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 Vicarius: Prof. Dr. Jean Hugues Polier
 Scriba: Dr. Stefan Heuser
 Quaestor: Gunther Barth

Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg
 Institut für Systematische Theologie/Ethik
 Kochstr. 6
 D-91054 Erlangen
 Tel. 09131/8522187
 Fax. 09131/85 26020
 E-mail: societas@theologie.uni-erlangen.de
 Website: www.societasethica.info

Bank
 Sparkasse Erlangen, Hugenottenplatz, D-91054 Erlangen
 Acc. No. 19008; BLZ 76350000
 BIC: BYLADEM1ERH; IBAN DE54 7635 0000 0000 0190 08

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Constantinos Athanopoulos:

The Ethical Problems of Sensus Communis Philosophicus: Reflections On McKeon⁴⁵

Abstract

Richard McKeon in his paper «Philosophy as an agent of civilisation»⁴⁶ develops the view that we should cultivate a *sensus communis philosophicus* as a basis for a rational exchange of ideas between cultures and civilisations. As the European Union becomes more and more a multi-racial and multi-cultural society, this 1981 paper provides the philosophical justification for an ethical platform of ideas that can serve as a *sensus communis philosophicus* in Ethics at the European level. My paper shall critically discuss both McKeon's views as well as such a development in the ethical theory that should guide current and future European legislation.

Keywords

Philosophy, Ethics, Civilisation, Culture, Sensus Communis Philosophicus.

1. Introduction.

First, as an Introduction to the way I try to perceive the topic of this Conference in Ljubljana («Pluralism in Europe?»), please allow me to discuss briefly two fundamental issues in relation to the Conference topic and my paper.

Firstly, I should emphasise that my paper discusses the set of three basic ethical questions put forward at the Societas Ethica's Call for Papers for this Conference, having as a presupposition that Ethics is an integral and necessary element in all forms of philosophical endeavour. Philosophy, as «philias» (φιλία) «sophias» (σοφία), can only be regarded as a love for wisdom. Wisdom however, in the ancient Greek way of doing philosophy has the meaning

⁴⁵ This paper was read at the Societas Ethica Conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, on Saturday 28th of August, 2004. I am grateful for all helpful criticisms during the discussion of the paper, and particularly the suggestions of Prof. Dr. Piotr MAZURKIEWICZ (Warszawa), Prof. Dr. Wahe H. BALAKRISHNAN (Glasgow), Prof. Dr. Werner WOLBERT (Salzburg), Dr. Anton VEDDER (Tilburg), Dr. Angela ROOTHMAN (Amsterdam), and Dr. Tim HEYSS (Brussels).

⁴⁶ RICHARD MCKEON: «Philosophy as an agent of civilisation», in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 41, Issue 4 (1981), 419-436.

of the union of virtue on the one hand and theoretical and practical knowledge on the other⁴⁷. Thus, philosophy as a habit of life and a life-long endeavour to attain self-knowledge («know thyself» or γνῶθι σεαυτόν), must include Ethics (i.e., the study of ethos (ἦθος), or how we must live and act) as a condition sine qua non. Ethics in this way cannot be separated from Philosophy, and all philosophical endeavour must include Ethics or have an ethical component, if it is to be called «philosophy» at all. Philosophers who claim that they study the world as a datum (the «is» of the world) without any consideration of the world as it should be (the «ought» of the world) are in my perspective deceiving themselves and us⁴⁸. According to my opinion (and I have here the support of the majority of the ancient Greek philosophers, namely among them, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle)⁴⁹ these philosophers should not name themselves «philosophers» and what they do «philosophy». Their use of the concept of philosophy in calling themselves «philosophers» and what they do as «philosophy» is so ill-conceived, that they resemble theologians who call themselves «theologians» and what they do «theology», while at the same time claiming that there is no God, or that God is just a human creation.

