν καὶ φιλῶ, πείσομαι δὲ μᾶλλον τῷ θεῷ ἢ ὑμῖν, καὶ ἕωσπερ ἂν ἐμπνέω καὶ οἶός τε ὦ, οὐ μὴ παύσωμαι φιλοσοφῶν καὶ ὑμῖν παρακελευόμενός καὶ ἐνδεικνύμενός ὅτῳ ἂν αἰεὶ ἐντυγχάνω ὑμῶν, λέγων οἷάπερ εἴωθα, ὅτι “ὦ ἀριστερεῶν ἀνδρῶν, ...”

... if you should say to me in reply to this: “Socrates, this time we will not do as Anytus says, but we will let you go, on this condition, however, that you no longer

spend your time in this investigation or in philosophy, and if you are caught doing so again you shall die”; if you should let me go under this condition which I have mentioned, I should say to you, “Men of Athens, I respect and love you, but I shall obey the god rather than you, and while I live and am able to continue, I shall never give up philosophy or stop exhorting you and pointing out the truth to any one of you whom I meet, saying in my accustomed way: ‘Most excellent man’ ...”

Moral concepts in text 4: In addition to the above-mentioned moral concepts, this passage presents:

- freedom of speech and individual responsibility; the refusal to submit to an opinion imposed by force (πέισομαι δὲ μᾶλλον);
- a refusal to be coerced by the threat of death;
- a friendly tone combined with a resolute stance (Ἐγὼ ὑμᾶς, ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, ἀσπάζομαι μὲν καὶ φιλῶ, πέισομαι δὲ μᾶλλον).

Text 5. PLATO, *Laches* 185A

(I. Burnet, *Platonis opera*. Tomus III. Oxford 1903;
translated by H. Meissner, based on B. Jowett, London 1953)

At one point, Socrates makes the following remark about child-raising:

ἢ περὶ μικροῦ οἴεσθε νυνὶ κινδυνεύειν καὶ σὺ καὶ Λυσίμαχος ἀλλ’ οὐ περὶ τούτου τοῦ κτήματος ὃ τῶν ὑμετέρων μέγιστον ὄν τυγχάνει; ὑέων γάρ που ἢ χρηστῶν ἢ τάναντία γενομένων καὶ πᾶς ὁ οἶκος ὁ τοῦ πατρὸς οὕτως οἰκίσηται, ὅποιοι ἄν τινες οἱ παῖδες γένωνται.

Is this a slight matter about which you and Lysimachus are deliberating? Are you not risking the greatest of your possessions? For children are your riches; and upon their turning out well or ill depends the whole order of their father’s house.

Moral concepts in text 5:

- awareness that child-raising has far-reaching consequences for good or evil;
- awareness that parents have a duty to raise their children as carefully as possible.

Text 6. PLATO, *Respublica* 519E/520A

(I. Burnet, *Platonis opera*. Tomus IV. Oxford 1902;
translated by C. Emllyn-Jones and W. Preddy, Cambridge 2013)

In his principal work, *The Republic*, Plato sums up the task of the legislator as follows:

... ὅτι νόμῳ οὐ τοῦτο μέλει, ὅπως ἐν τι γένος ἐν πόλει διαφερόντως εὖ πράξει, ἀλλ’ ἐν ὅλη τῇ πόλει τοῦτο μηχανᾶται ἐγγενέσθαι, συναρμόττων τοὺς

πολίτας πειθοῖ τε καὶ ἀνάγκῃ, ποιῶν μεταδιδόναι ἀλλήλοις τῆς ὠφελείας ἣν ἂν ἕκαστοι τὸ κοινὸν δυνατοὶ ᾧσιν ὠφελεῖν ...

... that this is not the purpose of the law that a single section of the community will do exceptionally well, but the intention is that this will apply across the whole state by uniting the populace by persuasion and compulsion, and by making them share the services with each other which every individual can do for the common good...

Moral concepts in text 6:

- a focus on the common good; a rejection of the privileging of individual groups within the state;
- cohesion as a fundamental value of the system of government;
- the deployment of all citizens in the service of the country according to their abilities.

