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Socrates Becomes Narcissus: Moral Mediation in Achille Bocchi's *Symbolicarum quaestionum*



Fig. 1: *Symbolicarum quaestionum de universo genere, quas serio ludebat, libri quinque*, 1574, Lib. I, Sym. III.

One of the illustrations made by Giulio Bonasone for Achille Bocchi's *Symbolicarum quaestionum* of 1555 shows the philosopher Socrates either sketching or painting, whilst accompanied by an observing winged figure, the sage's daimon (fig. 1). Bonasone's print was designed to illustrate Bocchi's adage, "Pictura gravium ostenduntur pondera rerum. Quaeq latent magis, haec per mage aperta patent" ("The significance of weighty things is shown by a picture/ Whatever is hidden deeper becomes more apparent").

^[1] To put it another way: Bocchi's use of pictorial and

optical devices helps to reveal inner truth. This seems to indicate that he was drawing on a tradition that blended the idea of representation with moral mediation, a tradition that fused art with moral philosophy. The unique example of Socrates engaged in painting confirms that Bocchi knew of the artistic side of Socrates' personality, which emerged in classical literature; these sources stated that Socrates' father Sophroniskos was a stone-worker and that according to reports his son worked stone in his early life.^[2] In line with these sources, Bocchi reinstates Socrates' artistic personality in order to bind art and philosophy together rather than simply relying on the idea of philosophical teaching for the purposes of educating the reader of the *Symbolicarum quaestionum*, although as will become evident, a new paradigm of philosophical education was introduced through the iconography of Bocchi's illustrated emblem book.

Before Bocchi, Socrates did appear in artistic contexts such as depictions of philosophers in Renaissance paintings; but his appearances there were not directly connected with the visual arts. Perhaps his most famous appearance is the assertive philosopher lecturing to his school in Raphael's *The School of Athens*, where Socrates is shown in his traditional teaching role rather than engaged in art practice. Here, the face of Socrates is based on images of the philosopher that appear in the *Imagines et Elogia Virorum Illustrium* by Fulvio Orsini of 1570. Despite its deviation from the usual representation of Socrates, Bocchi's philosopher does seem to derive from Orsini's formula: his features are similar, the pronounced dome and receding headline are evident. This physiognomic correspondence is hardly surprising as Bonasone was a member of Raphael's workshop; and as Irving Lavin has demonstrated, Bonasone also drew on the figure group of Pythagoras and an onlooker in the *School of Athens*, interpreted by Vasari as Matthew and the angel, in or-

der to suggest the divine inspiration of Socrates.^[3]

It would have been logical for Bonasone to have used Raphael's source as Bocchi would have wanted him to convey the idea of divine inspiration. Socrates's legend revolved around the figure of an invisible demon or daimon that inspired the philosopher when making ethical decisions. The concept of a daimon may not seem immediately relevant to a discussion of artistic representation and philosophy since it communicated with Socrates not through imagery, but with a voice that signified the logos or reason, a concept that Bocchi may be alluding to with the names of the daimon and Socrates inscribed in Greek beneath each figure.^[4] However, the Bocchi scholar, Elizabeth See Watson, stated that the ancient writer Proclus believed that the daimon transmitted Ideas to the artist and that the arts were impossible without the aid of daimons.^[5] What may be deduced is that Bocchi wanted to integrate daimonic communication through the logos with visual representation. In the Bonasone engraving, a direct connection is forged between artistic creation and the daimon: Socrates uses a stylus or a brush to outline his self-portrait as well as that of another figure, while his companion in the physical world looks eagerly over the philosopher's shoulder at the embryonic image outlined on the canvas.