Returning to the topic and the questions posed by the Call for Papers, I would also like to point out from the start that I do not consider as self-evident the thought that in order to communicate with someone we must speak the same language, have the same culture, the same philosophy, or adhere to the same ethical code: by this I mean, that a White-European, if he/she wills it, can communicate efficiently and live in peace with a native member of a Zulu clan in Africa, or a native member of a tribe in the island of New Guinea or the Amazon River. Colour, faith, philosophy, language and other cultural or non-cultural barriers are easily overcome, if there is sufficient force of will, and to claim otherwise is as futile as changing one's skin colour or the size of one's nose so that he/she can become more virtuous or clever! In this way, to preoccupy ourselves with the removal of cultural differences so that we can achieve communication, cultural homogeneity or peace and brotherhood is

⁴⁷ I have as a guiding text here the ancient Commentaries to Aristotle's Categories, in I. BEKKER, ed., *Aristotelis Opera*, Vol. IV, Berlin: W. DE GRUYTER, 1961, 6422-1642.

⁴⁸ See for my detailed arguments on the «is-ought» distinction in my paper C. ATHANASOPOULOS: «The Ontological Relation of Value, Virtue and Justice» (in English), in *Phronimon: Journal of the South African Society for Greek Philosophy and the Humanities*, Volume 2, 2000, pp.15-22.

⁴⁹ See *Aristotelis Opera*, *ibid.*

not only ill conceived or a chimera, it is just missing the issue! In some instances it may help (as perhaps other factors such as good weather or good health), but in some other instances it may just be a waste of time and effort and a further cause of friction and animosity, and thus a further barrier for a successful communication and cultural exchange. In philosophical terminology, one culture, one philosophy and one ethics can be perhaps at the best of cases a sufficient, but never a necessary condition for successful communication, harmonious interpersonal and international relations and thus peace on earth. With these thoughts in mind, I think I can start my discussion of the paper of McKeon and present to you my arguments and conclusions in relation to the questions posed by the Call for Papers.

2. The three presuppositions and the conceptual foundations in the argument of McKeon.

The paper of McKeon, read for the first time at the Afro-Asian Philosophy Conference on «Philosophy and Civilisation» in Cairo, Egypt, on March 15, 1978, is based on three pre-suppositions: firstly, that we can form a single conception of civilisation and use it in a plurality of applications to explain and analyse the given of the plurality of the civilisations in human history and their specific structures; secondly, that we can form a single conception of philosophy that can be used in explaining both the oppositions and reconciliation of specific philosophies and their structures, and that can provide us the basic philosophical theory with which we can explain and unite the multiplicity of the modes of philosophical statement; and thirdly, that philosophies and civilisations characterise and condition each other reflexively.⁷⁶

Based on these pre-suppositions McKeon finds that the operational inter-relationships between philosophy and civilisation have two dimensions: a) perpendicular between civilisations and individual members of civilisations who are both operative parts and cognisant agents; and b) horizontal among civilisations which have contacts with one another in various guises and on various levels, e.g., travel, mass media, conflicts etc. According to McKeon «philosophy is the connecting link in the operation and characterisation of the various levels of civilisation and of kinds of civilisations».⁷⁷ He finds that philosophy is a characteristic of civilisations, because philosophy is an operative agent in the formation of civilisations and has therefore left its imprint not only in the

⁷⁶ See *ibid.*, pp.419-420.
⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

pluralities of philosophies which characterise and distinguish civilisations but also in the pluralities of humanisms and civilities and cultures. He thus concludes «philosophy is an agent of civilisation in each civilisation and in the contacts of civilisations».⁷⁸ To apply his theory about philosophy as an agent of civilisation McKeon proceeds to a typology of the Five Great Traditions in Philosophy.