Text 7. PLATO, *Leges* 693B

(I. Burnet, *Platonis opera*. Tomus V. Oxford 1907;

translation based on Fachübersetzungsdienst GmbH, Berlin 2019)

In his late work, *The Laws*, Plato argues that to achieve stability (μενοῦσαν), a system of government must be focused on three fundamental values:

ὡς ἄρα οὐ δεῖ μεγάλας ἀρχὰς οὐδ' αὐτὴν ἀμείκτους νομοθετεῖν, διανοηθέντας τὸ τοιόνδε, ὅτι πόλιν ἐλευθέραν τε εἶναι δεῖ καὶ ἔμφορα καὶ ἑαυτῇ φίλην, καὶ τὸν νομοθετοῦντα πρὸς ταῦτα βλέποντα δεῖ νομοθετεῖν.

... that one must not give any government, by law, overly great and unmixed power, on the basis of the idea that a polis should be

- free, and

- guided by reason, and

- on friendly terms with itself,

and that the legislator must pay attention to these things when making laws.

Moral concepts in text 7:

- rejection of absolute governmental power, because:
- a state must be free.
- a state must be guided by reason.
- a state must have internal coherence.

Text 8. PLATO, *Epistulae* 7.336E/337A

(I. Burnet, *Platonis opera*. Tomus V. Oxford 1907;

translation based on R. G. Bury, Cambridge 1929)

In a letter to friends who are caught up in a horrific civil war in Sicily, Plato —well over seventy years old at the time— gives the following answer

to the question of how hatred and violence between enemy camps can be overcome:

ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν παῦλα κακῶν τοῖς στασιάσασιν, πρὶν ἂν οἱ κρατήσαντες μάχαις καὶ ἐκβολαῖς ἀνθρώπων καὶ σφαγαῖς μνησικακοῦντες καὶ ἐπὶ τιμωρίας παύσωνται τρεπόμενοι τῶν ἐχθρῶν, ἐγκρατεῖς δὲ ὄντες αὐτῶν, θέμενοι νόμους κοινούς μηδὲν μᾶλλον πρὸς ἡδονὴν αὐτοῖς ἢ τοῖς ἡττηθεῖσιν κειμένους, ἀναγκάσωσιν αὐτοὺς χρῆσθαι τοῖς νόμοις διτταῖς οὐσαις ἀνάγκαις, αἰδοῖ καὶ φόβῳ, φόβῳ μὲν διὰ τὸ κρείτους αὐτῶν εἶναι, αἰδοῖ δὲ αὐτὰ διὰ τὸ κρείτους φαίνεσθαι περὶ τε τὰς ἡδονὰς καὶ τοῖς νόμοις μᾶλλον ἐθέλοντές τε καὶ δυνάμενοι δουλεύειν. ἄλλως δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν ὡς ἂν ποτε κακῶν λῆξαι πόλις ἐν αὐτῇ στασιάσασα ...

... that there is no cessation of evils for the warring factions until those who have won the mastery cease from perpetuating feuds by assaults and expulsions and executions, and cease from seeking to wreak vengeance on their foes; and, exercising mastery over themselves, lay down impartial laws which are to satisfy the vanquished no less than themselves; and compel the vanquished to make use of these laws by means of two compelling forces, Reverence and Fear –Fear, inasmuch as they make it plain that they are superior to them in force; and Reverence, because they show themselves superior both in their attitude to pleasures and in their greater readiness and ability to subject themselves to the laws. In no other way is it possible for city at strife within itself to cease from evils ...

Moral concepts in text 8:

- a rejection of revenge (ἐπὶ τιμωρίας παύσωνται τρεπόμενοι);
- a rejection of the privileging of the rulers (μηδὲν μᾶλλον πρὸς ἡδονὴν αὐτοῖς ἢ τοῖς ἡττηθεῖσιν);
- the rulers have special obligations with regard to self-control (διὰ τὸ κρείτους φαίνεσθαι περὶ ... τὰς ἡδονὰς) and compliance with the law.

Conclusions

After considering the first three extracts, we initially concluded that they “tend to help pacify a society rather than divide it”.

If we now consider all eight extracts again, from the point of view of their civilizing potential, we believe that the following observations may also be made:

- the texts tend to foster openness towards the opinions of others rather than a defensive reflex towards anything foreign (σμικρὸν φροντίσαντες Σωκράτους ... παντὶ λόγῳ ἀντιτείνετε);
- they tend to contribute to freedom of expression rather than the intellectual subjugation of a society (πεισομαὶ δὲ μᾶλλον);
- they tend to foster an appreciation of careful child-raising and education

rather than a laissez-faire pedagogical attitude in society (κτήματος ὁ τῶν ὑμετέρων μέγιστον ὄν τυγχάνει);

- they tend to affirm public-spirited action rather than promote private interests (οὐ τοῦτο μέλει, ὅπως ἔν τι γένος ... εὖ πράξει).

