Engaging Socrates

by

Joel Alden Schlosser

Department of Political Science
Duke University

Date: _______________________

Approved:

___________________________
J. Peter Euben, Supervisor

___________________________
Ruth W. Grant

___________________________
Michael A. Gillespie

___________________________
Jill Frank

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
Political Science in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2009
ABSTRACT

Engaging Socrates

by

Joel Alden Schlosser

Department of Political Science
Duke University

Date:_______________________

Approved:

___________________________
J. Peter Euben, Supervisor

___________________________
Ruth W. Grant

___________________________
Michael A. Gillespie

___________________________
Jill Frank

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Political Science in the Graduate School of Duke University

2009
Abstract

This dissertation considers the role of the critic in democratic political culture by engaging Socrates. Since Socrates so often stands as an exemplar for many different styles of critical activity, both in political rhetoric and in popular culture, I address the roots of these many figures of Socrates by examining the multiple aspects of Socrates as they appear in Plato’s dialogues. Starting from the different metaphors that Socrates uses to describe himself – the stingray, the master of erotics, the midwife, the practitioner of the true political art, and the gadfly – I parse these different strands of Socrates’ character and assess their coherence. While each of these descriptions captures a different angle of Socrates’ activity vis-à-vis Athenian democracy, I argue that together they also hold one essential aspect in common: Socrates’ strange relationship to Athens as both connected and disconnected, immanent in his criticism and yet radically so. As strange both in the context of Athens and in relation to his interpreters, I further contend that the figure of Socrates suggests a kind of political activity committed to disturbance and displacement while also working across, with, and against conventional boundaries and languages. Moreover, I maintain that the Socrates suggests new forms of critical associations that take up his practice of philosophy in democratic culture today.
# Table of Contents

Abstract

Acknowledgements

**Introduction: Socrates Redux**  

1: **Questions of Socrates: Reading Socrates Out of the Republic**  

2: **The Sting of Philosophy: Socrates Among the Athenians**  

3: **Socrates Ἐρωτικός: Erotic Publics and the Symposium**  

4: **Between Politics and Philosophy: Socrates as Midwife**  

5: **Socrates Politikos: Ironic Rhetoric and the Gorgias**  

6: **The Heroic Gadfly: Socrates’ Strange Heroism in the Apology**  

7: **An Atopic Socrates: Engaging Socrates’ Strangeness**  

**Works Cited**  

**Author Biography**
Acknowledgements

This dissertation marks years of teaching and learning, and I have many people to thank. My teachers at Carleton College first initiated me to the delights of intellectual work. I am grateful to my teachers Ken Huber, Louis Newman, and Martha and Roger Paas as well as to my colleagues in the Department of Political Science. My two teachers in political theory, Larry Cooper and Kim Smith, humored my ingenuous intensity and encouraged my ambitions. To Larry especially, I am thankful for his love of Plato and serious engagement with the classics.

My teachers and colleagues at Duke University have also greatly contributed to this dissertation. I thank my teachers Peter Burian, Diskin Clay, Rom Coles, Peter Euben, Michael Gillespie, Ruth Grant, Malachi Hacohen, and Tom Spragens. I would also like to thank my colleagues and friends who discussed these ideas and the writings they bore over the years: Ali Aslam, James Bourke, P.J. Brendese, Winter Brown, Keegan Callanan, Doug Casson, Stefan Dolgert, Bill English, Laura Grattan, Shlomo Griner, Nora Hanagan, Ben Hertzberg, Alisa Kessel, Christine Lee, David McIvor, Dennis Rasmussen, Laurie Ward, and Akira Yatsuhashi. I would especially like to thank Ali Aslam and David McIvor, fellow members of the “Dinner and Democracy” reading group and frequent readers of my work. My neighboring colleagues at UNC, Chapel Hill also deserve many thanks: Susan Bickford, Brendan Boyle, Hollie Mann, and Elizabeth Markovits. During my time at Duke I have also been fortunate enough to encounter new friends and readers who have helped me in developing this project. I thank Danielle Allen, Libby Anker, Lawrie Balfour, Ryan Balot, David Belanich, Jeff Church, Brent Cusher, Matt Holbreich, Matt Landauer, Melissa Lane,

I owe even more thanks to my dissertation committee, the members of which have challenged and questioned this project – often against my own wishes but much to its benefit – over the past few years. I thank Peter Euben, Jill Frank, Michael Gillespie, and Ruth Grant. To Jill, I am especially grateful for her deep involvement as an outside reader as well as her committed support throughout the process. To Peter, I am thankful for his constant questions and energy, and for a body of work I have taken as exemplary for my own.

Before Carleton and Duke and before Socrates even seemed worthy of consideration, my parents and brother supported my reading, writing, and thinking. I owe Tom Schlosser, Marilyn Loveness, and Peter Schlosser the deepest thanks. In recent years another family has joined my own in providing support and courage, and I thank the Trents: Marilyn, Emily, and especially Sarah. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to John Wesley Robb. Great uncle, teacher, and friend, Wes put me on my present path many, many years ago.

Durham, North Carolina

December 2009
INTRODUCTION: Socrates Redux

I.

We live in a veritable sea of “Socrateses.” Socratic noise surrounds us, and the figure of Socrates appears across our cultural and political landscape – from the academy to prisons to children’s toys to marketing strategies. Books on Socrates overflow the shelves: *Socratic Selling: How to Ask Questions that Get the Sale* or *Socrates’ Way: Seven Keys to Using Your Mind to the Utmost* or *Socrates meets Jesus: history’s great questioner confronts the claims of Christ* or *Socrates, Plato, & guys like me: confessions of a gay schoolteacher*. Socrates is everywhere:

- Socrates is a crater on Earth’s moon;
- Socrates is a barefoot rag doll made by the Unemployed Philosophers Guild;
- Socrates is a European Union education and training program;
- Socrates is the fifth movement of Leonard Bernstein’s Serenade for Solo Violin, String Orchestra, Harp, and Percussion, after Plato’s *Symposium*;
- Socrates is a sculpture park in New York City; and
- eSocrates is a business enterprise.

One could add even more: Socrates as a crime novel protagonist; as a standardized system for employment management; as a new satellite technology; as a time-traveling science fiction fantasy (*The Plot to Save Socrates*); as a three act-opera, *Socrates*, about “the private and public life of Socrates . . . as well as his trial and execution, his love for his wife and Greece, [and] his defense of human rights”; and as a society sponsored by the Aspen Institute.

Whence all these “Socrateses”?  

---

1 J. Peter Euben describes “Platonic noise” this way: “Plato is himself becoming something like white noise, a voice below and outside the theoretical terrain, marginalized by an intellectual avant-garde but also perhaps a non sequitur that further hones and blunts the cutting edge of theory” (Euben, *Platonic Noise*, 13). As Danielle Allen glosses this, “Platonic noise” thus means “the resonance of our own contemporary debate about history, nature, and authority with key moments in the history of philosophy” (Allen, “Platonic Quandaries, 139). Much like Plato, Socrates, I suggest here, resonates widely and wildly.


3 Some of these examples come from my own Google searches. Others come from references in Michael Trapp, ed., *Socrates in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ix – xxi.
In one set of familiar images of Socrates, he appears indoors, clean, self-possessed, and flanked by a coterie of admiring disciplines. In Raphael’s “The School of Athens,” for example, Socrates stands by Plato’s side ensconced in the calm confines of a palace surrounded by loquacious fellow philosophers. While Anselm Feuerbach’s “Das Gastmahl des Platon” takes a more provocative topic, imagining Alcibiades’ dramatic entrance in Plato’s *Symposium*, Socrates appears unperturbed and even underwhelmed by the interruption to the apparently subdued conversation. Perhaps most famously, in particular for North American audiences, Jacques-Louis David’s “The Death of Socrates” shows Socrates undeterred from his dramatic discoursing – one hand raised to emphasize a point while the other grasps the hemlock – near death but undistracted by it, unlike his weeping followers. In all these paintings, this Socrates and his philosophical enterprise impress us, appearing as bastions of courage and wisdom in an unkind world, standing for freedom from fear of death or the dogmas of society, and exemplifying the life of the mind in contrast to the mindless life of many (including us).

This Socrates has continually merited admiration in the centuries following his death. Beginning with the Stoics, Socrates became an exemplar of virtue and of a way of life free from any stain of injustice. In the Italian Renaissance, Francesco Petrarch and Marcello Ficino both argued to include Socrates as an exemplar for their Christian humanist philosophies. A few centuries later, Voltaire wrote a play on Socrates, viewing him as

---

4 For more details on the paintings discussed below, see the essays collected in Michael Trapp, ed. *Socrates from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*.

5 As A.A. Long puts it: “In the *Discourses of Epictetus*, Socrates is the philosopher, a figure canonized more regularly and with more attention to detail than any other Stoic saint, whether Diogenes, Antisthenes or Zeno” (Long, “Socrates in Hellenistic Philosophy,” 150).

6 Here and for the rest of this paragraph, I draw on Melissa Lane’s account of Socrates’ influence: *Plato’s Progeny: How Plato and Socrates Still Captivate the Modern Mind*.
symbolizing the value of independent thought amid societal dogma. Hegel located the crucial pivot of his account of the development of Western philosophy in Socrates’ incipient rationalism. One could add Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Gottfried Herder, Matthew Arnold, and J.S. Mill to a list of political thinkers who have found Socrates exemplary in some way. Socrates has left a significant mark on the history of political philosophy. One might even add, as Allan Bloom does, that today “contemplation of Socrates is our most urgent task.”

Yet another set of images, perhaps no less common, exists alongside those I have just described. Less centered on the death of noble Socrates, these images focus on his life, placing Socrates in the context of Athens and as a figure in its political culture, whether by famously interrogating his fellow citizens or refusing to follow orders he deemed unjust. Indeed, the sublime philosopher has descended to earth most recently as the heroic ideal of social criticism. As Michael Walzer argues, Socrates embodies a “connected critic” who risked his life in order to call Athens to its best self. While some may see Socrates as detached from Athens in his pursuit of abstract philosophy, Walzer insists on the opposite: Socrates did not die alone but surrounded by friends and he sought to “question, examine, test, and reprove” the people of Athens “not only for their own sakes but also for the sake of the city.” Socrates is the critical interpreter of the concepts of Greek political and religious life,” Walzer asserts, and this connection allows Socrates to criticize effectively and beneficially. We could do well to imitate this Socrates.

9 Ibid., 188.
10 Walzer’s Socrates as social critic only gives one possible reading in this vein. Herbert Marcuse offers an alternative in *One-Dimensional Man*, when he writes: “The Socratic discourse is political discourse inasmuch as it
But in contrast to the muscled and manly figure of David’s painting or the heroic ideal of Walzer’s connected critic, yet another Socrates looks more like the rest of us, appearing, as Aristophanes described him, squat, snub-nosed, with thick lips and protruding eyes – as well as highly visible in public and always talking.\textsuperscript{11} This Socrates does not earn praise or admiration, nor does he often grace the canvases of great painters. Less marked by his steadfast virtuousness, this Socrates pursues inquiry while aware of his ignorance, irritating his fellow citizens with his disturbing questioning and his unsettling presence – to the point of upsetting them and thus inciting his trial and execution.