3. The Five Great Traditions in Philosophy according to McKeon.

In this typology of Great Traditions in Philosophy, McKeon finds that all the Great Traditions in Philosophy can be summed up into five large categories based on their respective geographical regions of appearance. Thus, we have: (a) the Philosophy/Civilisation of the Far East and «subjacent» Japan, (b) the Philosophy/Civilisation in the Indian subcontinent and «subjacent» Pakistan, (c) the Philosophy/Civilisation in the Middle East and the «subjacent» Iran, (d) Civilisation without Philosophy and the rise of philosophical thought in Black Africa, and (e) the Philosophy/Civilisation in the Mediterranean and the «subjacent» in North Africa.⁷⁹ McKeon believes that the proponents of the regional philosophies not only can use philosophy as an agent of civilisation to unite parts of the world and their distinctive philosophies in a world of philosophy, of co-operation, communication and common understanding, but they also should examine the history of the ways in which philosophy has functioned as an agent of civilisation and thus discover ways in which philosophies function among the characteristics of civilisations with the aim to join them in the recognition and advancement of a world civilisation.⁸⁰

4. What is Asked For according to McKeon.

From the above exposition we can easily see the main aim of McKeon's effort. What he propounds is not only the creation or at least the programme of study for a world philosophy which will aid as an agent of realisation the appearance of a world civilisation, but he further on believes that this should be the aim of all the representatives of the five great traditions of philosophy. It is clear I believe from the above, that we have here the proposal for a new Ethics which will help mankind to achieve communication, co-operation and peace. Thus, what is asked for, according to McKeon, is a New World Ethics, as part

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 425.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

or an aspect of a New World Philosophy that will act as an agent for a New World Civilisation.

5. The Elements of the proposed Common Social and Cultural Structure: Civilisation and Philosophy.

McKeon finds that philosophy has functioned and is functioning as an agent of civilisation in a variety of ways. He categorises and classifies these functions in four large categories. All four categories help in the formation of the New World Ethics, the New World Philosophy and thus the New World Civilisation. In this way we have: a) World Humanism. Here World Philosophy supports and is guided by a New World Humanism in which the study of human achievements (or Humanism broadly perceived) includes religion, science, institutions and associations, civilisations and cultures and where the accomplishments of alien civilisations are transformed into an agent of appreciation and promotion of common accomplishments of humanity.⁷⁵ b) World Civility. Here World Philosophy supports and is guided by the cultivation of a new perception of civility in the human relations and associations ranging from good behaviour to justice and from legality to equality. This new perception of civility is cultivated extensively in the co-operative manner in which nations and societies work together for the benefit of humankind in international organisations such as the United Nations (or even the EU). c) World Culture. Here World Philosophy supports and is guided by the free contact between civilisations and is the cultivation of communication, innovation and expression in the arts, science and technology. d) World Philosophy. Here as world philosophy is manifested in world humanism, world civility and world culture, it will not be contained in a systematic and literal expression of thoughts acceptable to all men, but it will be a conglomeration of conceptions and expositions of philosophy which will be related to each other in a non-ambiguous and non-controversial manner. This conglomeration will be marked and guided by the development of a philosophic sense, a *sensus communis philosophicus* to relate the varieties of philosophy by adapting them to changes of discussion rather than fixing them by attack and defence in disputation.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.428.

⁷⁶ Ibid, pp.427-432.

6. The *Sensus Communis Philosophicus* (SCP).

In order to comprehend McKeon's conception of the SCP we must see his discussion of the typology of philosophy as it is practised in Conferences such as the one at which he read the paper I am discussing here (i. e., the Afro-Asian Philosophy Conference on «Philosophy and Civilisations», Cairo, Egypt, March 15th, 1978). He maintains that in such meeting points of cultures and civilisations philosophical dialogues have been of two kinds: a) disputations among philosophical positions, and b) discussions of philosophical problems. In disputations, philosophy is used descriptively to identify positions and operates as an agent in the arguments in which one side establishes its position and refutes the opposing side. In discussion, differences are examined and characterised and philosophy operates as an agent to provide the social and cultural structure in which the philosophical differences are preserved and continue to function as philosophies and agents of civilisations.⁷⁷ Thus, according to McKeon the *sensus communis philosophicus* adopts the view that philosophical discourse should have the characteristic of discussion (and not that of disputation) and operate as an agent of civilisation in providing the social and cultural structure in which the philosophical and cultural differences are preserved (and not an agent to find the truth and establish the validity of the one side in opposition to another).