- they tend to foster a matter-of-fact style of debate rather than hateful agitation (φροντίσαντες ... τῆς δὲ ἀληθείας);

- they tend to encourage moderate rather than extremist political thinking (πόλιν ἐλευθέραν ... καὶ ἔμφρονα καὶ ἑαυτῇ φίλην);

- they tend to give priority to non-violent conflict resolution rather than affirm violent resolution (ἀλλ' ὠγαθέ);

- they tend to foster respect for the laws rather than disregard for them (τοῖς νόμοις ... δουλεύειν);

- they tend to encourage the idea that rulers have additional moral obligations, rather than the idea that they can allow themselves more freedoms than those who are dependent on them (ἐγκρατεῖς δὲ ὄντες αὐτῶν).

So far, we have concentrated on Plato's texts. To keep the study brief, we will continue to do so. But there are undoubtedly many other ancient and modern authors about whom similar things can be said.

3. CIVILIZING EFFECTS OF ANCIENT GREEK LITERATURE IN THE PAST

The observations made so far do not provide any compelling evidence that there is actually civilizing potential in ancient Greek literature. Can any historical proof be found that an educational and civilizing potential is actually present in Greek literature? Have there been moments in history where it seems plausible that the study of Greek literature contributed to an upswing in regard to the level of civilization? This hypothesis will now be tested.

We shall focus on two of these advances in civilization:

- the cultural shift that took place at the beginning of the modern era in Europe;

- what was known as the "Golden Age of Islam" in 9th to 12th century Spain.

3.1. The overcoming of the Middle Ages as a civilizing achievement

The cultural shift between the Middle Ages and the modern age was, as we all know, mainly triggered by the Renaissance and Humanism. In order to be able to assess this shift, it is helpful to compare modes of behaviour in the centuries before and after this change, in the Middle Ages and the modern age. Particularly striking are the differences in attitudes to public torture.

Medieval punishments, such as breaking on the wheel, quartering, impalement, boiling, burying alive and so on, were exceptionally cruel. As

modern-day Europeans, we find it hard to comprehend how those earlier Europeans, instead of feeling shame and indignation over such executions, could flock to them from near and far as if attending a festival. Early modern Humanism played a crucial role in ensuring that such forms of criminal justice later came to be seen, in large parts of Europe, as inhumane and abhorrent.

Did the study of Greek play a part here? Today it is sometimes forgotten that there was a kind of taboo on Greek until the end of the Middle Ages. For centuries, the schism between the Latin church of the West and the Greek church of the East (A.D. 1054) led to ideological resistance to a return to the Greek foundations of our culture, both in Germany and in Western and Central Europe in general.

It was largely by chance that the German humanist Johannes REUCHLIN (1455-1522) nonetheless became one of the first Central Europeans to be able to learn Greek: during his studies in Basel (beginning in 1474) he met a Greek exile who taught him the Greek language. And the English humanist Thomas MORE (1478-1535) faced opposition from his father when he wanted to learn Greek and study Greek literature; in England at the time, as in other countries, such studies were still seen as questionable.

Within a few years, however, an intellectual attitude had emerged that was quite new for the sensibility of the time. Johannes Reuchlin and Thomas More were key proponents. For example, Reuchlin, in an extremely anti-Semitic environment, resisted the calls of several German theological faculties to burn Jewish writings, especially the Talmud. In 1520 Reuchlin composed a soberly argued assessment of the matter for Emperor Charles V, and after long and gruelling struggles he was able to ensure that Jewish literature would be preserved.

No less unusual for that period was the intellectual independence of Thomas More, the author of the book *Utopia*. For example, he provided his three daughters with the same education as his son; his eldest daughter became one of the most learned women of her time.

Another of Germany's first Greek scholars was Philipp MELANCHTHON (1497-1560), who was not only a close collaborator of the reformer Martin LUTHER, but also —a less-known fact— devised and largely implemented a redesign of the whole German education system. Among other things, he was responsible for the introduction of history, geography and Greek as school subjects. Even in his lifetime he was accorded the honorary title of *Praeceptor Germaniae*.

It has become clear, I think, that the novel attitude of these “pioneers of Greek” already announces the “European canon of values” which many of us now see as threatened and worth defending.

