

Sentences Facing Chaos: The Seven Sages' Expression as A Paradigm of Sensibleness

Joseph Max Espiritu Ventocilla
(Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Peru)

Abstract: This text is about how the words of the Greek Sages of the 6th century BC, known as the Seven Sages, brought sanity to a chaotic and confused environment. It is precisely this primordial chaos that will be discussed at the beginning, for without their presence, both cosmogonic and political clarity could not have been achieved. We will then look at the profile of the Seven Sages, why there are seven of them and how they have been portrayed in antiquity. The concord between them and the anecdotes that have survived to the present day will show us why it is not just mere words that gave them authority, but above all their way of being. Finally, we dwell on the sentences, their message of sensibleness and the primary concern for friendship (φίλος) and the rejection of evil (κακός). Thus, we close the circle to the Greek sages, their sentences, and the order which confronts chaos.

Key words: sentences, chaos, Seven Sages, Greeks, sensibleness

1. Introduction

«Ἐπτά σοφῶν, Κλεόβουλε, σὲ μὲν τεκνώσατο Λίνδος·
φατὶ δὲ Σισυφία χθὼν Περίανδρον ἔχειν·
Πιττακὸν ἃ Μιτυλάνα· Βίαντα δὲ διὰ Πριήνη·
Μίλητος δὲ Θαλῆν, ἄκρον ἔρεισμα Δίκας·
ἃ Σπάρτα Χίλων· Σόλωνα δὲ Κεκροπίς αἶα,
πάντας ἀριζάλου σωφροσύνας φύλακας»

«Of the seven sages Lindus bore thee, O Cleobulus.
And the land of Sisyphus says that Periander is hers.
Mytilene bore Pittacus and fair Priene Bias,
and Miletus Thales, best support of Justice,
Sparta Chilon, and Attica Solon
— all guardians of admirable Prudence»

The quote above summarizes the main themes that I will present in the following pages. I will move from speaking of chaos and confusion to words and sanity.

To do so, we will dwell on a Greece in troubles, a Greece that but for its guardians of brilliant prudence would have fallen into the sea and the abyss of meaninglessness that always stalks every culture.

It is precisely for this reason that the words of the Seven Sages will speak to us intimately, for such logos addressed to every citizen is aimed at reminding us of matters we already know beforehand or should now. In the midst of the tumult it is easy to get lost in the hustle and bustle of the mass disorder that prevails in certain times.

If we allow ourselves to be carried away thoughtlessly by destructive tendencies promoted by the superficiality of the present time, discernment will escape us and we will become a faceless flock, in-human. The “Sentences in the face of chaos” point to that taking of sense, to stop and act, because being immersed in societies that are guided by rules of the game that are expected to be accepted by majority, is it not our duty to meditate on such a scenario and play the best possible role?

2. Chaos

“Ἡ τοι μὲν πρότιστα Χάος γένετ” «First of all there was Chaos» — says Hesíod in his Teogony 116–125. From Chaos arise Erebus, darkness, and Nix, night, from the union of the two arise Ether, light, and Hemera, day.

Greek mythology, like many others, places chaos, darkness or night at the very beginning of existence. The formless matter that is potentially light and order is presented in the first place as an abyss, a crack, a dark Whirlpool that shallows all things, a black mouth wide open or a fissure. Salvador Pániker mentions that “the word chaos is related to the verb *jaino*, which means to open the earth, to open the mouth, to yawn” (Pániker, 2000, p. 28). Then commenting on this passage of the Teogony he adds “All beings come from an initial abyss, ‘yawning abyss’, and they take specific from through a process of division” (Pániker, 2000, p. 28). On the other hand, Andrea Marcolongo notes that chaos has a familiarity with confusion, revising the Latin he traces the term *confundere*

that is, “to melt together”, “to mix”, a word that comes from the union of the prefix “con-” and the verb *fundere*, “to pour”. Pour into a cauldron diverse ingredient totally “a voleo”, make them cook for hours and “see what effect it has”, like improvised alchemists of existence (Marcolongo, 2021, p. 30).

Chaos is thus a state of fusion and confusion with the potential to be ordered. The geneses of various part of the world recognize this. To give some examples, the mythology of the biblical Old Testament begins precisely with an allusion to this, in the very beginning of the “Huarochiri Manuscript” also something similar is told. And taking the aforementioned alchemist of the previous quote, they also recognize that to achieve the opus magnum one must first go through putrefaction.

In short, in order to reach the light, one must pass through the darkness, chaos is a condition of order and only in the balance of both forces are things produced.