What may be delineated on the canvas before the philosopher may be the inner self, which the daimon prompts Socrates to emulate through the art of painting, an idea suggested by motifs within the emblem. Socrates uses the tools of painting and geometry; the set square and compass to faithfully render himself in outline, a motif that may have been suggested by Alberti's comments about circumscription in *Della Pittura*. Alberti may have possibly derived circumscription or *circonscrizione* from Xenophon's account of Socrates.^[6] As will be evident, Bocchi identified with Socrates, so he would undoubtedly have studied Xenophon's writings on the philosopher. Bocchi would have known that Xenophon's Socrates enquires of the painter Parrhasius if the mind's character is a fit subject for representation.^[7] Bocchi, a teacher of law and philosophy, was not ignorant of artistic theory either, and there are Albertian undertones to the image: the truncated tree may refer to the inven-

tion of sculpture from anthropomorphic tree trunks, an idea presented in Alberti's *De statua*.^[8] This natural feature resembles a torso, and it seems to be resting on some kind of marble slab, an iconographical juxtaposition that implies the art of sculpture. Even if Alberti's ideas on the origin of painting are discounted, knowledge of art theory is suggested by other iconographical details: the inclusion of the sun recalls Pliny who said that "Quintilian believed that the earliest painters used to draw around shadows made by the sun, and the art eventually grew by a process of additions."^[9] According to Pliny, the origin of painting was to be found in the tracing of the outline around a man's shadow, which was circumscription, which in turn gave birth to sculpture.

Yet, as previously stated, circumscription does not only lead to painting, but to self-knowledge: the origin of painting becomes inseparable from knowing oneself, and in the present image's case, it is especially appropriate because of the Socratic maxim of *Nosce te ipsum*, "Know thyself", which is encountered throughout Bocchi's emblem book.^[10] In Bocchi's astounding conflation of painting and philosophy, perhaps the truest example of the painter-philosopher idea is realised. Here we have a philosopher, Socrates, who is actually engaged in the act of painting, in the process bringing together the idea of "every painter paints himself" with the aid of self-knowledge acquired by wisdom and insight, presumably transmitted through his daimon rather than using himself as a model.^[11] Socrates paints himself with the aid of his daimon to uncover his self; painting becomes a form of moral mediation between representation of nature and the soul.

However, there is another dimension to this image which seems to have escaped commentary: the age aspect. Both of the figures sketched by Socrates are young, not old. Why should this be? It may be the case that shown on the easel is a preliminary sketch and the characteristics of age have yet to be realized later in the process. What supports the idea of a self-portrait despite the difference in age is that the physiognomy of the drawn figure is consistent with Socrates's own; he has a high-domed head and prominent nose in accordance with the traditional way of portraying the philosopher, although the depicted

'Socrates' is clean-shaven. If the picture whose outline Socrates is drawing is supposed to be a self-portrait, then it would have been logical for Bonasone to have shown Socrates looking at himself in a mirror; instead, as we shall see, Bocchi had Socrates using a mirror in what may be a companion print featuring this theme of self-representation and moral insight (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: *Symbolicarum quaestionum*, Lib. II, Sym. LIX.

One of the best examples of moral mediation via the mirror was Seneca who stated that as the individual journeyed through life, the mirror would help to gauge how the young and old man could learn to behave in accordance with their specific ages.

Mirrors were invented in order that man may know himself, destined to attain many benefits from this: first, knowledge of himself; next, in certain directions, wisdom. The handsome

man, to avoid infamy. The homely man, to understand that what he lacks in physical appearance must be compensated for by virtue. The young man, to be reminded by his youth that it is a time of learning and of daring brave deeds. The old man, to set aside actions dishonourable to his grey hair, to think some thoughts about death. This is why nature has given us the opportunity of seeing ourselves. A clear fountain or a polished stone returns to each man his image.^[12]

Self-awareness and self-knowledge in this instance are tied to the specific age of the beholder: the old man looks in the mirror and sees his white hair, a reminder that death is imminent and that he should prepare for it in the stoic way; the young man's vigorous body reminds him that his age is one for action and great deeds, both in the classroom and on the battlefield. In formulating his natural philosophy fixated on the moral natural mirror, Seneca had transposed Socrates's use of the domestic mirror employed in his teaching of the young. According to Diogenes Laertius, Socrates used a mirror to reveal to the young their true selves.^[13] The object served as a form of moral mediation, although there was a practical thrust to Socrates' advice. If the mirror reflects your unhand-some features back at you, you can take comfort that your learning will compensate for your 'ugliness'.^[14] As Diogenes Laertius put it, Socrates "used to recommend young men to be constantly looking in the glass, in order that, if they were handsome, they might be worthy of their beauty; and if they were ugly, they might conceal their unsightly appearance by their accomplishments."^[15] Assuming that the pictorial surface in Bocchi's Symbol no. III can be seen as a moral mirror, it breaks with the convention of reflecting the age of the onlooker back and shows that person younger, as previously stated.