On this basis, the Czech theologian John Amos COMENIUS (1592-1670), who had studied in Heidelberg, created a profound new concept of education.

Here he contradicted the frequently brutal habits of earlier times. His principles still seem very modern today: equal support for boys and girls of all classes, an education that instills humanity and personal responsibility, an avoidance of violence and coercion. A much-quoted motto of Comenius: *omnia sponte fluant, absit violentia rebus*.

3.2. The Golden Age of Islam as a civilizing achievement

Another period which, in our view, casts light on the civilizing potential of ancient Greek literature is the “Islamic Golden Age” in Spain. Today societies shaped by Islam are often said to have a comparatively low level of educational achievement. And yet there were centuries in which Islam, specifically in Spain, was culturally superior to the European West. The “Islamic Golden Age” lasted roughly from the 9th to the 12th century. A famous scholar of the period, the Aristotle commentator AVERROËS (Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198), had a substantial influence on Christian scholasticism in the Middle Ages. This period is praised for the fact that, in its best phases, an intellectual life prevailed in which Muslims and Jews worked together fruitfully. There are reasonable grounds for assuming that a causal relationship existed between this cultural florescence of Islam and the study of Greek and especially Aristotelian philosophy.

The influence of ancient Greek culture on Roman culture will be mentioned only briefly here. Many Romans were aware that ancient Greece was a major source of intellectual and cultural inspiration. The Roman poet HORACE (*Ep.* 2.1.156 f.) wrote, full of admiration: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artis / intulit agresti Latium* “Greece, the captive, made her savage victor captive, and brought the arts into rustic Latium”¹.

4. CIVILIZING IMPACT OF ANCIENT GREEK LITERATURE TODAY

The results of this historical retrospective undoubtedly give grounds for the assumption that—at least in the past—a thorough study of ancient Greek literature had the potential to develop civilizing effects. Regarding Germany, I personally believe that the philhellenic and humanist tradition helped the Germans to deal self-critically with the barbarism of the Nazi period. But now this humanist tradition is weakening. The question, then, is whether a thorough study of ancient Greek literature can have a civilizing effect in the future, as it had in the past.

¹ Kiessling, A., Heinze, A., Q. *Horatius Flaccus*. III. Berlin, 1961; translated by H. R. Fairclough, Cambridge 1991.

Of course, Greek is not a cure, and never has been. But we would like to show that a return to Greek literature presents great opportunities, particularly with regard to certain current problems in Germany and Europe, and that these opportunities are often underestimated at the present time.

4.1. European problems as problems of inner attitude

The growing European problems for which no satisfactory solution has yet been found include:

- the proliferation of public lies and slanders (“fake news”);
- the spread of hostile, antagonistic forms of controversy;
- increasing doubt in the trustworthiness of leading politicians.

The means used in the effort to fight these problems are essentially always the same: public disapproval and distancing, appeals, threats of “sanctions”, and ultimately their implementation. Yet these methods clearly have little or no success.

This limited success can be explained, we believe, by a widespread misunderstanding about the degree of difficulty of these problems. People overlook the fact that these problems which face Europe are not just about outward actions, but are largely based on *inner attitudes*. Let me try to explain this:

- concerning “truthfulness”: whether someone resists the temptation to say things that are untrue, and to pass on things that have not been verified, is undoubtedly a question of inner *attitude*;
- concerning “antagonistic argument”: undoubtedly, constructive, understanding-focused argument requires a self-critical, self-disciplined inner *attitude*.
- concerning “loss of confidence”: trust in a person relates mainly to his or her inner *attitude*.

4.2. The task of developing more civilized attitudes

Inner attitudes are harder to influence than outward actions, as they cannot be changed by punishments and rewards, or taught and learnt like examination material. If the attempt is made to change attitudes by force, this will not succeed, and negative outcomes are nearly inevitable.

This raises a difficult question: in the effort to overcome attitudes that are problematic for Europe, which means are likely to succeed? The question requires a very wide-ranging answer, differentiating between the various situations and people involved. In keeping with the intention of this paper, however, we will concentrate on one aspect, that of youth education.

Socially “valuable” inner attitudes cannot be implanted in a young person from the outside, but have to grow within him or her. Their development is a process that cannot really be planned. The role of parents and schools in this process consists in creating the best possible conditions for the development of valuable attitudes. The most important methods are: setting an example, being

available as a trustworthy person to talk to, encouraging young people to read good literature, and the like.