7. The Philosophies of the Four Worlds

To apply his theory about the SCP, McKeon investigates how SCP can help reduce conflicts and increase the co-operation and understanding between nations and states. To make his case more concrete, he takes for granted the political and economic division of the world and proceeds to see how each of the philosophies that express each world can be accommodated and be compatible with the SCP. So he finds that in the Philosophy of the First World (Europe and the Americas) «philosophy» has come to mean the philosophy which is taught in the universities, it incorporates a plurality of philosophies with many different traditions and subject matter related to arts and sciences, politics morals, business and religion. In the Philosophy of the Second World (which in 1978 included the Eastern Block states), according to McKeon, we find a sceptical attitude towards Western Philosophy, reducing the philosophies of the capitalistic world into simple ideologies. The proponents of the

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 426.

Philosophy of the Second World, based on the Marxist inversion of the Hegelian Philosophy of the Spirit by substituting matter for spirit, emphasise that political rights and freedom of expression cannot be exercised by men who have not yet acquired economic and social rights and equality. In the Philosophies of the Third World we find traditional wisdom and mythical history adapted and expressed in the vocabulary and subject matter of the philosophies of the First and Second World. The proponents of these Philosophies seek to preserve their regional and local cultural characteristics and relate them to other civilisations. The Philosophy of the Fourth World is, according to McKeon, the pursuit and cultivation of wisdom, and it is both the most ancient and the most influential for all world philosophies. It is based on hierarchies of being, knowledge and love and is opposed to both dogmatism and scepticism. It is both diachronic and a fundamental tool for basic communication between the Philosophies of the Four Worlds.⁷⁶ According to McKeon in bringing together the proponents of the Philosophies of different Worlds in a common platform of communication (such as Philosophy Congresses and World Conferences) it is a mistake to disregard one or two of the World Philosophies; and it is also a mistake to think that one World Philosophy is an extension or a corollary of another. The only way, in which, according to McKeon, we can fully recognise the importance and potential of each philosophical perspective, tradition and world-philosophy, is to see philosophy as an agent of civilisation. It is only in this way that all the philosophical perspectives, traditions and world-philosophies can be incorporated into a SCP, i.e., a world philosophy that can be valid for all worlds and traditions, and which can be the agent of the world civilisation which according to McKeon is being formed.⁷⁷

8. Ethics and the Sensus Communis Philosophicus (SCP)

It is important to note in our exposition of McKeon's argument that McKeon's general proposal in philosophical and cultural theory has important ethical ramifications. One of them has to do with what philosophers should do as their habit of life and profession. McKeon's SCP should be a life-long endeavour for all philosophers. McKeon asks us to strive in our philosophical studies to achieve and develop what he claims to be the only way to world co-operation and peace. Of course this can not be achieved efficiently and system-

⁷⁶ Ibid, pp.435-5.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p.436.

atically without the creation of a new system of Ethics. We have to observe that this new Ethical system however, requires a new philosophical and religious justification. SCP has as its core philosophical nucleus free rational discourse and it is of paramount importance here the willingness of the philosopher who accepts and follows SCP to accept and discuss with even antithetical or non-rational theories. Please note that, even if this is quite problematic in itself (I shall discuss this problem shortly), it still is heavily dependent on rationality. Now, *Recta Ratio* as a basis for Ethics is a difficult choice here, since it will have to accommodate issues such as *akrasia* (I shall also discuss about this later), but it also raises the question of what to do with the teleological foundation for our Ethics. I mean with this that our (European) contemporary systems of Ethics have as one of their foundations a teleological moral theory and/or a virtue theory, which, if not guided, at least is compatible with our (Christian) religion.⁷⁸ This characteristic of our existent ethical systems maintains not only social cohesion and friendly relations among the members of our societies, but also provides the back-bone of our ethical *sensus communis*. It is important to note here that McKeon's proposal denies the teleological foundation of our virtue theory and especially eradicates the influence of religious and theological mysticism and teleological non-rationalism in Ethics; this calls for a new foundation for his proposed new Ethics. What I can see however, here as a possible foundation for this new Ethics is only the 'religion' of *Recta Ratio* and Utopian Positivism as was practised by eccentrics such as Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) and August Comte (1798-1857).