It is helpful at this point to invoke recent work on early modern aging and representation. In his discussion of the aging of Narcissus, Philip Sohm has argued that the tragic gaze of the young man reflected in the water contains elements of the meditations of decay and death.^[16] Narcissus's pining for his reflection in a pool of water in a shadowy grove implies the

decomposition and dissolution brought on by old age; unlike Seneca's youth looking into the natural pool and seeing his virility reflected back at him, the narcissine viewer intuits old age, the state of the philosopher who is comfortable with death.^[17] A new paradigm enters into the discussion here, which needs more elaboration: Narcissus as philosopher.

Outside art history, the classics scholar Shadi Bartsch has analysed the notion of Narcissus as a philosopher with interesting results that bear on the arguments about age and moral mediation presented here.^[18] Briefly, as Bartsch points out, the act of Ovid's callow youth, looking into the woodland pool could be regarded as a metaphor for discovering self-knowledge. Far from the idea of Narcissus providing inspiration for psychological models of the self, Ovid's tragic youth's search for self is bound up with the Greek dictum of self-knowledge.^[19] Narcissus's tragedy is that he does come to know himself, a revelation warned against by another Ovidian character Tiresias, the old sage who states that Narcissus will live long provided he does not come to know himself: "fatidicus vates se se non noverit inquit."^[20] Here we see in Tiresias and Narcissus the relationship between elderly philosopher and young fool centred on the mirror of self-knowledge – Narcissus's pool.

Lest this be seen irrelevant to Bocchi, it is a fact that the narcissine pool of self-knowledge was of interest to him and his intellectual circle in Bologna. One of Bocchi's pupils, Ulisse Aldovrandi (1522-1605), had an image of a man looking at himself in a mirror on the wall of one of his villas; as this image had the inscription *Nosce te ipsum*, "Know thyself", it was clearly Socratic in origin and nature. Below this picture stood allegorical figures, a harpy and a chimera representing the false lures and obstacles on the road to self-knowledge, which framed the image of Narcissus at a pool.^[21] For Aldovrandi, Narcissus represented the loss of identity through the mirror of the pool which lured the boy into self-absorption and self-deception, qualities that Aldovrandi's museum was designed to combat by providing a moral compass which would orient the viewer rather than leading him astray, an idea that Aldovrandi obviously derived from the tradition charted by Bartsch in which

Narcissus's pool was a metaphor not only for wisdom, but also self-deception. Bartsch identifies two contradictory strands emerging in the ancient world regarding the mirror of philosophy: firstly, it was primarily a tool of self-knowledge; secondly, the mirror conveyed a false self with its reverse image along the right-left axis which transmitted the unreliability of the phenomenal world, trickery cautioned against by a version of Socrates in Plato's *Republic*.^[22]



Fig. 3: *Symbolicarum quaestionum*, Lib. III, Sym. LXXXVIII.

Though Bocchi makes no direct reference to Narcissus's plight in his *Symbolicarum*, he does allude obliquely to the tale in an intriguing engraving dedicated to Giulio Camillo, one of the Bolognese circle that Aldovrandi belonged to.^[23] In this plate, a group of women stand on the edge of a pool looking at a nightingale perched on a branch over the water. The bird frustrated by its shadow, and transfixed by its im-

age reflected in the water, evokes Narcissus in animal form (fig. 3). This use of the nightingale could be situated within a tradition of *ut pictura poesis* with the voice of the bird suggesting the verbal sounds of the poet which embellish painting. Such singular iconography relates to Camillo because he was celebrated for his charming singing voice and his interest in the complex relationship between shadows and ideas. According to Lina Bolzoni, this symbol of the nightingale staring at its reflection alludes to the problem of ideas, of forms, and the ways in which they are made visible, as well as the errors they might provoke in the spectator, a theme that precisely informs representations of Socrates in the *Symbolicarum quaestionum*.^[24]