The uproar provoked by I.F. Stone’s \textit{The Trial of Socrates} gives a sense of this Socrates’ political effects.\textsuperscript{12} On Stone’s polemical and impassioned account, Socrates deserved the hemlock for his antidemocratic teachings and inaction during the bloody dictatorship of the Thirty Tyrants in 404 BCE – so Socrates appeared to his fellow citizens. Socrates does not exemplify the unimpeachable moral philosopher nor the social critic led by good intentions but a harsh detractor of democracy sympathetic to despotic oligarchs. Rather than exemplifying virtues abstracted from the political realm or embodying those latent within it, this Socrates upsets his fellow citizens and threatens political stability. We could view this Socrates in the vein that Aristophanes depicted him, seeing that Socrates’ criticisms harmed Athenian culture and its system of education by undermining its

\textsuperscript{11} As Debra Nails puts it: “The extant sources agree that Socrates was profoundly ugly, resembling a satyr more than a man – and resembling not at all the statues that turned up later in ancient times and now grace Internet sites and the covers of books” (Nails, “Socrates,” 2).

\textsuperscript{12} I.F. Stone, \textit{The Trial of Socrates}. For a contemporary account of the uproar, see Myles Burnyeat’s review of Stone in \textit{The New York Review of Books}: “Cracking the Socrates Case.” For a reappraisal, see Malcom Schofield, “Socrates on Trial in the USA.”
democratically-constituted authority and unsettling its civic conventions.13 Far from the bronzed Socrates of many familiar paintings, this image of Socrates appears in the shadows of harsh aspersions, less haunted by than deserving of the charge “corrupter of youth.”

***

All of these appearances of Socrates prompt a number of questions that swirl around all the figures of Socrates. First, how can Socrates still mean anything? Do all of these different and often conflicting “Socrateses” show his utter fungibility – the ability of this figure to serve any function in any context? Has Socrates lost all distinctiveness and all content by virtue of these manifold “Socrateses”? Do the many “Socrateses” signify mere commercialization and capitalist appropriation or could we also view this as a democratization of “Socrates”?

Second, how should we deal with all these images? Need we search for some coherence? What would a “coherent Socrates” look like? Could we discover a “right” and a “wrong” Socrates? What then could we make of the continuing power of a broad spectrum of different “Socrateses”? In other words, does approaching and interpreting Socrates mean solving him and thus eliminating the versions of Socrates that fail to “fit”? Could we maintain these many Socrates in tension with one another? Would we want to do such a thing?

Third, what is it about “Socrates”? Why does he evoke so many ardent and diverse reactions? Why should we care about Socrates at all?

13 We could also see Aristophanes’ and Socrates’ activities as having key points of commonality in demanding thoughtful response from their audiences and thus participating in the political education of democratic Athens, as argued by J. Peter Euben in “When There Are Gray Skies: Aristophanes’ Clouds and the Political Education of Democratic Citizens” (in Euben, Corrupting Youth, 109 - 138).
II.

While some may find these questions about the figure of Socrates compelling taken by themselves, Socrates also stands at the beginning of the Western tradition of political thought,14 and his figure has elicited contestation about the very place and function of political thinking and political philosophy in the practice of politics and political life today. As Cicero writes in his *Tusculan Disputations*: “Socrates . . . was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men and bring her also into their homes and compel her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil.”15 All of the political thinkers listed above – from Epictetus to Michael Walzer – have located the origins of their approach to politics to some degree in an interpretation of Socrates. Just as Hannah Arendt has written that the death of Socrates began the tradition of political thought, we could glibly add, to paraphrase Alfred North Whitehead, that the rest of it constitutes “a series of footnotes” to him.16 Thus reapproaching Socrates, as I propose, entails rethinking a foundational and structuring figure for much of political theory today.17

14 I recognize the limitations of this Western paradigm but acknowledge its continued claim on our attention.


16 The full sentence from Whitehead reads thus: “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” (Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 39).

17 In what follows, “Socrates” will refer to the character Socrates from Plato’s dialogues, as my substitution in Whitehead’s epigram indicates; I take Plato as my primary interlocutor for “engaging Socrates” and I do not discuss Xenophon, Aristophanes, Aristotle, or other Socrates at length. In addition to the justification for looking only at Plato that I elaborate in Section IV of the Introduction below, I would add here three reasons for my exclusive focus on Plato for discussing Socrates: (1) Plato offers the most influential account of Socrates, as documented recently by Melissa Lane in *Plato’s Progeny* and evidenced by any survey of the tradition of “Socrates” until the present; (2) While one can justifiably exclude Aristotle because he did not live contemporaneously with Socrates, I would also argue that much of the account of Socrates in Xenophon appears derivative of Plato (on which, see Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*) while others have argued that Aristophanes’ “Socrates” presents a pastiche of sophists and philosophers and not just Socrates (such as Kenneth Dover in his edition of *Clouds*); and (3) Plato gives the richest, most diverse of Socrates, as I hope will become evident in the chapters that follow. One could say that by beginning with Plato I rescue a much more sympathetic Socrates than one could find elsewhere, and I take that point seriously. By invoking the criticisms of Socrates from figures such as Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin, I seek to keep a critical assessment of Socrates alive.
Moreover, and as Hannah Arendt tells the story, the trial of Socrates began a conflict between political thought and the practice of politics that must shadow any engagement with Socrates.18 With the death of Socrates came a distrust of the political realm among thinkers and philosophers and a turning away from a political life viewed as unstable and inconstant. Socrates cannot model good citizenship, let alone serve as an ideal political educator or exemplify any political virtues. As Arendt puts it, the execution of Socrates at the hands of the Athenians precipitated a conflict between the philosopher and the polis, which soon led to philosophers’ asserting a realm higher than politics, a realm of ideas and principles superior to and thus enforceable on the public domain. Philosophy and its incontrovertible insights threaten political life with a “tyranny of truth,” a regime where “the eternal” becomes the center of thought.19 As Arendt writes, “concern with the eternal and the life of the philosopher are seen as inherently contradictory and in conflict with the striving for immortality, the way of life of the citizen, and the *bios politikos.*”20

Following this line of argument, Sheldon Wolin has taken up Arendt’s concern by reasserting the need to focus on the *bios politikos* and thus reject the tradition that began with Socrates. Indeed one could read Wolin’s *Politics and Vision* as dedicated to resuscitating a

---

18 Here is the full quote from Arendt: “Our tradition of political thought began when the death of Socrates made Plato despair of polis life and, at the same time, doubt certain fundamentals of Socrates’ teaching” (*The Promise of Politics*, 6 – 7).

19 Arendt’s story here also resembles that of Leo Strauss in *Natural Right and History*. Strauss sought, however, to maintain the tension between philosophy and political life whereas Arendt often seemed to wish to dissolve it. On the heels of his analysis of both Arendt and Strauss, Dana Villa comments that, “For more than two thousand years the Western philosophic tradition has insisted upon the Platonic distinction between the philosopher and the citizen, elevating a *tension* to the level of ontological difference” (Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, 299). This remains the case for both thinkers, stemming in part, at least on some arguments, from their connections to Martin Heidegger. On this last point, see Rodrigo Chacón, “German Sokrates: Heidegger, Arendt, Strauss.”

tradition of political thinking freed from the antipolitical biases of the legacies of Socrates.  

In this vein, Wolin begins an essay accompanying Arendt’s “Philosophy and Politics” thus:

A long time ago, philosophy was invented and, independently of it, the Greeks invented a version of democratic politics. Greek philosophy, especially the philosophers descended from Socrates, invented a conception of politics that represented itself as superior to all forms of existing politics. Even when that conception was later resisted by a Machiavelli or a Hobbes, the starting point was the one fashioned by Plato or Aristotle. 

In other words, according to Wolin, the figure of Socrates began a line of philosophers that legislated what we could call a philosophic politics, a politics born in the minds of philosophers and destructive of organic and ostensibly genuine political life around it. So Wolin titles his chapter on Plato, “Plato: Political Philosophy versus Politics,” and he writes that “from the very beginnings of political philosophy, a duality was established between the form-giving role of political thought and the form-receiving function of political ‘matter.’”

Socrates begot this tradition, Wolin implies, and now we must move past it.

Most recently, Bruno Latour has reframed this concern with philosophy’s potential tyranny of truth in the political realm in even starker terms. In a compelling and provocative formulation, Latour has argued that Socrates began a fearful dilemma that remains urgent in the imagination of many today, the pitting of Reason against Force, and that this began in

---

21 Although this hardly provides definitive evidence, I find it worth noting that Wolin omits Socrates entirely from the index of the revised edition of Politics and Vision and Socrates rarely figures in Wolin’s discussions of Plato.


24 In what he characterizes as a “post-Nietzschean” characterization of philosophy, Wolin describes the tenets of this lineage as follows: “Politics should be grounded in a higher truth to which philosophy alone has access; a basis in truth converted a society into a community, a close or solidarity group; a good political society would be one in which philosophers not only were tolerated but were honored members of the community and, ideally, would have influence over those who ruled or, stated slightly differently, the alienation of the philosopher, as dramatized by the death of Socrates, the political isolation of Plato, and the flight of Aristotle from Athens, would be over; and, finally, the politics of virtually all of the Greek philosophers descended from Socrates was antidemocratic” (Wolin, “Democracy in the Discourse of Postmodernism,” 5).
Plato’s *Gorgias*. For Latour, Socrates in the *Gorgias* embodies the “true scientist,” telling Callicles: “You’ve failed to notice how much power geometrical equality has among gods and men, and this neglect of geometry has led you to believe that one should try to gain a disproportionate share of things” (508a).\(^{25}\) The *Gorgias*, in Latour’s words, founds the “science wars,” the unending conflict between expert rationality and the rest of us. We can easily hear echoes of Arendt’s concern about a “tyranny of truth” or Wolin’s fear of “architectonic” politics.\(^{26}\)

For Latour, Socrates’ pursuit of a politics of philosophy in the *Gorgias* defines itself in contradistinction to politics without philosophy, the pure power politics Socrates associates with the tyrant, the philosopher’s opponent and negative simulacrum in the *Republic*.\(^{27}\) In other words, Socrates’ example leads to an impoverished concept of politics today, one heard in the refrain that “if Reason cannot prevail, then Might will take over!” Latour repeats this as an oft-heard cry of despair.\(^{28}\) In the *Gorgias*, Socrates’ Reason faces Callicles’ Force. Socrates, moreover, stands opposed to the democratic power of Athens, as he seeks to nullify the force of “ten thousand fools” – the force of the demos – either by the power of rhetoric or by any other means necessary.\(^{29}\) Socrates loves philosophy and this provides the Reason that makes Socrates boast of being “the only real statesman of Athens,” and that


\(^{26}\) Latour echoes these criticisms in *Politics of Nature*, when he criticizes Plato’s allegory of the cave as creating the myth of “Philosopher-Scientist, at once Lawgiver and Savior”: Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 10 – 11.

\(^{27}\) See *Republic* IX.

\(^{28}\) As Latour quotes Steven Weinberg: “Our civilization has been powerfully affected by the discovery that nature is strictly governed by impersonal laws . . . We will need to confirm and strengthen the vision of a rationally understandable world if we are to protect ourselves from the irrational tendencies that still beset humanity.” Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, 216.