Having seen this need for chaos at all levels, let us take the human collective. A society that is constantly in a state of confusion is destined to collapse. For what criteria of coexistence could there be in such a situation. Likewise, a perpetually ordered group is a collective in unhealthy repression, the very nature of things prevents that something like that can be sustained, however, that does not take away the attempts that have been made in this regard. The literary imagination, the totalitarianism, their dystopias and utopias have given us examples of this type.

In any case, a healthy society needs to find a balance: a proper tensión between chaos and order. Historically speaking, Greece on the 6th century BC experienced a particular state of turmoil. In its transit from the 7th century BC onwards it brought structural changes to the nascent Greek polis. Schollars such as Jean-Pierre Vernant, Carlos Garcial Gual and Johannes Engels describe problems of coexistence at all levels. Whether in fractured social relation, in the excessive interest in wealth and its ostentation, in acts of injustice and impiety, among many others, *hybris* took hold of Greek collective. According to what is known, one of the reasons for this social upheaval was the return to contact with the East, the increase in trade and lack of scruples of the Greek

aristocrats in the face of novelties that landed in their lands.

Precisely in the face of evident lack of control that endangered the Greek cities, characters that will go down in posterity as the Seven Sages arise. If the main problems were ethical, political and religious, the voices of the wise men will be destined to clarify what type of conduct is appropriate for these cases, all following the ideals of their own *paideia*.

However, the following should be clarified, more than giving a catechism or new tables of values, these characters were managers of changes in the Hellenic spirituality. As Nietzsche already said “Gleich das erste Erlebniß der Philosophie auf griechischem Boden, die Sanktion der sieben Weisen, ist eine deutliche und unvergeßliche Linie am Bilde des Hellenischen” (Nietzsche, 1962 [1873], p. 32)¹. That is to say, these wise men and their sentences gave shape to a new type of expression, to a new *logos* that from then on would mold subsequent generations. The fruit of their work is the whole ethical approach of the middle ground that Aristotle will study, and of course the spiritual phenomenon called philosophy that comes from the Milesian Thales, the first of the Seven.

Once again, we see how out of the chaos comes light, out of darkness comes day, and out of confusion comes clarity. Mythology and history are intertwined in this sense. From the formless matter comes an ordered whole. The dynamics of these transitions will be a constant that Greek thought of antiquity itself will explore, whether through philosophers, poets, or both.

3. Seven Sages

For the moment let us return to the Seven Sages. Their incorporation into studies in Greek philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century came mainly from the early versions of Diels-Kranz's “The Fragments of the Pre-Socratics”. This was later joined by the reflections of the older poets and narratives from mythological sources that current scholars have explored with much enthusiasm.

However, it has to be said that in the same antiquity the Seven Sages were also recognized as an institution within the entire Hellas. The first mention we find in Greek philosopher literature is in Plato (Protagoras 342e–343b) who very much in his own style modifies the standard list compiled by Demetrius Phalereus. Such a list introduces us the following characters: (1) Thales of Miletus, (2) Solon of Athens, (3) Bias of Priene, (4) Pythagoras of Mytilene, (5) Chilon of Lacedaemon, (6) Cleobulus of Lindos and (7) Periander of Corinth.

The plastic arts were also keen to bequeath to posterity this diverse group of highly esteemed Greek citizens. Mosaics have been found in different parts of ancient Greece depicting the sages always in fellowship. Literature and poetry also place the seven together in harmony. This is itself is striking because if there is any place where most quarrels are aired it is in the schools of humanities with their endless warfare over who has the truth or who is even closer to it. Garcia Gual already talked about it in his book of the Seven Sages.

Given this evidence, it is worth asking under what unity the seven were identified. What unites them, being from different places? As could not be missing in a study on the Greek, it is more than necessary to appeal to the *logos*. The Greek expression *par excellence* shows here its ethical, political, and social strength. The civilization of the word, as it has been called, has as its hallmark this unifying characteristic that is intrinsic to its tradition. Already from the earliest poets, this taste for the word can be noted. Indeed, it is the poets who were in the first

¹ The very first experience that philosophy had on Greek soil, the sanction of the Seven Sages, is an unmistakable and unforgettable feature of the Hellenic image.

place the teachers of all virtue. The fact that their *paideia* was not enough to attenuate the effects of the East and the novelties of that time does not detract from their educational work. Moreover, if the message of the sages penetrated the Greeks, it was precisely because among the citizens there was already a willingness to listen to their superiors.