The Socratic mirror is designed to correct this optical fall into error as both Bocchi and Aldovrandi knew through their reading of the renaissance theologian Sabba Castiglione's guide to manners, *Ricordi*, which cited the example of Socrates studying his own features in a mirror as a moral guide for the scholar.^[25] This Socratic mirror is central to what might be a conceptual pendant to the image of Socrates painting. Unusually, in this emblem, the non-writing Socrates is shown seated at a desk with an inkpot, paper and books, a scribal still-life that evokes the *disjecta membra* of studios, offices or cabinets in renaissance culture. In this setting, Socrates holds a mirror with a protective cover that is half-opened; but on this occasion he is not accompanied by a winged daimon, but what seems to be one of his young acolytes, which immediately invites connections with his pupils, particularly his most famous student Alcibiades.

Alcibiades was not only Socrates's most famous pupil but also his first lover, as described in Plato's dialogue named after the young man. Looking at this depiction of Socrates and a youth, it is impossible not to think of philosophical truth gained within a culture of same-sex love: the relationship between the ephebos and the ephebe of ancient Greek culture. The mirror also plays a part in this sexual and educational transaction; the older philosopher sees himself "reflected" in the face of the younger lover. Vision and sexuality are joined together here within a framework of Socratic wisdom in which

the master's pupils not only conceive of self-knowledge in terms of philosophy, but also the homoerotic. Pupil is multivalent here: it not only refers to the student of philosophy, but also the pupil of the eye which acts as a mirror reflecting any eye staring into it, in this case the ephebos who sees himself "mirrored" in the ephebe, a form of self-deception rather than self-mirroring.^[26] The homoerotic is theorised along the sightlines of age with Socrates believing that he sees a younger version of himself in his pupil Alcibiades.

Though such a transmission of mutual affection could underline the iconography of Symbol LIX, it comes as a surprise to learn that the context for moral mediation via the mirror is in fact the family, specifically Bocchi's own. After a section which, amongst other things, states that judgment is a mirror, as in the Socratic doctrine, the commentary switches its attention to Bocchi's son in a section headed "Ad Filium". So it must be concluded that the advice offered in the text and the image that articulates it in symbolic form, relates to Socratic wisdom passed on from father to son within the home. If the figure seated at Socrates' table is none other than Bocchi himself in the guise of Socrates, then the young man bearing the mirror could represent Bocchi's troublesome son Pirro, who is being taught self-knowledge with the use of the moral mirror. Within such a scheme, the son would look into the mirror in order to see his own character; but given the father/son bond, the mirror would also work across the generations. The father would also represent the moral mirror in which the son would himself be "reflected".

In the case of Pirro, his father's advice went unheeded and he exchanged the path of Socratic wisdom for one of narcissine folly. Pirro shirked his familial and moral duties and became embroiled in a murder charge resulting in his flight from Bologna with the consequence that the handsome sum he stood to inherit from his father was forfeited. The younger self that Bocchi would have seen in his Socratic mirror would correspond more to Narcissus rather than a moral individual like his father. As Bocchi senior makes clear in the text, it is Pirro's own fault that he cannot see the good in himself that would help him to improve significantly. "Nates, dolet, tua cupidus est." "Son, are you sorrowful? The fault is your own."^[27]

This admonition is underscored by Bocchi's Latin verse "En viva e speculo facies splendente refertur, hinc sapiens, poterisq. Omnia dum ipse velis." "Behold – a live face is splendidly transmitted from a mirror. You know this and are able to do everything you yourself want."

Returning to where we started, the theme of moral improvement over generations may also inform the image of Socrates drawing accompanied by his daimon. Bocchi is known to have exhorted his recalcitrant son Pirro to follow his genius rather than be led astray into false knowledge and self-deception, or even worse. Again, given the close proximity of Socrates and his daimon, an idea of same-sex love might be mediated here, but given that the daimon seems to allude cryptically to teaching Pirro to find his true self, it is likely that the image of Socrates painting, like the image of Socrates teaching via the mirror, conveys the notion of philosophy taught within the family. Bocchi seems to have conceived of himself as a Socratic father-figure who used strategies of representation to teach his family to lead a moral existence in the manner of the Greek philosopher.