\(^{29}\) Latour’s language: *Pandora’s Hope*, 12.
only he will win true glory in the final judgment – not famous Athenian politicians such as Pericles and Themistocles, Arendt’s exemplary political figures in *The Human Condition*.

Latour’s stark formulation contravenes the admiring paintings of Raphael and David with which I began and goes farther even than I.F. Stone. Not only do the many divergent images of Socrates provoke questions, but Latour’s recasting of the figure of Socrates brings into question whether or not the tradition of political thought often attributed to Socrates can or should exist at all. Arendt, Wolin, and Latour’s concerns that Socrates’ activity may fundamentally threaten the political life altogether heighten the urgency of the questions with which I began: should we even consider Socrates? What role can Socrates’ critical activity play in politics and in democracy? Does his activity only harm or can it benefit political life? In the wake of Latour’s most recent arguments, we must wonder whether engaging Socrates can serve any purpose for contemporary democracy. Socrates may only stir up trouble.30

III.

Alexander Nehamas, Martha Nussbaum, and Dana Villa each offer divergent ways of responding to the threats attributed to Socrates’ politics by Arendt, Wolin, and Latour and provide ways of considering what Socrates might contribute to contemporary life. By virtue of their divergent readings, I want to solicit Nehamas, Nussbaum, and Villa to help move us toward a “Socrates redux,” a reconsideration and bringing back of Socrates from both the incoherence of his multiplicity and the animadversion of recent political theorists. Yet while Nehamas, Nussbaum, and Villa prepare the way, none goes quite far enough – or so I will argue – and for this reason in my excursions into their work I will extrapolate some ways of considering the questions I have raised to this point while also providing warnings about

---

30 And doing so may prove a *good* thing. As I will suggest in Chapter 7, Socrates’ lack of democratic dogma may in fact constitute his greatest contribution.
potential dangers that come with any answers. Nehamas, Nussbaum, and Villa thus serve to frame the treatment of Socrates that follows in the rest of this book, both by inviting reflection on Socrates’ “usefulness” today while also highlighting the perils that attend any use of Socrates, whether for politics or otherwise.31

***

In her book criticizing and reassessing American colleges and universities, *Cultivating Humanity*, Martha Nussbaum argues for the usefulness, even the necessity, of Socrates.32 On Nussbaum’s argument, Socrates presents a coherent and needful example to us if we wish to become good citizens of liberal democracy. “Progress needs clarity,” Nussbaum asserts, and Socrates exemplifies a kind of inquiry that pursues clarity through question and answer, reasoned argument, and logical analysis.33 Socrates teaches us how to critically examine ourselves and our traditions so that we can become the open and engaged “world citizens” that, Nussbaum argues, a diverse and interconnected world requires. This should occur, most importantly, in higher education:

Liberal education in our colleges and universities is, and should be, Socratic, committed to the activation of each student’s independent mind and to the production of a community that can genuinely reason together about a problem, not simply trade claims and counterclaims. (19)

In the Athenian democracy that depended on public argument, Socrates’ “distinctive contribution” lay in “bring[ing] sustained unrelenting philosophical argument to bear on

---

31 The very language of “use” and “usefulness” indicates a central problem for the work that follows, as I wish both to propose Socrates’ relevance while also preventing the figure of Socrates from becoming domesticated by this assertion of relevance. The following sections of this Introduction will establish the approach I propose for dealing with this issue.

32 I focus here on *Cultivating Humanity* to the exclusion of other, longer work involving Socrates such as *The Fragility of Goodness* and *Therapy of Desire* not because I find these latter accounts insufficient – in fact, I find them more praiseworthy in some crucial respects – but because *Cultivating Humanity* comes in Nussbaum’s period of writings with a more explicit focus on contemporary political questions. I would acknowledge, however, that the two earlier works demonstrate a notable ambivalence about Socrates absent in *Cultivating Humanity*.

33 Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 25. Quotations in this paragraph come from this edition.
these issues of communal concern” (20). Integrating this feature in college curricula marks one crucial step toward perpetuating such inquiry and developing critically conscious citizens for liberal democracies today.\textsuperscript{34}

Her Socrates should persist, Nussbaum continues, not only for his example of logical inquiry but also because he might militate against the “enemies” of Socratic reason – conservatives and traditionalists on the one hand and “postmodernists” on the other – that threaten the open inquiry needed in a free society (37). Socrates’ “values,” Nussbaum argues, “are assailed by the left as well as the right”: on the left, critics of Socrates see his project as committed to a project of truth and reason that embodies a single set of values and threatens a kind of cultural imperialism (38); on the right, conservatives suspect Socrates will subvert traditional values (36). To both camps, Nussbaum asserts, “Socratic inquiry mandates pluralism” (33), and truly open and searching questioning will leave no belief untouched, including its own. Moreover, while the search for truth, Nussbaum argues, “is a human activity” and one subject to the conditions of a struggle for power, “this should not undermine the very project of pursuing truth and objectivity.” Socrates shows us how we might still inquire and how we must proceed, if we aspire to a better democratic life.\textsuperscript{35}

More than any other figure in the history of philosophy, Nussbaum asserts, Socrates gives an example of how to examine ourselves and conduct reasoned arguments with others. For one, Socrates shows the necessity of these practices to flourishing human life in

\textsuperscript{34} Here is Nussbaum: “The successful and stable self-realization of a democracy such as ours depends on our working as hard as possible to produce citizens who do examine tradition in the Socratic way” (27).

\textsuperscript{35} Without Socrates, democracy comes into peril, suggests Nussbaum: “In Reno, Nevada, and South Bend, Indiana, and Waltham, Massachusetts, as in ancient Athens, the unexamined life threatens the health of democratic freedoms, and the examined life produces vigor in the nation and freedom in the mind” (49).
general—without the questions of Socrates, Nussbaum reminds us, we live “passive lives” (23). More important, democracy requires more than “sluggish” citizens, and Socrates’ mode of inquiry promises a new critical wakefulness necessary for considering the claims of morality and justice. “This demand,” Nussbaum argues, “now begins to seem not an idly luxury in the midst of struggles for power, but an urgent practical necessity, if political deliberation is ever to have a dignity and consistency that make it more than a marketplace of competing interests, that make it a genuine search for the common good” (25). In other words, according to Nussbaum, we need Socrates for ourselves as well as for our institutions so that we might live well together.

Nussbaum’s project of advancing arguments on behalf of universal, liberal norms has met with constant criticism from all sides, yet her use of Socrates has some admirable features. For one, Nussbaum brings Socrates to bear on the dilemmas of modern political life in a way that insists on the relevance of Socrates. While Nussbaum underemphasizes the critical arguments Socrates might inspire against her own rather complacent liberalism, she nonetheless invokes Socrates despite his antagonistic relationship to Athenian democracy—and perhaps even because of it. Taken individually or collectively, we all fall in danger of becoming sluggish, of a kind of “deadness,” as Jonathan Lear calls it, that renders us

---

36 This marks an interesting tension in Nussbaum’s thought, since in *Fragility of Goodness* Nussbaum contrasted Socrates incipient scientism with the emotional claims of Alcibiades, thus suggesting that Socrates’ inquiry did not directly connect to human flourishing.

37 See, for example, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “The Hunger of Martha Nussbaum.” Harpham calls Nussbaum’s *Cultivating Humanity* “the most rigorously banal” of her books” (Harpham, “The Hunger of Martha Nussbaum,” 70).

38 Although I cannot be sure that Nussbaum wrote in this vein, one could say that Socrates’ questions have the potential to subvert any discourse, and while Nussbaum assures her readers that our most excellent principles will emerge with support, the deployment of Socrates cannot come without the possibility of subversion.

39 In Lear, *Open Minded*, 3. Lear also connects this to Socrates: “For Socrates, the unexamined life is not worth living; it is not a form of living, but a form of deadness. To live openly with the fundamental question is to
unresponsive to others and unable to adjust as the world changes around us; not only does
such deadness harm us as individuals, but it threatens our fragile collective life. Socrates,
Nussbaum asserts, can disturb our human, all too human tendencies toward lassitude and
blindness.

Yet despite the virtues of Nussbaum’s account, her “use” of Socrates also suggests a
danger that surfaces in any attempt to makes “something” of Socrates, including my own –
the danger of a kind of didacticism. By insisting that Socrates has a lesson for us, a set of
reasonable injunctions about a form of inquiry and its necessity for human flourishing,
Nussbaum makes Socrates exemplary and thus treats him didactically. We can think of this
danger in terms of the etymology of “exemplary.” “Exemplary” comes from the Latin word
“exemplum,” meaning a moralizing or illustrative story. In this sense, making Socrates
exemplary hazards reducing his provocations to lessons and his life to a morality play.
Declaring something exemplary and making it an example from which we can learn and
deduces lessons, Nussbaum threatens to contain Socrates to a list of conclusions, a bottom
line that discourages reflection or future interrogation. Through this containment,
Nussbaum elides dissonant voices while also domesticating Socrates, confining the figure of
Socrates to comforting moral categories and stifling all disturbing voices.

avoid assuming that there are any fixed answers which are already given. It is, above all, to avoid all forms of
‘knowingness” (4).

40 This danger along with the danger of presentism, discussed below, comes from suggestions in J. Peter
Euben’s essay, “The Uses of Classical History for Contemporary Themes,” 15. Their elaboration and
application is my own.

41 See the entry in the New Oxford American Dictionary.

42 This appears as deeply ironic in the case of Nussbaum given her use of Socrates as an exemplar of critical
reason. But she refuses to turn these critical powers on her own argument and especially on the institutions of
liberal education where she places Socrates.
Such an approach further endangers any work with Socrates in particular by threatening to close down the questions and interrogation which, like dialogue, would seem to make Socrates, well, Socrates. Reading Socrates as conveying some instruction, as a didactic approach similar to Nussbaum’s presupposes, runs contrary to Socrates’ declaration of ignorance and his rejection of being a teacher. Even more important, an insistence on drawing lessons and on Socrates’ possessing a “teaching” risks occluding another feature of Socrates – Socrates’ strange, inexplicable character. As I will argue more in Chapter 7, the most general characteristic of Socrates appears as a kind of strangeness – a condition marked by being placeless, unclassifiable, and even absurd. Socrates remains always shrouded in mystery. Moreover, and as Sarah Kofman has recently argued, our encounter with Socrates contains an element of fiction due to the lack of historical evidence for how Socrates lived and thought; Socrates’ mystery leaves us as creators of his character, birthing a multitude of Socrates, as we have seen, in the process. Didactism would rob Socrates of this uncertainty by imposing a lesson, a point, or a bottom line. Yet the figure of Socrates resists this.

In contrast to Nussbaum’s explicit use of Socrates to consider contemporary issues of liberal education and citizenship, Alexander Nehamas uses Socrates to elaborate what Nehamas calls “the art of living.” The art of living, for Nehamas, offers a different conception of

---

43 Approaches often begin with this presupposition and yet never defend it. For two examples of very different interpretations of Plato that both fall prey to this problem, see Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* and Gregory Vlastos, “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge.”

