

Socrates Falls Short

Christopher Zuk

Socrates fits Chuang tzu's description of the sage, or wise person, only through his humility, but differs greatly from the sage on the issue of the seeking of knowledge. Socrates and the sage both possess a high level of knowledge, but do not display arrogance or contempt for others. They vary on the acceptance of different perspectives of knowledge, the methodology of seeking, and their desire to seek knowledge. Whereas the sage accepts all perspectives as potentially legitimate, Socrates attempts to gain knowledge by eliminating erroneous ideas. As for their contrasting methodology, Socrates's involves series of focused assertions and questions, causing one to introspectively and contemplatively discover definite answers. Contrarily, the sage emphasizes spontaneity in life and simply "[doing] the rounds of space and time" — meaning not actively seeking wisdom and letting life happen to him (16). Lastly, whereas Socrates has dedicated his life to discovering unknown ideas in philosophy, the sage "is a dullard and a sluggard," and doesn't have the genuine motivation to learn as Socrates does (16).

A quality of humility is virtually the only characteristic Socrates shares with the sage. Chuang tzu says, "The sage is nameless" (3). This means that the sage doesn't desire admiration or recognition, and chooses to remain undistinguished and not prominent. He also states that "the utmost person is selfless," and that "the shen-person takes no credit for his/her deeds" (2, 3). Since their descriptions are similar, the utmost person and the shen-person seem to be an extension of what the sage represents, which is unselfishness and obscurity. The sage is "clever enough to do well in one office or efficient enough to protect one district," so the sage does service to others but is humble about it (2). He "rides a true course between heaven and earth" by being beneficial to society but not letting others praise him (2). Although the sage is

intelligent, he remains nameless because he doesn't aspire to be mentioned over others, and thus the sage possesses traits of modesty and equality.

Similarly, Socrates possesses higher knowledge than most, but also chooses to remain nameless. In Plato's *Symposium*, everyone at the party looks up to Socrates as the most intellectual thinker, as Agathon calls to him, "come lie down next to me," so that "if I touch you, I may catch a bit of [your] wisdom" (5). Yet Socrates's very presence at the party, where he is willing to listen and participate with men of inferior understanding, shows he feels he can still learn from others. Socrates conveys his modesty clearly when he states, "the only thing I say I understand is the art of love," therefore indicating his capacity for further knowledge (8). Socrates has the quality that the sage does of being beneficial to society, in that his role as a thinker provides an example of virtue to his contemporaries. And as Meno, in Plato's *Meno*, defines it, a man's virtue is "being able to manage public affairs and in doing so benefit his friends and harm his enemies" (4). Yet even as an authority figure, Socrates discloses his faults and "[blames himself] for [his] complete ignorance" about a subject (4). Socrates, like the sage, takes no pride in his superiority but instead maintains his status as a consumer of knowledge.

Chuang tzu presents the sage's view on the seeking of knowledge as an all-accepting, all-encompassing process. Socrates rather adheres to a process of elimination. Chuang tzu says, "what is outside the cosmos the sage locates as there but does not sort out," so he does not exclusively label answers as right or wrong (13). The sage knows that "if one goes by 'That's it,' then one goes by 'That's not','" therefore invalidating potential alternatives (10). On the other hand, Socrates believes definite answers can be reached through discussion and debate. In *Meno*, Socrates says that when he has "given [his] answer; if it is wrong, it is [someone's] job to refute it," proving Socrates's willingness to discard falsifications (8). Socrates is likely to say, as

he did in *Symposium*, “Let us review the points on which we agree,” so that old ideas can be thrown out and new ideas can be uncovered (43). Socrates believes in a selective process of acceptance, but the sage believes that to “discriminate between alternatives’ is to fail to see something” (13). This is why “the sage does not take this course, but instead opens things up to the light of heaven” and marks no boundaries to possibility (10).

The ways in which the sage and Socrates seek for knowledge are completely opposite. Chuang tzu says that the sage “does not fix a route by a way,” while most people (including Socrates) work for an end result (15). The sage’s method of spontaneity is esoteric, or only understood by a few, and thus the sage just rambles and roams along life’s path. From the other perspective, Socrates feels definite answers can be reached through investigation and recollection. In *Meno*, he contends that since the soul is immortal, then “there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before” (14). However, Chuang tzu comments that “common people fuss and fret” and also “compete and fight over” knowledge (15, 13). The sage then is more even-tempered and “in saying nothing says something” (15). Socrates doesn’t fit the sage’s description because of his tendency to deliberate and rely on concrete information, and so Socrates is more likely to contradict the sage and think, “In saying nothing says nothing.”

Besides their different practices on attaining knowledge, the sage lacks the aspiration to seek, while Socrates enjoys discussing “virtue” or “Love” and places significance in the search itself. Chuang tzu says the sage “does not delight in seeking,” but Socrates feels strongly enough to say, “I would contend at all costs [...] that we will all be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know” (15, 20). Socrates considers life a quest to learn and correct personal shortcomings, and at the same time the sage is content with

being one of the myriad, or countless things, that “make up totality” (16). The sage is disposed to take the hand life has dealt to him feel fulfilled living in simplicity and the oneness of society.

Socrates does not accurately fit the description of Chuang tzu’s sage, but in all other respects he is still considered a knowledgeable person. The sage brings up the question of whether knowledge is actually worth seeking—Socrates would sacrifice his life for it. Socrates’s love for learning is seen in *Symposium*, when Alcibiades wants to trade Socrates’s philosophy for Alcibiades’s love, but Socrates says the comparison is like “gold in exchange for bronze” (70). This statement illustrates that Socrates placed learning above everything else in his life. While Socrates’s actions do not follow the instructions of the sage, neither do Socrates’s *nor* the sage’s actions follow rationality by today’s standards, both their perspectives are worthy to be labeled “wise.”