What can we ultimately learn from Bocchi's and Bonasone's handling of the Socratic theme of philosophical teaching within a framework of pictorial and optical envisioning? The tension between different aspects of reflection and self-knowledge suggests a shift from a Platonic model of representation, rooted in such texts as the *Phaedrus* to philosophical insight outside the relationship of ephebos and the ephebe. Within the Platonic tradition, eroticism was an aspect of self-knowledge; in the story of Narcissus, it was "a uniquely platonic twist on the pederastic relationship", to use Bartsch's apt phrase.^[28] That erotic element may be buried within Bocchi's two images dealing directly with Socratic self-knowledge, and this homoerotic theme must have been evident to Caravaggio who suggestively entwined the older St Matthew and a young angel together in the first version of St Matthew and the Angel. Irving Lavin claimed that Bocchi's emblems were the key to Caravaggio's altarpiece, and it must be said that a St Matthew resembling Socrates who writes recalls Bocchi's ironic representation in the mirror engraving where the philosopher sits next to an inkwell.^[29] It also seems likely that Cara-

vaggio's antennae may have been tuned to this homoerotic element in Bocchi's prints, and that the baroque painter may have adopted them for his controversial altarpiece.



Fig. 4: *Symbolicarum quaestionum*, Lib. I, Sym. II.

In the case of Bocchi's prints, philosophical eroticism and Socratic self-knowledge could not exist comfortably within the context of the renaissance family. Pirro in the guise of a wayward Narcissus is not encouraged to find true moral direction with the aid of an older male lover, but he is encouraged to see his true self through the Socratic mirror, which is not only held by his teacher but by his father who modelled himself both morally and physically on Socrates, as is evident from the portrait of Bocchi at the front of the *Symbolicarum quaestionum* (fig. 4). However, instead of seeing the ideal in the form of his father, Pirro's own gaze was returned to him with unfortunate results. "Nates,

dolet, tua cupidas est.” In this particular case, Narcissus failed to turn the project of self-knowledge into Socratic wisdom. Moral mediation failed, and the potential philosopher remained fixated on his own image in the mirror of self-absorption, and therefore never attained the wisdom of his Socratic father, much to the latter’s disappointment.

Endnotes

1. Achille Bocchi, *Symbolicarum quaestionum de universo genere, quas serio ludebat, libri quinque* 1574. All references to 1574 edition.
2. Kenneth Lapatin, *Picturing Socrates*, in: *A Companion to Socrates*, eds. Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar, Oxford 2006, pp. 110-155, see p. 110; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, ed. Robert Drew Hicks, vol. I, London 1972, p. 149.
3. Irving Lavin, *Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio’s Two St Matthews*, in: *The Art Bulletin*, 56, 1974, pp. 59-81, see p. 70. Bonasone must also have known Raphael’s St Matthew through a print by another of Raphael’s pupils – Agostino Veneziano.
4. For a summary of views on Socrates’s divine sign or daimon, see Anthony A. Long, *How Does Socrates’ Divine Sign Communicate with Him?* in *A Companion to Socrates*, Oxford 2006, pp. 63-74.
5. Elizabeth See Watson, *Achille Bocchi and the Emblem Book as Symbolic Form*, Cambridge 1993, p. 85.
6. Leon Battista Alberti, *Della pittura e della statua di Leonbatista Alberti*, Milan 1804, p. 45. Alberti was taking some liberties here; there is no mention of drawing line in Xenophon.
7. Xenophon, *Conversations of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Robin Waterfield, London 1990, p. 164.
8. Alberti 1804, *Della pittura e della statua*, p. 110.
9. Cristelle L. Barkins, *Echoing Narcissus in Alberti’s Della Pittura*, in: *Oxford Art Journal*, 16, 1993, 1, pp. 25-33, see p. 27.
10. On this motif, see Elisabeth Wilson, *Achille Bocchi*, Cambridge 1993, p. 122.
11. The Socrates drawing image can be usefully compared with Symbol XXIII. This shows an actual painter in front of his easel painting the Valois king, François I, whose image appears on the canvas and in the clouds in the sky, suggesting that the artist is painting just as much from memory of a dead person as a living model.
12. Seneca, *Naturales quaestiones*, vol. 1, 91, ed. Thomas H. Corcoran, Boston 1971.
13. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, vol. 1, p. 91.
14. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, vol. I, p. 163: “He recommended to the young the constant use of the mirror, to the end that handsome men might acquire a corresponding behaviour, and ugly men conceal their defects by education.” See also Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History*, trans. Katharine H. Jewitt, London 2002, p. 106.
15. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, vol. 1, p.163.
16. Philip Sohm, *The Artist Grows Old: The Aging of Art and Artists in Italy 1500-1800*, New Haven / London, 2007.
17. Sohm 2007, *The Artist Grows Old*, pp. 38-39.
18. Shadi Bartsch, *The Philosopher as Narcissus: Vision, Sexuality and Self-Knowledge in Classical Antiquity*, in: *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance*, ed. Robert S. Nelson, Cambridge 2000, pp. 70-97.
19. Bartsch 2000, *The Philosopher*, p. 70.
20. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D Melville, Oxford 1989, p. 61.
21. Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting and Scientific Culture in Modern Italy*, Berkeley 1994, p. 302. Aldovrandi wrote a commentary on the Narcissus emblem: “Admiring one’s own face is easy but knowing one’s internal self has always been reputed to be difficult”, p. 302.