44 As Pierre Hadot puts it, “Socrates is *atopos*, meaning strange, extravagant, absurd, unclassifiable, disturbing” (Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 30). Chapter 7 explores the different meanings of *atopia* as a way of mapping the aspects of Socrates I trace in the subsequent chapter.

45 As Kofman puts it, articulating the crux of her argument in *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher*: “With Socrates, we cannot escape from fiction” (Kofman, *Socrates: Fiction of a Philosopher*, 1).

philosophy, one much needed as philosophy has strayed from its integral role in human life. Returning to Socrates allows us to reimagine philosophy as a way of life, not merely as a set of doctrines but as a path for our existence. We can live philosophically by pursuing our own ethical self-work in the mode of Socrates: asking questions of ourselves and others, seeking to live justly, remaining open to new truths and ways of life. Philosophy as the art of living demands the artistic creation of one’s character, requiring style and eccentricity in the work of constructing a self. “The study of philosophy as the art of living,” Nehamas asserts:

discloses our own ethical preferences and compels us to reveal part of ourselves. This personal type of philosophy reflects our own person, and it is personal in that additional sense as well. To study it is also to practice it. (6)

Nehamas thus brings Socrates into our lives in a very personal way: this Socrates does not merely speak to academic paradoxes and problems in the history of philosophy; rather, for Nehamas, Socrates speaks directly to us, urging us to a certain way of living with ourselves and with others. One who practices the art of living constructs her personality through “the investigation, the criticism, and the production of philosophical views. . . . The body of work that reflects on the philosophical life is the very content of the life it composes” (ibid.).

Rather than trying to find the right Socrates or constructing a coherent “Socratic philosophy” from his myriad images and inspirations, Nehamas focuses our attention on what Socrates might elicit. In this way Nehamas offers us a generative Socrates – Socrates not only initiated the art of living but he began it without prescribing its ends – the figure of Socrates possessed a strangeness in his own time that extends to ours. Socrates wrote nothing and we know little about his life. Yet the life of Socrates also appears “ready-made” (9) – it comes with a compelling purpose that makes us seek our own. Socrates thus provides “the most coherent and least explicable model of a philosophical life that we possess” (ibid.):

To imitate Socrates is therefore to create oneself, as Socrates did; but it is also to make oneself different from anyone else so far, and since that includes Socrates
himself, it is to make oneself different from Socrates as well. That is why he can function as the model for the individualist, aestheticist artists of living whose main purpose is to be like no one else, before them or after. (11)

What Nehamas calls Socratic irony ensures that this Socrates always generates new interpretations and forms of expression. Socrates presents both “an unprecedented type of person” and an “inexplicable” one (11), and his irony, according to Nehamas, “was a form of silence” (12): Socrates never indicated what he thought, he left his interlocutors to discern his motives, and he rejected imitation. For Nehamas, then, we cannot locate any actual or historical Socrates to buttress our arts of living; Nehamas recognizes that engaging Socrates will always constitutes a creative act. In other words, Socrates initiates the genre of philosophy as an art of living but without predestining it to a certain kind of expression. Not only may every age possess its Socrates – every human being might do so as well.47

Nehamas suggests, then, that Socrates persists precisely because he proves so generative. The art of living begins with a single self, but it also constantly spawns new and diverse responses. Yet these ways of life remain at the level of a single self: Nehamas deems the work of Socrates “essentially individualist” and Socrates’ “ultimate purpose,” Nehamas writes, “was his own improvement” (12). This does not mean that we can call Socrates an “egotist” or “oblivious to others”; rather, Socrates cared for himself without disregarding others: “one can be a good human being,” Nehamas asserts, “without devoting oneself to others” (ibid.). Thus Nehamas, when treating Foucault’s Socrates-inspired art of living, criticizes Foucault for making Socrates too oriented toward others when Foucault claims that Socrates “loved life, Athens, and the world and that he had devoted himself to the improvement of his fellow citizens” (14). For Nehamas, Socrates’ project “was more

47 In this sense Nehamas gives us a political Socrates despite himself. As I discuss in Chapter 2, Patrick Deneen elaborates the democratic implications of maintaining philosophy as a possibility open to all. See Deneen, Democratic Faith.
private,” beginning and ending as it did with himself, with caring for himself. This constituted Socrates’ activity – “politics was irrelevant to it” (164). Yet Nehamas’s Socrates can still evoke responses like Foucault’s – or Montaigne’s or Nietzsche’s – because he persists out of a need to continue the art of living he began.

I greatly admire Nehamas’s Socrates: Nehamas’s careful approach to Socrates and the thoughtfulness of his engagement, and Nehamas’s desire to open Socrates to many possible and fruitful encounters, including Nehamas’s own, impress me. As Nehamas admits in his introduction:

I slowly realized that I too tried to find in Socrates a model for my own approach to the things that are important to me. My own interest has turned from the study of the art of living to its practice; or, rather, I have come to realize that to study the art of living is to engage in one of its forms. (15)

In bringing his engagement with Socrates into his own life, connecting the work of thinking to the act of living, Nehamas both recognizes and emulates that gravity and beauty we find in Socrates when he says things like this to Glaucon in the Republic:

My dear Glaucon, we are engaged in a great struggle, a struggle greater than it seems. The issue is whether we shall become good or bad. And neither money, office, honor, nor poetry itself must be allowed to persuade us to neglect justice or any other virtue. (608b, 1212)  

Nehamas conveys in his work this deeply existential dimension of Socrates, one that has spoken directly to the souls of readers for millennia, and translates this Socrates to today. Socrates becomes a teacher who elicits but does not instruct, who calls us to our authentic selves as our ethical selves, leading us to new and nobler seas.

---

48 All citations to Plato’s dialogue refer to the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text (Duke, ed. for Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Cratylus, Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman or Slings, ed. for Republic or Burnet, ed. for the remaining dialogues) and the page number of the translations in Cooper, ed. Plato Complete Works unless otherwise indicated.
Nehamas’s account does all these things well with his Socrates, yet his argument also functions as a warning against a danger that seems to me exemplified by this Socrates and Nehamas’s treatment – the danger of a kind of romanticism.49 As in the paintings with which I began this introduction, Nehamas’s Socrates often seems to promise all sun-lit rooms and the gentle susurrus of friendly discourse. None of the sarcastic rhetoric or outrageous arguments occur here, no strange, ugly, barefooted man living an outlandish life.50 Nehamas’s irony does not include its biting, irritating variety – of which interlocutors like Callicles or Thrasyymachus accused him. The Socrates of I.F. Stone, a Socrates who stalks the streets and challenges the governing authorities, even to his detriment, seems elided by Nehamas’s Socrates of aesthetic self creation. Although Nehamas leaves the mystery of Socrates unsolved, his Socrates lacks a provocative side in the modern sense of the term: irritating and angering provocations that cause a strong, generally negative, reaction. The Socrates who earlier in the Republic has silenced Thrasyymachus, brow-beating him into friendship by Book V, does not exist in the cheery confines of this philosophic atelier of the self. Becoming too smitten with our Socrates, we can easily forget these other sides of his character.

The danger of such a romanticized account, it seems, lies in its creating a one-sided version of its object. I think that Nehamas avoids this by insisting on an elusive Socrates with undetermined content, yet I can also envision an unimpeachable and perfected Socrates following an appreciative account like Nehamas’s. Such a Socrates, free from all his grime

49 By “romanticism” I do not mean the arts and literature movement of the late 18th century but rather, more broadly, the tendency to describe something in unrealistic or idealized fashion, making it seem better or more appealing than it is.

50 Although Nehamas does see some deeply disturbing questions in Plato’s use of Socrates, he leaves these observations behind in his own account. Yet in doing so, I want to suggest, we lose the disturbing side of the figure of Socrates as well, and risk romanticization.
and spice, speaks in a single voice. And yet this would do violence to the many “Socrateses” with which I began. Providing a truth about Socrates as teaching the art of living, Nehamas threatens the dialogic nature of our every encounter with Socrates as well as the dialogic nature of the figure of Socrates as we encounter its many variations. At one level, we meet Socrates in the midst of conversation, defending his own opinions or interrogating another’s (or even sometimes his own). Socrates’ dialogues occur within a field of polarities, much like Greek tragedy, and this resists any idealized appropriation of him. At another level, Socrates exists as dialogue; he comes instantiated through multiple voices just as he proceeds through dialogue in Plato’s depictions. While finding Socrates exemplary and admirable has its place, such an approach, I believe, must also acknowledge the dangers of making this Socrates monological; any treatment risks reducing Socrates to a monotony and thus eliding the dissonance that would seem to accompany every harmony, a “carnivalesque” complement to Nehamas’s Socrates of the drawing room.

***

As a counterpoint to Nussbaum and Nehamas’s “Socrateses,” I want to turn to the recent image of Socrates as a citizen in Dana Villa’s *Socratic Citizenship*. Whereas Nussbaum’s Socrates points to the educational value of Socrates’ practice of philosophy and Nehamas’s Socrates illuminates philosophy as an art of living, Villa’s Socrates models “philosophical

---

51 Viewed from a different direction, Socratic dialogue, as the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, “is counterposed to official monologism, which pretends to possess a ready-made truth” (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 110). Quoted in James Zappen, “Bakhtin’s Socrates,” 71. Italics in the original.

52 On the “carnivalesque,” Bakhtin explains later: “The carnivalistic base of the Socratic dialogue, despite its very complicated form and philosophical depth, is beyond any doubt. Folk-carnival ‘debates’ between life and death, darkness and light, winter and summer, etc., permeated with the pathos of change and the joyful relativity of all things, debates which did not permit thought to stop and congeal in one-sided seriousness or in a stupid fetish for definition or singleness of meaning – all this lay at the base of the original core of the genre” (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 132).

53 References in the following paragraphs will refer to this text.
citizenship.” Villa begins with a concern about the state of citizenship, arguing that Socrates provides a much-needed antidote to our current complacency about good citizenship.

Citizenship today, according to Villa, suffers from an “engagement or nothing” dilemma: either one adopts a communitarian stance of total engagement or one suffers accusations of being an apolitical quietist. “It is my contention,” Villa writes, “that Socrates invented a form of philosophical or dissident citizenship which puts these well-worn nostrums in doubt” (xi).

For Villa, Socrates challenges this dilemma by presenting “a radically new articulation of the relation between individual moral consciousness, political authority, and one’s fellow citizens” (1). Introducing a form of critical individualism as well as “intellectual sobriety” as new critical standards for justice and civic obligation, Villa’s Socrates creates a “dissident citizenship” – “essentially critical yet not fundamentally anti-democratic” (5). Villa’s Socrates thus not only generates but also models a kind of citizenship required for successful political life in the twenty-first century.

In other words, Socrates has meaning for Villa because he speaks to a need in theories of citizenship. Socrates’ mode of interrogating his fellow citizens, what scholars call his “elenchus,” does not offer a method pursued for the positive results it yields but rather a negative practice: “Socratic philosophy teaches the art of estrangement” (15), meaning that Socrates’ questioning distances himself and those who listen to him from the accepted world around them, alienating them from the “dogmatism . . . woven in the very fabric of our moral being” (79). Thus the elenchus, says Villa, paraphrasing Plato’s Apology,

Reveals the confident claims of the “moral experts” as so many baseless illusions, but without the comfort of an alternative set of “moral facts.” In these matters – the most important for human beings – real wisdom is, paradoxically, “the property of God,” not man. No human being can claim to be wise when it comes to virtue. (18)
In ancient Athens, the work of the elenchus opposed conventional doctrines such as those embodied in what Villa calls the “aesthetic monumentalism” of Pericles’ funeral oration.