9. Problems with SCP and its Ethics.

In this part of my discussion, I shall analyse the problems that I see in McKeon's paper in four main areas: a) its proposed philosophical typology, b) the possibility of communication, c) the purpose of communication, and d) its ramifications for Ethics.

Firstly, I shall focus on its proposed philosophical typology. The Philosophies of the Four Worlds are not as clearly demarcated as McKeon indicates in his paper. There are many philosophers of the First World who actually have many elements, which, according to the typology McKeon proposes, belong to the Second World, and many others who can easily be classified in all Four

⁷⁸ See Michael SLOTE: 'Virtue Ethics', in Hugh LaFollette, ed., *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, pp. 325-347 and Philip L. QUINN, 'Divine Command Theory', *ibid*, pp.53-73, and my own above mentioned paper (ATHANASOPOULOS, 2000).

Worlds. Examples of philosophers who cannot be clearly classified in one or another category are J.-P. Sartre, who even though belonging in McKeon's characterisation in the First World, he has incorporated in his agenda topics from all the other Worlds; M. Gandhi, who is extremely difficult to be classified in one World or another; and many others most notable among them representatives of the Ecological or Environmental Philosophy movement.

Next, let me discuss briefly the related problems of the possibility and purpose of communication. According to the philosophy of language of the later Wittgenstein (mainly in his book *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953), if we want to achieve communication with maximum effectiveness the at least two people (transmitter and receiver) who take part in the act of communication must be of the same culture and they must be engaged at the same language game with high level of efficiency (master level).⁴⁴ All other attempts at communication are of high or low achievement rate depending on the level of mastery in the language of communication and the specific language game related with the act of communication. In this way, what McKeon hopes for (i.e., finding some form of common ground of communication, for example in relation to what is philosophy or what is civilisation, which will reduce the level of friction and animosity among people of different cultures, languages and creeds) is not only extremely difficult; it is a utopian dream. Also, assuming that this is possible, what is the benefit in doing it? With this I mean what is the purpose of such a common platform Civilisation or Philosophy in the SCP sense, if it is to be reduced into a trivialisation of Civilisations and Philosophies of the sort we witnessed recently at the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games in Athens? In communication theory there is the saying that the message must be as shallow as its receiver. What is the benefit for an Ethics, a Philosophy or a Civilisation, if it is to be full of «shallow» messages? If a Civilisation and Philosophy is to have any universal value this value lies in its depth and profound importance for humankind. If we have a World Philosophy and World Civilisation full of shallow messages, such as the ones which

⁴⁴ See L. WITTGENSTEIN: *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E. ANSCOMBE, Oxford: Blackwell, 1963 (1953); my interpretation is based on my analysis of par. 65, 67, 78, 79 (first part). The terminology comes from A. P. MARTINICH, *Communication and Reference*, Berlin-NewYork: De Gruyter, 1984 (mainly p.18). I do not claim here that WITTGENSTEIN would support my views on Ethics and Philosophy. I only use his views on the close relation of language and culture. However, for a more favourable to my worries analysis of basic related Wittgensteinian texts see Iris MURDOGH: *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992.

exist in Coca-Cola and other contemporary pop culture advertisements, then what is the point of making such a World Philosophy and Civilisation?