In the school sector there is currently no satisfactory provision for this: the fact that fostering valuable inner attitudes is an indispensable part of education has been completely overlooked in the OECD's project "*The definition and selection of key competencies*" (2005). And this sensitive topic of "attitudes" continues to be neglected in the public debate on education, although attention is now increasingly being drawn to the fact that certain attitudes are essential to the effective functioning of a democracy, and that these attitudes must be regained if we are to halt the downward trend.

Here educational policy bears considerable responsibility; it has a duty to ensure that young people can engage with good literature and thus form their own attitudes, in a process lasting many years.

Certainly, there are numerous ancient and modern authors from various nations whose works are suitable for this purpose. But again, this cannot be explored in detail here.

4.3. The civilizing potential of Plato's dialogues

To at least briefly hint at how the study of such texts can lead to the emergence of the attitudes Europe needs, we have selected one aspect: Plato's Socratic dialogues.

What are the basic principles of the Socratic dialogue? Surprisingly, these principles are never explicitly formulated in Plato's writings. But we can deduce them from the manner in which the interlocutors approach the problems and deal with each other.

The Socratic dialogue may be regarded as the embodiment of European values. The question of whether and to what extent comparable traditions exist in non-European cultures is a separate topic and will not be considered here. On the basis of four main values –reason, truth, freedom and responsibility– the basic principles of the Socratic dialogue can be roughly summarized as follows²:

- **Reason:** In an understanding-focused dialogue, it is the weight of rational arguments that should be decisive, not social rank or psychological pressure.
- **Truth:** Without the effort to at least approach the truth, a dialogue which begins from opposite positions cannot succeed. Also, self-criticism is indispensable as well as the willingness to accept a loss of prestige.
- **Freedom:** In an understanding-focused dialogue, freedom is essential, the freedom to both *express* opinions and *form* them: opinions must not be imposed by force. Unwelcome opinions and objective criticism must be tolerated. Personal insults, however, are prohibited.

² In naming these principal four European virtues, I am drawing on the work of Richard Schröder ("Europa, was ist das?" in: *Aktuelle Antike*. Leipzig 2002, pp. 31 ff.).

- **Responsibility:** Every participant must help to ensure that the debate remains focused on communication and understanding, and that the atmosphere is one of positivity towards each other. Everyone shares the responsibility for paying regard to the “rules of the game”.

These four values –reason, truth, freedom and responsibility– do not simply coexist in the Socratic dialogue, but are related to each other: thus *freedom*, here, is obviously more than the absence of slavery. Freedom, as a basic principle of dialogue, requires an inner connection to the other three values. To give a hint of how these four values interconnect, we could say that Socratic dialogues are defined by an ethos of truth, reason, freedom and responsibility. Successful dialogue thus requires not just the observation of particular rules, but also an inner *attitude*.

The great advantage of studying the Socratic dialogues is, on the one hand, that it can potentially give the desired value orientation, but, on the other hand, that it does not tell readers what to think: it grants them the necessary scope to develop their own moral concepts.

Can the study of Socratic dialogues also help to rebuild, in the minds of citizens, the *attitudes* which Europe needs if it is to survive, i.e. a respect for truth, a willingness to work towards understanding, and an effort to be reliable?

We should beware of overconfident statements. Yet there is a causal relationship which has been observable even in recent times, but has received little attention: although the “rules of play” of Socratic dialogue were not explicitly formulated by Plato at any point, the Socratic/Platonic idea of understanding-focused conversation is a living practice even today, though decreasingly. This psychological phenomenon has been well known since antiquity: if we see a behaviour and admire it, we feel the need to imitate it³. And sooner or later, anything we frequently imitate becomes a habit, and second nature⁴. And so, even if it may sound surprising at first, we can reasonably argue that we owe it largely to the exemplary effect of Plato’s dialogues that this special form of conversation, the “Socratic dialogue”, has remained alive and effective for centuries. In the present public debate on education this psychological phenomenon has widely been underestimated.

³ ... ὅτω τις ὀμιλεῖ ἀγάμενος, μὴ μμεῖσθαι ἐκεῖνο (Pl. R. 500C)

⁴ αἱ μιμήσεις ... εἰς ἔθη τε καὶ φύσιν καθίστανται (Pl. R. 395D)

5. GENERAL CONCLUSION. THE TASK OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY

In the interests of Europe, then, educational policymakers need to make greater efforts to ensure that young people in coming generations, all over Europe, have the opportunity to study Plato's Socratic dialogues and other comparable literature.

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