Responding to these civic dogmas, Socrates’ “essential task,” Villa argues:

is to get his fellow Athenians to entertain the possibility that the demands of morality may, in fact, run counter to the established norms of the society and its conception of virtuous citizenship. If Socrates is a “connected critic” who feeds on the “shared meanings” of the community, he is a peculiarly heretical one. (3)

Socrates’ heresy lies, for Villa, in opposing the self-glorying of Athens evident in Pericles’ Funeral Oration; in opposition to this, Socrates maintained questioning as an end in itself and thereby taught “the art of estrangement,” the practice of critical distancing from the conventions of dominant culture at all times that Villa finds most needful today.54

Making Socrates into an exemplary citizen would seem to risk falling into the same traps as Nussbaum and Nehamas. But Villa’s intensely critical conception of Socrates militates against this: Villa’s Socrates exists only for the sake of critique, and thus resists attempts to conform him to any stable position. By virtue of being critical to his core, Villa’s Socrates defies the exemplarity of a didactic appropriation of Socrates – one must judge for oneself always – while also refusing the cheery stability of a romanticized version. Always questioning and always unsettling, this Socrates exhibits the intellectual hectoring that we can easily imagine I.F. Stone admiring in spite of himself; as Villa puts it, Socrates demonstrates “ceaseless renewal and provocation” (58), a model muckraker avant la lettre. Exemplifying a “minimal moral life,” Socrates reminds us that any commitment, whether to a meaningful common good or a noble form of life, can lead us to unjust acts. Purging people of harmful, potentially unjust, opinions, practicing what Villa calls “dissolvent” rationality, constitutes

54 Villa’s insistence that Socrates rejects the need for glory and reputation comes as ironic considering the role Socrates’ reputation played in his trial, conviction, and execution. I discuss these issues of reputation more in Chapter 6.
Socrates’ lifelong pursuit – thus “the gadfly’s work is never done” (58; 3). Villa turns this Socrates back against some of the subsequent images of Socrates I mentioned earlier, using this Socrates to criticize a series of modern thinkers – J.S. Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, Hannah Arendt, and Leo Strauss – for “betraying” Socrates and succumbing to their fears that “the mass” could never reason well or effectively. As Villa asserts to the contrary:

We remain prisoners in the cave – part of a “mass” – only so long as we lazily allow the frescoes on the wall [Nietzsche’s “great frescoes of stupidity”] to define who we are as political and moral beings. The moment we begin to think, to question the moral adequacy of socially available creeds and ideologies, we gradually slip the bonds that Plato assumed would always hold the vast majority of humankind captive. (304)

Thus according to Villa, Socrates holds a democratic promise that every citizen could emulate – although emulate critically, given that criticism forms the essence of Villa’s Socrates. The result of more thoughtful citizens seems deeply needful; we need only practice Socratic “intellectual hygiene” (xii) and we can reclaim citizenship from its detractors and revitalize its apathetic spectators.

For Villa, Socrates persists because of his timeless example of integrity and critical engagement; this Socrates offers something to us, a lesson in critical citizenship, matched by no other figure in history. According to Villa, Socrates invented individual conscience – a “genuine politics of conscience” (56) – and moral integrity – a “disillusioned and hence more authentically moral brand of citizenship” (58). As both originator and purveyor of critical citizenship, then, this Socrates seems assured a place in all political societies – “all polities are in need of a gadfly,” Villa asserts (299) – but even more so today: democracies, characterized by “a high degree of energy and common purpose,” require Villa’s Socrates because “where activity is the norm, skepticism and thinking about what one is doing are obviously the exception” (300). Thus this Socrates’ ultimate task, to bring citizens to “think what they are doing” entails not political withdrawal but a new kind of activism. Reading Socrates’
declaration in the *Gorgias* that he possesses the “true political art,” Villa sees Socrates as complementing democratic life – Socrates’ political art attempts to “de-aestheticize the public realm . . . by making care for the city something distinct from and secondary to the (thoughtful) care for one’s soul” (39). Socrates’ example and his continuing influence come intertwined in his critical and questioning figure; as Villa puts it: “By transforming the idea of moral subjectivity . . . Socrates also transformed the idea of citizenship. Twenty-four hundred years later, we have yet to catch up with the revolution in citizenship in the great ironist’s thought and practice” (309).

Villa’s Socrates offers a compelling example of a political Socrates. This Socrates becomes an ideal citizen for citizens of today’s liberal democracies, but one that resists the dangers of overly didactic or romantic visions of Socrates that often haunt any argument about exemplarity. Villa’s Socrates represents moral integrity at a time when evil has become banal and critical questioning when mass culture seems to have stupefied us all into unthinking patterns of consumption. In this vein, the antagonism of Villa’s Socrates toward a monumental self-aggrandizing polity especially resonates in today’s era of National Security Strategies and the Department of Homeland Security.55 If Nussbaum developed a Socrates useful for political life and Nehamas accented the creative and expressive side of Socrates, Villa’s Socrates complements this by showing how developing one’s own life entails critically evaluation of surrounding society; Villa gives us a democratic politics with his Socrates, unimpaired by Nussbaum’s liberal institutions.

Villa’s provocative and political Socrates adds a new contribution absent from Nehamas’s account and one which extends Nussbaum’s Socrates of the university. Yet like Nehamas, however, I believe that Villa’s Socrates highlights another danger attending such a

---

55 Jason Frank points this out in his view of Villa: “Proximity, Power, and the Practice of Citizenship,” 2.
“use” of Socrates – the danger of presentism. In making citizenship “Socratic,” Villa brings contemporary categories of understanding to ancient texts without sufficiently interrogating these categories or allowing these texts to resist the questions he brings. Absent such an approach, a mirror of present life often appears in encounters with the old and strange and the activity of “interpretation” can become a kind of narcissism.56 The presentist Socrates qua citizen risks ignoring the vast differences between ourselves and the figure of Socrates we seek to understand, seeing simulacra where none exists. More generally, Villa’s presentist appropriation risks blindness to the radical differences of other times, cultures, and modes of thought in an embrace of the new, threatening to create an effectively homogenous past, present, and future.

Citizens of the twenty-first century might have difficulty imagining democratic Athens. The Greek word “demokratia” means – and meant – “people power”: “demos” being the word for people and “kratos” that for power – and in the fourth and fifth centuries BCE, the power of the demos created a public, open politics where the citizenry as a whole debated and decided all important political matters.57 Through formal institutions,

---

56 Much of the language in this paragraph comes from J. Peter Euben, *Platonic Noise*, 7.

57 This language comes from Josiah Ober, “What Democracy Meant to the Athenians,” 22. In what follows I treat the fourth and fifth century BCE as one of relatively continuous democratic culture, following the arguments of Josiah Ober’s in *Mass and Elite* and *Political Dissent*, both of which I take as foremost within the classics literature and leave unquestioned. Ober notes the relative stability of the period ca. 400 – 322, which accounts for most of Plato’s lifetime (born ca. 427, died ca. 347), and this is the period on which I base most of my historical observations. Of course, the political events preceding and leading up to the death of Socrates were not exactly stable: the beginning of the Peloponnesian War in 431, the oligarchic revolution of the Four Hundred in 411, the restoration of democracy in 410, the oligarchic revolution of The Thirty imposed by Sparta in 404, and the restoration of Democracy in 403. But as Ober has argued most recently in *Democracy and Knowledge*, if one takes the period from roughly 500 – beginning with Kleisthenes and the democratic uprising in 508 – until roughly 300 – ending in 322 and Athens’ defeat in the Lamian war – democracy remained continuous. When crises arose, such as oligarchic rebellions, the democracy responded by developing better institutions. Thus I believe one can safely assert some continuous notion of democratic culture as a backdrop for Plato's dialogues; work by Euben, Saxonhouse, Monoson, and Wallach has made similar moves. Given this and Ober’s work and given that the arguments here rest on claims about the character of Socrates in the dialogues and how we might understand him given a rough sketch of the context, the slight changes that occurred across the time period are less significant.
rhetoric and leadership, citizen identity, and civic education Athenians created a democratic polity that out-performed its rivals, promoted agreement while encouraging contestation, and sustained decision-making procedures resulting in both timely and effective policy formation and implementation. While Athens certainly had its limits – the disenfranchisement of women, foreigners, and slaves; its militarism and imperialism; its insistent claims to cultural superiority – Athens nonetheless practiced democracy in more than name and thus in radically different ways from today.

Citizenship today – what Judith Shklar, quoted by Villa, calls most central to politics – does not directly resemble citizenship in Athens. For one, living a quiet life in ancient Athens did not entail quietism given the pervasiveness of politics at every level of society: the system of Athenian democracy required the sharing of information and common concern, it necessitated political involvement at multiple levels ranging from neighborhoods to nation, and its civic rituals and customs had intrinsic political functions. Tocqueville’s concern about withdrawn individualism would never have arisen in ancient Athens; citizenship did not exist as one possible pursuit but as an unquestionable way of life. As Martin Ostwald describes the Athenian citizen: “No act of his can make him an active member of the community: the degree to which he is a citizen is not determined by himself, but by the expectations of the community of which he is a part in terms of the contributions

58 Here I draw on discussion in Ober, “What the Ancient Greeks Can Tell Us About Democracy,” 73.


60 For an account of Athenian participation, see R.K. Sinclair, Democracy and Participation in Athens. For a more formal account of Athenian institutions, see Josiah Ober, Democracy and Knowledge. On cultural institutions, see Robin Osborne and Simon Goldhill, eds., Performance culture and Athenian democracy.

61 Although this did not exclude quietism altogether. See L.B. Carter, The Quiet Athenian.
he can make to its functioning.”Moreover, citizenship depended on a “strong principle of equality”: while Athens limited citizens to Athenian-born males, these males had equal participation rights. As Ian Morris reminds us, wealth had justified dominance over subjects in many ancient states, but the Greeks substituted for it birth within a broad male citizen body, creating, perhaps for the first time in history, a new level of inclusiveness and thus broader possibilities for participation and leadership. This baseline of equality spread power across the body of citizens; ordinary people mattered in Athenian democracy in a way they do not today.