Lastly, but most importantly I wish to refer to the specific ramifications for Ethics. According to McKeon, as we saw, representatives of the Four World Philosophies and Civilisations must strive for the creation of this Sensus Communis Philosophicus and this World Civilisation. As we also saw, this means a rationalisation of all modes of thinking including teleology, religion and theology that are the foundations of the majority of our ethical systems and virtue theories. For many this rationalisation of religion and theology means the death of God, or at least the death of God, as they know it (I mean here important traditions and theological schools in the Christian, Jewish and Muslim Religions). How can this serve the creation of a World Philosophy and a World Ethics, which will lead eventually to the creation of a World Civilisation? And if it does serve such a creation, what will be the foundations for its Ethics? We can mention here one simple and brief example that has troubled Ethical Theory from the ancient Greeks till now: *Akrasia*. In *Akrasia* (a phenomenon of weakness of will, discussed systematically firstly by Plato and then by Aristotle) we know that something is bad or evil and nevertheless we do it. How an Ethical Theory that has no virtue theory components based on religious/ theological foundations can solve this problem? My answer is simple: it just cannot. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle could solve this problem, because they had a virtue theory and a teleological or religious further justification for their system. Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant and Hume could not and all their attempts at solving this problem only created further problems for their Ethical Theory. Recent attempts such as Davidson's did nothing else but to acknowledge that its solution lies in human non-rationality or even in human irrationality.⁴⁵ In this way, the theory of McKeon has many important problems. Problems, which make his proposal for the creation of SCP and its corollary Ethics not only less valid but even dangerous, since, as I mentioned in the opening remarks of my paper, they just miss the point! Achievement of Peace on Earth, which should be the final purpose of all Ethical Theories and Systems is not a matter of means of communication, is just a matter of strength of will.

⁴⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the problem of *Akrasia* and Davidson's views see my paper C. ATHANASOPOULOS: «Aristotle's *Akrasia* and J.-P.Sartre's *Bad Faith*» (in English), in D.N. KOUTRAS, ed., *The Aristotelian Ethics and its Influence*, Athens: Society for Aristotelian Studies «The Lyceum», 1996, pp.24-32.

10 Conclusions for the (Non-) Necessity of SCP and its Ethics.

From the above exposition and discussion, it is evident, I think, that McKeon's concept of *Sensus Communis Philosophicus*, as well as the Ethics that this concept implies have serious problems.

These problems have to do with a) the mistaken philosophical typology that McKeon proposes; b) the possibility and the purpose of communication that *Sensus Communis Philosophicus* and its Ethics are aiming to serve; c) the lack of teleological, non-rationalistic, and virtue theory related characteristics in the new World Ethical Theory that the SCP concept implies; and d) its disregard for perhaps the most important factor in achieving the supposed goal of both SCP and its Ethics: world co-operation, cultural exchange and peace on Earth.

To finish my exposition and discussion of McKeon's paper, I would like to briefly sketch what I believe is the most advantageous alternative to what McKeon suggests. In order to do this, I shall turn back to my preliminary remarks in this paper. There, I noted that all philosophical systems must include, as one of their essential components, Ethics. Ethics, however, comes, as among others Aristotle notes in his *Eudemian Ethics*, from *ethos*, which has to do with the customary habits and ways of life that people believe are acceptable and should be promoted as ideals in their society.²³

I believe that since these mores or *ethos* cannot but be locally based and defined, even at the contemporary political and social 'melting pots' of the European Union, we should accept that both Ethics and (thus) Philosophy should be allowed to be defined and flourish locally, with no further demands to be universally acceptable or translatable or analysable. And this brings me to the other point I referred to in my preliminary remarks; this is that our motivation for such an Ethics of respect for other cultures and peoples should not be based on our or some others' universal concept of rationality. It should be based on our will to respect others and their culture. This respect should have an intrinsic ethical value with no association to utilitarian or consequential principles and considerations. It should guide all European legislation on relations between cultures and it should have as its foundation the teleological and/or virtue based ethics, which define and strengthen the bonds of society within a (locally defined) culture.

²³ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, (Bekker page) 1220a38-49.

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