In short, the message of the wise men was directed to the recovery of prudence, to acting wisely, to balance or, in a word, to moderation. The situation from which they started, confusion, threatened to dissolve the ethical axis that identified them as Greeks. Therefore, not only their words but also their actions were fundamental to instill order among the nascent cities open to the world. Each one in their respective polis acted and spoke in such a way that their fellow citizens knew how to recognize in them the virtue proper to great spirits. The anecdote about the tripod that Diogenes Laertius narrates is a staging of such *koinonia* that the other arts also testify,

The quick exploration of the Seven that we have made would be incomplete without understanding why they are precisely such a number. We must take into account that the ancient world lived linked to the meaning of things. It was a word with meaning and that intended to give meaning to its greatest expressions. Under such a premise, let us briefly inquire why the wise men are necessarily seven. In order to do so, it is obligatory to incorporate the Greek religion, and especially Apollo, into the sacred sphere. Apollo of the seven days, of the feast on the seventh day, of the seven rays of light, who has a lyre with seven strings, who is worshipped by seven young women and seven young men. Apollo, the sun, is the one who gives that symbol to the wise men, is the one who receives honors when the Greeks honor the seven. Apollo in the words of the wise men themselves, is the ultimate source of wisdom. This is how the anecdote of the tripod ends, with Thales of Miletus carrying this sacred object to the temple of the god. Bias of Priene would say: “ὅ τι ἂν ἀγαθὸν πρᾶσσης, θεοῦς. μὴ σεαυτὸν αἰτιῶ (Whatever good you do, ascribe to the gods, not yourself).”

Indeed, the first to take this reflection into account were the Seven themselves, whose two famous sentences “Nothing in excess” and “Know thyself” were placed at the entrance of the temple of the god Apollo.

4. Sentences

Everywhere in the world. Sayings have flourished, sometimes known by different names: sayings, proverbs, paroemia, etc. Some consider them as popular wisdom and others as mere phrases without much value. The point is that we can recognize a natural tendency to express ourselves in this way, that is, with brevity, but not just any kind of brevity, but one that rhymes. Thus, the phrase becomes memorable, and it is possible to transmit it with ease.

In the time of the sages of the sixth century B.C., where orality prevailed more than writing, wisdom by default had to be also of such nature, and indeed it was so. We know that the Seven were all poets, they cultivated that discipline and exercised it constantly, we also know that they were active in politics, that they occupied important positions and that they made changes in the legal order, finally, we know from the visual and written sources that they were recognized as virtues people. All these factors are shown in their sentences which like them are logos in action, but a brief, cadent and profound logos — substance and form, ethics and aesthetics in unison. The brevity reflects the practicality of their words, the cadence allows memorizing their message and the depth is a mirror of their character. With this in mind, let us move on to review the main themes of the sentences.

Regarding the topics, I know of two contemporary authors who have given their opinion. The first is Ana Gispert-Sauch. She proposes seven sections in which the one hundred and twenty-six maxims that tradition has

bequeathed to us can be placed. These are knowledge, speech, action, moderation, justice, firmness, and relations with fellow men (Gispert-Sauch Colls A. M., 2016, pp. 109–153). On the other side, Johannes Engels prefers only three: coexistence among citizens; religious obligations to the gods and the dead; and the relations between couples, between parents and children, friends and enemies (Engels, 2012, p. 103). If we go back to antiquity, there is also a classification that comes from Plato himself, for whom self-knowledge and not exceeding oneself would be the summary of the whole message of the Sages.

As I have already said, the temple of Apollo collected precisely the sentences that refer to this advice. While we can agree that both themes appear in the maxims of the Seven, reviewing Plutarch (On the E of Delphi) and Ananada K. Coomaraswamy (The “E” at Delphi) who investigate the enigmatic E that was next to both Greek phrases everything seems to indicate that the very famous “Know thyself” is more a form of greeting from the god to the mortal than a pattern of behavior. Therefore, and as it is written in the title of this paper, the theme par excellence of the logos of the sages would be the sensibleness, moderation, the “nothing in excess”. They are a paradigm, a model, an example of the aurea mediocritas, of medio-crity, of being in the middle of the mountain — medus, ocris.

Finally, I will present two main words which appear with more recurrence among the sage's sentences. Making a thorough examination of every one of them I have found that the terms friendship (φίλος) and evilness (κακός) are the favorite ones. On the latter we have eight sentences in six of the seven sages. Here is the selection²

Cleobulus: «ἀρετῆς οἰκεῖον, κακίας ἀλλότριον»

A kinsman of virtue, a stranger to evil.

Solon: «μὴ κακοῖς ὀμίλει»

Do not associate with wicked people.

Chilon: «μὴ κακολόγει τοὺς πλησίον· εἰ δὲ μή, ἀκούσῃ ἐφ' οἷς λυπηθήσῃ»

Do not speak ill of those nearby, otherwise you will hear things that will cause you pain.