Villa’s example warns against any easy slide from ancient Athens to the twenty-first century, eliding differences both resistant and provocative to our accounts. The way of life in democratic Athens resists thinking of Socrates in entirely individualist terms: Socrates existed, he lived and acted, in a world of extensive connections where life took place in common physical and imaginative spaces structured by myth, ideology, and institutions. Socrates worked within these spaces and through the terms of discourse around him. As Jean-Pierre Vernant has shown, for example, philosophy’s very existence came bound with the development of the polis: “it was at the political level that Reason was first expressed, established, and shaped in Greece,” Vernant writes: “Social experience could become the object of pragmatic thought for the Greeks because in the city-state it lent itself to public


64 Although I do not mean to take a completely deterministic approach to Socrates, I would emphasize his indebtedness to Athenian democracy as scholars have before me. Socrates and Plato also innovated and created new forms of discourse and philosophic practice by combining and thus transfiguring the ways that came before them. See, on this first point, S. Sara Monoson, Plato’s Democratic Entanglements and, on the second point, Andrea Nightingale, Genre in Dialogue.
debate.” Socrates lived in and through the polis; abstracting him from this situation robs Socrates of important layers of his figure’s significance.65

***

Nussbaum, Nehamas, and Villa’s work helps to map my path for what will follow while also warning of the perils we may encounter in engaging Socrates. With these approaches in hand, then, let me reformulate the questions I asked earlier, the questions that the many images of Socrates elicited and that the challenges to the politics of Socrates gave heightened urgency. First, can we approach Socrates and ask what he might mean while remaining wary about how our questions could confine any apparent responses we receive? In other words, can we balance our desires to use Socrates, for Socrates to “get us somewhere,” with the dangers and blindness of what I have called presentism? Second, can we try to make sense of Socrates while also listening to his multiple voices and thus resisting tendencies to find in Socrates a comforting monotony? Can we hold these often dissonant voices in tension and still feel as if the work of engaging Socrates is worthwhile? Third, can we enlist Socrates, can

65 On the other hand, recognizing the differences between Socrates’ time and our own could also provoke new ways of imagining Socrates. By placing Socrates within the category of citizenship, Villa forgoes the potential of intentional anachronism, which could function to create juxtapositions and combinations never previously imaginable. Hermeneutic dialogue, in line with the work of H.G. Gadamer, introduces the process of fusing historically distinct horizons, but these horizons can also produce intellectual fission by igniting startling contrasts. Such contrasts languish not in irrelevance but illuminate new ways of thinking, showing intense relevance in a literal sense by “raising up” new objects to our concern, making us see what we had previously discounted or failed to acknowledge. Recognizing the differences between our time and another (i.e. resisting presentism) could force us to change what we view as relevant by elevating novel phenomena to our attention, creating newly relevant facts and questions. Thus while viewing Socrates through the lenses of democratic Athens, I would also propose that we might confront the radicalness of Socrates’ lifelong commitment to inquiry without the “security” or “stability” – our society’s “keywords” – of a “steady job” or a “strong family.” We might see provocative promise in Socrates’ asking questions not just of university students or “concerned citizens,” but of everyone: men and women, free and slave, young and old, citizen and foreigner. In these terms, Socrates could exceed the category of citizenship and force a complete reimagining of what we mean by living well together. Thus rather than import Socrates to our present categories or confine him within his own we might take his challenge as demanding a completely new social organization – such as a “democracy to come,” as Derrida puts it – and not a negotiation of difference or a translation between different cultures and civilizations. As I will argue in what follows, the disturbing and displacing aspects of Socrates promise exactly this. Yet by smoothing over the distance between the present and the past while privileging the new, presentism threatens both of the possibilities – through dialogue or through anachronism – that historical difference can generate.
we bring him to bear on contemporary life, while also recognizing the irony involved in such
encounters? Can we maintain the mystery that surrounds all figurations of Socrates as well as
the irony of our own aspirations to make what will always exceed our attempts to do so?

IV.

I began with a series of images and I would like to end with another one. My hope is that
this image might give us a way of imagining strategies of engagement to mitigate the dangers
I examined in Section II. These strategies will then become central to the arguments in the
following chapters as I continue the work begun by Nussbaum, Nehamas, and Villa in
investigating the questions above. The image comes from a sculpture by Constantin
Brancusi.

“Socrates” is made of oak and limestone. He measures 43 ¾ by 11 3/8 by 14 ½ inches standing on
an oak footing measuring 7 ½ by 9 ¾ by 10 5/8 inches (overall 51 ¼ inches high) atop a limestone
cylinder, 11 7/8 inches high. From one angle, the carved wood shows a series of bulbous shapes:
three large spheres joined on one side with a narrowed, telescoped leg connecting to a base
beneath them. In the middle of the third large sphere from the top, Brancusi has cut a hole. Thus
the sculpture seems to resemble a disproportionately large head with an equally large mouth –
perhaps a nod to Socrates’ brainy garrulity – and a narrow pair of legs, making the figure
appear avian, like a heron poised and circumspect. We encounter a visibly cerebral and
loquacious Socrates, perched on earth but perhaps in danger of floating away with his inflated
 cranium – like the Socrates of Aristophanes’ *Clouds* who measures gnats’ legs from a hot air balloon.

---

66 The specific measurements and materials come from the description of “Socrates” in the Museum of
Modern Art’s online catalog:
http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A738&page_number=11
Yet from another angle, the sculpture appears dramatically different. What appeared from one perspective like two large orbs on top reveal themselves as hollowed, much like what once appeared as a mouth, which disappears from view. Now the head has a doughnut hole – an enlarged ear, perhaps, but also a potential symbol of Socrates’ ignorance: an empty yet receptive (i.e. open) mind. From this angle the sculpture also appears slightly inclined toward the ground, as if bending to listen to an interlocutor or from the effects of long days standing in the marketplace. This aspect of “Socrates” has generosity that the other aspect’s stark lines lack, giving us a hunch instead of rigidity, an open ear rather than a balloon-like head.

One could multiply the ways of looking at Brancusi’s sculpture, taking different perspectives and overlapping aspects that show partial openings, contrasting angles, and different shadows. “Socrates” invites different approaches, and the piece speaks in different voices. As Michael Kimmelman comments:

[“Socrates”] is a top-heavy gag, all brain, no body, except for a single spindly leg, like a stork’s. Made of roughly carved wood, the sculpture has a bulbous head with a gaping hole in it, and another smaller sphere below that, for its yawning mouth. . . . It’s earthy and irreverent, magnificently so, and not highfalutin’.

On the one hand, “Socrates” conjures an entire tradition of earnest philosophy and the hardly earthy images of Socrates calmly taking the hemlock or discoursing with his disciples. Brancusi’s title and his venerable materials – oak and limestone – connote this. Yet one could also find in the sculpture’s whimsy, its off-kilter bent and protuberances (recall Socrates’ famous pot-belly – despite always going hungry), other voices: Kimmelman’s earthy irreverence or a frank humility. Oak and stone could also comically invert Socrates’

---

claim in the *Apology* that he “is not made of oak and stone.” Or it could simply seem strange.

In the work that follows I want to take up Brancusi’s “Socrates” as a guide for how to approach the many images of Socrates. For one, “Socrates” reminds us of the need for movement in our readings and interpretations. Just as we would pace around the sculpture, examining it from multiple angles and vantage points, so too we must try to come to terms with Socrates from as many perspectives as possible, recognizing that one can neither exhaust every angle nor wholly accept one over another. In this way “Socrates” also shows that every approach has a limited perspective; with every insight comes a degree of blindness. This encourages a kind of traveling as both a metaphor and as a practice, making possible “knowledge that is necessarily partial and contingent yet constitutive of both self-understanding and understanding of others.” To switch metaphors and as Bakhtin reminded us, Socrates comes to us as multiple voices, none of which must silence the other; we must train ourselves to listen to all at once, or to listen and listen again, following one voice and then another, one layer of argument and then another. While wrong interpretations certainly exist – one could imagine the critic who mistakes “Socrates” for a fountain – I want to privilege polyphony over a definitive reading, complexity over reductionism.

---

68 *Apology* 34d. I thank David McIvor for this connection.

69 As noted above (page 6, n. 17), in this dissertation I limit my discussion to Plato’s work, meaning that “Socrates” in what follows refers to the Socrates of Plato’s dialogues. Moreover, I have taken a limited number of angles even within Plato’s dialogues by focusing on those metaphors made salient both in terms of the dialogues themselves – i.e. that these metaphors structure the dialogues in which they appear in important ways – and in terms of their subsequent lives in the history of discussions of Socrates. I do not claim to have exhausted every interpretation of Socrates in the light of Plato’s dialogues, but I proceed with these aspects under the assumption that they have had the most influence in subsequent political theory.

70 Roxanne L. Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore*, 45.
The need for movement and repeated engagement from different angles or bringing
different ways of looking and listening – for walking around “Socrates,” as it were – also
entails recognizing where we stand at any moment. We might see in Socrates an exemplar
when we lack direction in our lives or as a comic spectacle when seriousness enshrouds our
doings. In other words, the position from which we examine “Socrates” alters what we see.
Thus “Socrates” suggests a different approach to the work of translating — literally, of
carrying over or of bringing across from the interpreted to our own lives — that we gain in
the process. Every approach comes from somewhere and must negotiate those differences.\(^71\)

In the case of Socrates, we saw how presentism threatened differences that could
work generatively if attended — whether in initiating a dialogue of understanding à la
Gadamer or facilitating provocative contrast and startling juxtaposition.\(^72\) Attending our own
position as we engage Socrates also hearkens back to Nehamas’s Socrates and the personal
demands this figure makes on us. We each must respond to Socrates from our very selves;
the act of engagement necessarily possesses a deeply personal dimension while also
possessing a political valence — Socrates lived, undeniably, an intensely political life.

Moreover, I think that Brancusi’s “Socrates” adds a degree of irony to our attempts
to make sense of it — one that we should also take up as we engage Socrates. The sculpture
exudes multiple meanings, none of which can ultimately “solve it” — “Socrates” does not
offer a crossword puzzle but rather elicits responses, responses that continue to build on
each other. Yet in approaching “Socrates” we wish for some certainty and some meaning.

\(^71\) Roxanne Euben puts this in terms of translation, which while not a perfect analogue, does offer a helpful
parallel: “In contrast to the translator who presumes to float, tabula rasa, above a linear process culminating in
the faithful and complete reproduction of the original in a new language, the translator is here understood to be
dialogically implicated in a jagged and perpetually unfinished endeavor constrained by power inequalities and
social institutions, characterized as much by moments of incomprehension as illumination, and where the
translator, translated, and language of translation are transformed in the process” (Ibid., 44).

This wish for a defined “Socrates” combined with the reality of its innumerable meanings calls for irony – although not “Socratic irony”\(^73\) – in our approach: we must seek what will always elude us, but in so seeking we imagine an end to the search – all the while still knowing the quest will never find completion. Not coincidentally, I think, we could say that this kind of irony began with Socrates. When Socrates asks, “What is involved in becoming truly human?” Socrates questions what would be the highest development of ourselves. Yet, as Jonathan Lear explains,

> Socrates recognizes that living with these questions – genuinely living with these questions as continually renewed questions – is a lifetime task. It is the essence of Socratic irony that the question is a genuine question, which Socrates himself shares. From Socrates’ point of view, if he thought he had the answer and only feigned ignorance, he would in fact have already given up on the project of becoming human. For living with the question is of the essence of becoming (being) human.\(^74\)

As Lear adds, we hear the call of Socrates’ question precisely because it resonates with our own searching – as does his declared ignorance. Again, Brancusi’s “Socrates” illustrates this: we cannot know what this sculpture ultimately means, for it has no ultimate meaning. Yet we want it to mean something – this incites our questions in the first place. An ironic response acknowledges this dilemma and attempts to live within its tensions. If indeed “his entire life was irony,” Socrates would seem to offer the perfect site for the kind of work I am describing.