22. Bartsch 2000, *The Philosopher as Narcissus*, p. 73.
23. On Camillo, see Lina Bolzoni, *La chambre de la mémoire: Modèles littéraires et iconographiques à l’âge de l’imprimerie*, Geneva 2005, pp. 8-11.
24. Bolzoni 2005, *La chambre de la mémoire*, p. 195, n. 76.
25. Sabba da Castiglione, *Ricordi, ovvero ammaestramenti di Monsignor Sabba Castiglione Cavalier Gierosolimitano, ne’ quali con prudenti, e Christiani discorsi si ragiona di tutte le materie honorate, che si ricercano a un vero gentil’uomo*, Venice 1562, fol.119 r-v.
26. On the mirror in relation to the ephebos/ephebe relationship, Bartsch 2000, *The Philosopher as Narcissus*, pp. 76-78.
27. Bocchi 1574, *Symbolicarum quaestionum*, CXXVII.
28. Bartsch 2000, *The Philosopher as Narcissus*, p. 81.
29. Lavin 1974, *Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio’s Two St Matthews*, pp. 66-73.

Figures

Fig. 1: *Symbolicarum quaestionum de universo genere, quas serio ludebat, libri quinque*, 1574, Lib. I, Sym. III.

Fig. 2: *Symbolicarum quaestionum*, Lib. II, Sym. LIX.

Fig. 3: *Symbolicarum quaestionum*, Lib. III, Sym. LXXXVIII.

Fig. 4: *Symbolicarum quaestionum*, Lib. I, Sym. II.

Summary

Achille Bocchi’s *Symbolicarum quaestionum* of 1555 shows Socrates drawing a preparatory design, in the presence of his demon. Socrates as artist was used to illustrate Bocchi’s adage, “The significance of weighty things is shown by a picture/ Whatever is hidden deeper becomes more apparent.” A companion print of Socrates holding a mirror illustrates another maxim “Behold - a live face is splendidly transmitted from a mirror. You know this and are able to do everything you yourself want.” This article explores how Socrates’s iconography is intertwined with theories of artistic representation and moral mediation in the *Symbolicarum quaestionum*. It also argues that Bocchi’s juxtaposition of Socrates looking into a mirror and performing an artistic function, suggests that the Bolognese intellectual knew of a philosophical tradition that combined Socrates and Narcissus: the former linked with inner truth via the mediation of the mirror; the latter with the origin of painting, also a form of self-knowledge. Finally, by drawing on recent scholarship on Socrates, which meshes reflections on philosophy, gender and age, Bocchi’s representation of Socrates is placed within a new context.

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Title

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