Thales: «μὴ πλούτει κακῶς»

Do not become rich by wickedness.

«κακὰ ἐν οἴκῳ κρύπτει»

Conceal evils within the house.

Pittacus: «τὸν φίλον κακῶς μὴ λέγε, μηδ' εὖ τὸν ἐχθρόν· ἀσυλλόγιστον γὰρ τὸ τοιοῦτον»

Do not speak ill of a friend nor well of an enemy, for such a thing is illogical.

Bias: «οἱ πλεῖστοι ἄνθρωποι κακοί» Most humans are bad.

«μήτ' εὐήθης ἴσθι, μήτε κακοήθης»

Be neither simple-minded nor evil-minded.

It is beyond the scope of this work to comment on each sentence; however, one thing could be said, the sages are so concerned to avoid the evil behavior that makes our character ugly.

Now, looking at the theme of friendship we have the following.

Solon: «φίλους μὴ ταχὺ κτῶ, οὓς δ' ἂν κτήσῃ, μὴ ταχὺ ἀποδοκίμαζε»

Do not acquire friends quickly, but those that you do acquire do not reject quickly.

«φίλους εὐσέβει» Respect your friends.

² The Greek text as well as the translations are taken from Laks & Most (2016, pp. 136–147).

Chilon: «ἐπὶ τὰ δεῖπνα τῶν φίλων βραδέως πορεύου, ἐπὶ δὲ τὰς ἀτυχίας ταχέως»

Go slowly to your friends' dinners, but quickly to their misfortunes.

Thales: «φίλων παρόντων καὶ ἀπόντων μέμνησο»

Be mindful of your friends when they are present and also when they are absent.

Pittacus: «τὸν φίλον κακῶς μὴ λέγε, μηδ' εὖ τὸν ἐχθρόν· ἀσυλλόγιστον γὰρ τὸ τοιοῦτον»

Do not speak ill of a friend nor well of an enemy, for such a thing is illogical.

Bias: «πλούτῳ φιλίαν»

[You will acquire] friendship by your wealth.

Periander: «φίλοις εὐτυχούσιν καὶ ἀτυχούσιν ὁ αὐτὸς ἴσθι»

Be the same to your friends both when they are fortunate and when they are unfortunate.

«λοιδοροῦ ὡς ταχὺ φίλος ἐσόμενος»

Blame like someone who wants to quickly become a friend.

While Cleobulus does not directly use the word friend, one of his sentences touches on the topic by saying: «ἔχθρας διαλύειν» «Settle enmities». That is to say, each and every one of the sages considered it relevant to speak about friendship, this is condoned with that *koinonia* we already saw above.

5. Conclusions

In summary, taking the sentences themselves and with the use of philological tools, we see that the fraternity so celebrated since ancient times is also exposed in the logos that has been transmitted to us. The Sages are a single sentiment that appeal to sensibleness as a means to dilute political chaos. On the other hand, the cultivation of friendship also emerges as an implicit call in the face of convulsive situations.

The Greek example and their way of facing inevitable chaos with the wisdom of moderation will always be a way of coping with similar situations. This does not imply submission or chronic passivity in the face of emergencies but proper use logos at the political level. By this we mean every sphere where one becomes human, in the private and in the public one.

The author has translated the above quotations from the original Spanish into English.

References

- Conejo A. M. E. (1987). "Los siete sabios de Grecia: Enfoque crítico", *Filología y Lingüística*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, pp. 95–101.
- Engels J. (2010). *Die sieben Weisen: Leben, lehren und legenden*, München: C. H. Beck.
- García Gual C. (1989). *Los siete sabios (y tres más)*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
- Gispert-Sauch Colls A. M. (2016). "La sabiduría gnomica de los primeros griegos comparada con la Hebrea y la actual sabiduría popular", *Escritura y Pensamiento*, Vol. XIX, No (38); 109-153.
- Laks A. and Most G. W. (2016). *Early Greek Philosophy. Volume II. Beginnings and early ionian thinkers Part I*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Marcolongo A. (2021). *Etimologías para sobrevivir al caos. Viaje al origen de 99 palabras*, Barcelona: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial.
- Nietzsche F. (1962 [1873]). *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Washington, D.C: Regnery Publishing, Inc.
- Paton W. R. (1917). *The Greek Anthology II*, Vol. V, New York. G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Salvador P. (2000). *Filosofía y Mística: una lectura de los griegos*, Barcelona: Kairós.
- Vernant J. P. (1992). *Los orígenes del pensamiento griego*, Barcelona: Paidós.