Finally, by beginning with Brancusi’s “Socrates” I mean to indicate a particular way of approaching Socrates (and Plato) that differs from many well-established methods. In proposing Brancusi’s “Socrates” as a legitimate site for exploring the meanings of

\(^{73}\) Here I use irony in the sense Lear has derived from Kierkegaard as a way of describing the distance between aspiration and reality. While Kierkegaard locates this sense of irony in the figure of Socrates, I am less certain. In Chapter 5 I deal more with what I find “ironic” about Socrates and his practice of philosophy.

\(^{74}\) Jonathan Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, 75.
“Socrates,” I presuppose that we lack any definitive way of finding a “real” or “historical” Socrates that might allow us to judge between a right and wrong “Socrates” or a true and false “Socrates.”75 Instead, I assume that we can approach the images of “Socrates” through the works of Plato, and I take it that Plato’s work offers the most expansive and compelling vision of Socrates as well as the most influential for today’s images of Socrates.76 Thus while scholars have often chosen either to define “Socratic” and “Platonic” dialogues within the Platonic corpus, taking the “Socratic” as signifying the historical Socrates (or something approximate to that) and the “Platonic” as advancing a Platonic doctrine perhaps inspired by Socrates but meant as Plato’s freestanding philosophy,77 I consider Plato’s writings as responses to the figure of Socrates and workings-through of Socrates’ character and philosophical project.78 Here I build on the work of other scholars who have advanced a project of reading the entirety of Plato’s work not so much as a cohesive doctrine but as a set of reflections on and engagements with the philosophical and political problems of his time.79 These readings emphasize Plato’s dialogues as dialogues and thus offer “dramatic”

75 To be clear, I do not advance any argument about the historical Socrates. Instead, I focus solely on the Socrates of Plato’s dialogues, for the reasons elaborated above (page 6, n. 17 and page 31, n. 61). The question of the “historical Socrates” has created its own literature, one which I do not cover here. For a useful introduction to the issues, see C.C.W. Taylor, *Socrates: A Very Short Introduction*. For an approach akin to mine, see John Wallach, *The Platonic Political Art*, as well as for arguments about the futility of the question for a “historical Socrates” and citations to the literature involved.

76 By omitting the works of Aristophanes and Xenophon – Socrates’ other two contemporaries who described him – I do somewhat limit the range of “Socrateses” available to me. I give some reasons for doing so in note 17 above. I would add that I believe Aristophanes and Xenophon would only augment the many voices I detail in the following chapters rather than controvert them, thus supplementing Socrates’ strangeness rather than solving it.

77 Vlastos’s *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* offers the most influential arguments in this vein.

78 This places my project in the line of what Danielle Allen recently dubbed the “Socratic approach” as opposed to the “Platonic approach.” I agree with many of these latter approaches and cite them in what follows as in agreement with my argument. See Allen, “Platonic Quandaries.”

79 Debra Nails has called these two sides the “analytical” (that has modern origins in Gregory Vlastos’s approach) and the “literary-contextual” (that traces its doyen as Hans-Georg Gadamer). See Nails, “Socrates.”
readings of them. Socrates remains the protagonist when Plato finds his character compelling for the situation, but ultimately Plato writes as author and Socrates thus acts as character. Thus when I write “Socrates” I have no intention of denoting a historical figure but rather a character that began in Plato but has come to signify much more than Plato may have intended.

While I cannot avoid setting forth “my Socrates,” I do so while seeking multiplicity and ambiguities rather than “unity” or “coherence” in Plato. I think that such an approach better approximates the different genres that Plato appropriated in creating his dialogues, an argument advanced well by many other scholars. Tragedy, comedy, and the “Socratic dialogue” that emerged after Socrates’ death presented not doctrines but “tensions and ambiguities,” complex and dialogic truths that demanded response and evaluation from their audiences. Thus Plato’s dialogues require our active engagement while also resisting being formulated – “etherized upon a table” – into doctrine. Instead, the work of traveling, translation, and irony that I described following from Brancusi’s “Socrates” seems necessary.

80 Michael Frede describes this well in “Plato and the Dialogue Form.”

81 As emphasized and well-supported by Ruby Blondell in The Play of Character in Plato’s Dialogues.

82 This last sentence also indicates my intentions to treat Plato’s text as governed less by intentions than by the life of the text as an artifact. This does not mean we ignore entirely what Plato could have meant, but it does mean that the cultural and political context – both in Plato’s time and in our own – plays a significant role in giving the text meaning. For more on my approach as well as some warnings about it, see Alexander Nehamas, “Writer, Text, Work, Author.”

83 “My Socrates” will become clearer in what follows. This Socrates runs against the pursuit of unity in coherence in such studies as Paul Shorey’s The Unity of Plato’s Thought or Catherine Zuckert’s recent Plato’s Philosophers: On the Coherence of the Dialogues.

84 See, for example, J. Peter Euben, The Tragedy of Political Theory; Andrea Nightingale, Genres in Dialogue; Charles Kahn, Plato and the Socratic Dialogue; and Diskin Clay, Platonic Questions: Dialogues with the Silent Philosopher.

85 On “tensions and ambiguities” see Vernant and Vidal Naquet, Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece, 29 – 48. On dialogic truths, see Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 106 - 111 as well as Euben, “Democracy and Political Theory: Reading Plato’s Gorgias” and Chapter 5 below.
Both the “Socrates” of Brancusi and the “Socrates” of Plato elicit many responses while shrouding any final significance in mystery.

Last, while Brancusi’s “Socrates” suggests that I mean to treat Plato’s dialogues as superb and profound works of art (which indeed I do), I do not mean to invoke Brancusi as any indication of a purely aesthetic approach to Plato. Not only would aestheticizing Plato result in the same kind of romanticism I discussed earlier, but it would also ignore the degree of Plato’s political involvement in democratic Athens and the concomitant necessity of reading his dialogues in this context (along with many other contexts) and thus as political works. As Josiah Ober has argued, Plato participated in a tradition of democratic criticism made possible by the conditions of democracy yet also deeply critical of this democratic culture.86 And for Plato, as S. Sara Monoson reminds us, this critique came out of deep ambivalence: “a searching consideration of the possibilities raised by some democratic ideals and institutions . . . alongside severe criticisms of democratic life and politics.”87 We cannot simply extricate “Socrates” from his deployment in this very political atmosphere – yet I will also argue that this context does not foreclose any negotiation of the differences between the voices of Socrates and the authorial intentions of Plato.

V.

The rest of this work proceeds as follows. In Chapter 1, I further delineate questions about Socrates by “reading Socrates out of the Republic.” With this phrase, I mean two things: first, that many approaches to Socrates read him in the terms of the Republic, and that this tends to

86 As Ober puts it: “the Western tradition of formal political theorizing originated in the work of an informal, intellectual, and aristocratic community of Athenian readers and writers. . . . In an atmosphere of profound disillusionment with practical attempts to establish a non-democratic government at Athens, the elite Athenian critics of popular rule set themselves the arduous task of reinventing political dissent” (Josiah Ober, Political Dissent in Democratic Athens, 5).

87 S. Sara Monoson, Plato’s Democratic Entanglements, 3.
determine the figure of Socrates in some predictable ways: as founder of the kallipolis, an apolitical and anti-democratic utopia; as an abstracted philosopher unconcerned with although threatened by political life; and as Plato’s philosophic hero and an exemplar that Plato wished all his “good readers” to emulate. This reading has some truth but only partly — another sense of “reading Socrates out of the Republic” opposes this first sense. In the second vein, many approaches to Socrates completely ignore him in the Republic and prefer to focus on the elenchic or aporetic Socrates of other dialogues. The Republic becomes Plato’s territory and Socrates in the Republic his mouthpiece. This effects a strong separation between Socrates and Plato.

In the first chapter I argue that the Republic neither solves Socrates in the first sense nor elides him in the second. Instead, the Republic develops what we could call the problematic of locating Socrates. In the action of the dialogue, Socrates appears in terms of the founder, the philosopher, and the hero, but never identical to them. The Republic in this way raises locating the identity of Socrates to our attention as a problem: we cannot place Socrates in terms of the Republic yet its terms also serve to frame questions about his character. The Republic, then, on my argument, frames the chapters that follow by showing how Socrates both advances and counters the dominant tropes of Athens, and how we can read Socrates through these lenses while never fully containing his multifaceted figure.

In the next five chapters I develop different aspects of Socrates’ character by focusing on dialogues where Socrates appears identified by a striking metaphor. In the Meno, Meno calls Socrates a “stingray,” a title to which Socrates agrees. The stingray signifies many familiar aspects of Socrates such as his elenchic approach and the perplexities to which he subjects his interlocutors. But the stingray also has strange resonances in Athenian political culture and its activities in the dialogue raise questions about the gains and harms produced
by the “sting of philosophy.” Thus the *Meno* treats Socrates as a kind of educator but a distinct one, and the dialogue depicts Socrates’ practice of philosophy in action without specifying a particular outcome.

The *Symposium* shows the erotic dimensions of Socrates’ practice of philosophy. In this dialogue Socrates appears as an *erōtikos* and identifies himself as a “master of erotics.” I argue that the dialogue gives us at least seven different reflections on the consequences of the erotic practice of philosophy – and seven different images of Socrates’ ‘erotic publics.’ The *Symposium* thus also hints at the associational aspect of Socrates’ philosophy. Whereas the stingray of the *Meno* seemed limited to singular encounters, in the *Symposium*, Socrates appears always in search of a web of interlocutors. Here the language of the *sunousia*, an Athenian educational institution that Socrates subverts and transforms, appears to provide a way of imagining the beneficial effects of association with Socrates. Yet Alcibiades’ entrance and example also unsettles this.

Whereas the *Meno* and the *Symposium* seem to hold little evidence for any salutary consequences from Socrates’ practice of philosophy, the *Theaetetus* sets out yet another compelling image for Socrates’ activity, and one that seems to promise good results. In the dialogue, Socrates describes himself as a midwife, and the dialogue elaborates this strange metaphor through its conversation: we witness Socrates midwifing Theaetetus, a young and promising philosopher, by eliciting his opinions, testing them, and proceeding through successive inquiries. Thus the *Theaetetus* evidences a different side to Socrates’ practice of philosophy that would seem to proceed in tandem with processes of knowledge construction in democratic Athens. While not committed to conventional political activity, neither does Socrates’ philosophy chose to roam the heavens of apolitical abstraction. Instead, the
midwife exists “between philosophy and politics,” advancing and countering – what I will call working both with and against – Athenian political life with the possibility of assisting it.

And yet the story of the midwife does not exhaust the different sides of Socrates. In my fifth chapter I turn to Socrates’ harsher side in the *Gorgias*, where Socrates appears as a *politikos* and declares himself practitioner of the “true political art.” Yet despite Socrates’ political face, this dialogue would seem to dash the hopes of a Socrates engagé and beneficial to the community around him: Socrates silences his interlocutors and opposes his practice of philosophy to their rhetoric and thus to the conventions of Athenian political life. The conflict of this dialogue runs deep and we cannot underestimate it. But I also argue that we can see similarities among all the interlocutors when we recognize their indebtedness to institutions of democratic Athens. This commonality among antagonists provides a background condition and a shared language that makes the dialogue itself possible. While Socrates in the *Gorgias* appears at his most adversarial, we can also figure this aspect of his character as part of democratic political culture.

Returning to the *Apology* and Socrates as a gadfly, we see yet another aspect of Socrates’ practice of philosophy. The *Apology* gives us Socrates’ most public face and the dialogue puts his relationship to Athens in starkest relief. Examining the image of the gadfly, I argue in my sixth chapter that the image of the gadfly contains a telling ambivalence imbuing Socrates’ relationship to Athens around him: Socrates appears both as a committed citizen of Athens and as its most radical critic. The image of the gadfly, in similar terms, both demeans and exalts Socrates. This aspect of the figure of Socrates thus does not fit the typical appropriations of him. Similarly, the gadfly differs in important respects from all the previous aspects.
To what do all these “Socrateses” amount? In my final chapter, I give what I argue provides the fullest account of Socrates’ inexplicable coherence: Socrates’ strangeness, his *atopia*, unites these different figures of Socrates, even while this strangeness does not “amount” to a definitive product or sum. Moreover, Socrates’ strangeness also exists on multiple registers: in terms of Socrates’ physical presence and dislocations of the status quo of Athenian political culture as well as his disturbing quality of asking unexpected and seemingly absurd questions. In other words, Socrates’ strangeness does help us consider what Socrates means and what “coherence” can come from such a fragmented and multifaceted figure. In my final section, I return to some contemporary uses of Socrates in order to elaborate what bringing Socrates to bear on our political lives might resemble when one also respects and takes inspiration from Socrates’ strangeness. These uses thus promise concrete implications of “engaging Socrates” today.
Let us then assume that the Platonic dialogues do not convey a teaching, but, being a monument to Socrates, present the Socratic way of life as a model. Yet they cannot tell us: live as Socrates lived. For Socrates’ life was rendered possibly by his possession of a “demonic” gift and we do not possess such a gift. The dialogues must then tell us: live as Socrates tells you to live; live as Socrates teaches you to live. The assumption that the Platonic dialogues do not convey a teaching is absurd.

– Leo Strauss

It is hard, I think, to conceive a greater contrast than that between the Socratic and the Platonic ideal of a philosopher. It is the contrast between two worlds – the world of a modest, rational individualist and that of a totalitarian demi-god.

Socrates had only one worthy successor, his old friend Antisthenes, the last of the Great Generation. Plato, his more gifted disciple, was soon to prove the least faithful. He betrayed Socrates, just as his uncles had done.

– Karl Popper

I.

What does it mean to “read Socrates out of the Republic”? With this phrase, I want to mark two things: first, that many approaches to Socrates read him from the Republic, that is the terms of the Republic, and that such an approach tends to determine the figure of Socrates in some predictable ways: as founder of the kallipolis, an apolitical and anti-democratic utopia; as an abstracted philosopher unconcerned with although threatened by political life; and as Plato’s philosophic hero and an exemplar that Plato wished all his “good readers” to

1 Leo Strauss, The City and Man, 51.

emulate. Leo Strauss employs such an approach in his essay on the *Republic* when he writes that the dialogues, in particular the *Republic*, exhort their readers to live as Socrates lived—even if such a teaching comes complicated by the impossibility of emulating Socrates and the inscrutability of Socrates’ irony. Still, Strauss insists, we can read Socrates out of the *Republic* and commune with Socrates through such reading.³ Engaging Socrates comes through engaging Plato.⁴

Yet another sense of “reading Socrates out of the *Republic*” opposes this first sense. In this second vein, many approaches to Socrates completely ignore him in the *Republic* and prefer to focus on the elenchic or aporetic Socrates of other dialogues.⁵ The *Republic* becomes Plato’s territory and Socrates in the *Republic* his mouthpiece; we must look elsewhere in order to engage Socrates. As Karl Popper would have it, for example, Plato radically displaced Socrates, expounding tyrannical dreams rather than Socrates’ more limited commitment to inquiry: “the world of a modest, rational individualist and that of a totalitarian demi-god.” This effects a strong separation between Socrates and Plato – Plato betrayed his teacher Socrates, and in effect we must erect a strong wall separating the two.

---

³ This communing occurs at multiple levels according to Strauss – hence his “esoteric” approach. So Strauss writes that “the proper work of a writing is truly to talk, or to reveal the truth, to some while leading others to salutary opinions; the proper work of a writing is to arouse to thinking those who are by nature fit for it; the good writing achieves its end if the reader considers carefully the “logographic necessity” of every part, however small or seemingly insignificant, of the writing” (Strauss, *The City and Man*, 54).

⁴ I do not mean to oversimplify Strauss’s approach to Plato, which deserves more attention. I agree with G.R.F. Ferrari, for example, about the usefulness of Strauss’s “careful” approach to reading Plato (in Ferrari, “On Strauss’s Plato”). But I also wish to find a space between his identification of Socrates as Plato’s hero – a reading more fully elaborated by Catherine Zuckert in *Plato’s Philosophers* – and the possibility that Socrates stands apart from the arguments of the dialogue. For other readings of the *Republic* using Strauss’s approach, see Seth Benardete, *Socrates’ Second Sailing*, and Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Republic: A Study*.

⁵ Gregory Vlastos adopts this approach in *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* and one also sees it in Martha Nussbaum, “Plato’s *Republic*: The Good Society and he Deformation of Desire.”
Often scholars repair to Plato’s *Apology* in order to locate an infrangible, “historical” Socrates and thus evade the problem of Socrates that appears with the *Republic*, but rather than return to Plato’s *Apology* to comb the final speeches of Socrates in the hopes of finding some authentic core, I want to take a different tact in this chapter by looking at how Socrates figures in Plato’s best known and perhaps most influential work, the *Republic*. I turn to the *Republic* not because Plato’s *Apology* lacks compelling and important content; on the contrary, the starkness and concision of the *Apology* arguably gives it more poignance and persuasiveness than the *Republic* and its tortuous and often abstruse arguments. With the dripping water clock preventing Socrates from unwinding one of his famous digressions, Socrates in the *Apology* instead focuses his response on addressing the charges made against him and characterizing his life in approachable terms. In doing so, a recognizable Socrates emerges from the *Apology*, a Socrates whose tropes persist today, the unworthiness of an unexamined life and the excellence that stems from a commitment to truth among them.

The *Apology* portrays – and perhaps will always do so – the most familiar Socrates, who, whether facing his death courageously or submitting to just punishment, continues to elicit response and provoke our imaginations, from David’s “Death of Socrates” to I.F. Stone’s polemics to Brancusi’s “Socrates.”

---

6 One can find an example of this in John Wallach, “Socratic Citizenship.” But in his later work, Wallach steps back from claims about the genuine Socrates, writing that “the Socrates of Plato’s *Apology* surely sheds light on the historical Socrates, but the gap between Plato’s transcript of the trial and a reportorial account means that Socrates’ discourse in Plato’s *Apology* needs to be understood in relation to Plato’s dialogues as a whole” (Wallach, The Platonic Political Art, 90). I proceed from this later formulation, although I do not adopt Wallach’s position that we can track Plato’s development from the basis of the *Apology*.

7 Although I do discuss the *Apology* in much more detail in Chapter 6.

8 Although the *Republic* has its own influence and legacies that can obscure approaches – hence Julia Annas writes that the *Republic* is perhaps “too famous for its own good” (Annas, An Introduction to Plato’s Republic, 2) – I believe that for approaching Socrates the *Republic* both maps a field of possible readings and offers a fresher perspective than the *Apology*. I elaborate my reasons for this contention in this chapter.
The familiarity of the *Apology* accounts for the continued influence even today of these images of Socrates, but I believe that this familiarity also presents a danger. Like a statue too often touched, preoccupations with a single piece of evidence can serve to rounds its edges and smooth over its subtleties. While multiple visions of Socrates emerge from the *Apology*, they often hinge on interpretations of the same lines or different responses to the same images.⁹ I do not want to deny the importance and power of the *Apology*, and for this reason I return to it in a later chapter. But rather than continuing to pursue the same ground from the very beginning, I want to suggest we turn toward another figuration of Socrates so that we might gain new perspectives on the questions of Socrates’ life and death that arise with such force in the *Apology* as we explore the different meanings and images Socrates that began this project.

In what follows, I argue that the *Republic* neither solves Socrates in the first sense sketched above nor elides him as in the second. Instead, the *Republic* develops what we could call the “problematic” of locating Socrates. In the action of the dialogue, Socrates appears in terms of the founder, the philosopher, and the hero, but never identical to them. The *Republic* in this way raises locating the identity of Socrates to our attention as a problem: we cannot place Socrates in terms of the *Republic* yet its terms also serve to frame questions about his character.¹⁰ The *Republic*, then, on my argument, frames the chapters that follow by showing we apprehend Socrates through the dominant tropes of Athens, and how we can read Socrates through these lenses while never fully containing his multifaceted figure: Socrates appears as founder, philosopher, and hero, but never becomes fully encompassed

---

⁹ I explore these different readings in Chapter 6.

¹⁰ Although I do not want to overemphasize the stability or unity of the *Republic* itself. As J. Peter Euben has argued, the *Republic* presents a “dual message” and its meanings depend on its audience – questions that the dialogue itself raises. See Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 274 – 275.
by any of these tropes. I want to suggest, then, that the Republic provides a fruitful opening for discerning the multiple voices of Socrates I will develop through the rest of this book, and that, contrary to the opinions of many, the Socrates of the Republic does not merit wholesale rejection nor complete incorporation. Rather, I will argue and delineate in what follows how the Republic raises the questions of Socrates and, in particular about Socrates – how we can begin to consider his figure and with what terms. In other words, we can begin with the Republic as laying a groundwork for the series of explorations in other dialogues that I undertake in the following chapters.\textsuperscript{11}

I propose, then, to treat the Republic as a prelude to the work that follows.\textsuperscript{12} From its first words, the Republic alludes to Socrates’ trial and execution and the tension-filled space inhabited by both Socrates’ philosophical practice and Athens’ democratic way of life. As the Republic begins, Socrates describes his trip to the Piraeus, the port district of Athens that also served as a base for the democratic resistance against “The Thirty,” a thirty-man junta imposed on Athens by Sparta during 404-403 BC and which Critias – a consort of Socrates and Plato’s mother’s cousin – led.\textsuperscript{13} The label “men of the Piraeus” came to identify those who fought for the insurgent democracy, many of them immigrants and the lower ranks of society who lived in the area. The Temple of Bendis, whose festival Socrates and Glaucon in the Republic have just visited, later became the site of a decisive battle between supporters of the Thirty and the democrats, a battle during which Critias as well as Charmides, appointed

\textsuperscript{11} In reading the Republic with this degree of openness, I take inspiration from Jacob Howland, The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy. Whereas he argues that the Republic demands an engagement with philosophy, however, I argue that the Republic demands an engagement with Socrates – and hence its appropriateness as a starting point for a work that seeks to engage Socrates.

\textsuperscript{12} I should stress that beginning with the Republic does not indicate my belief that it stands first in a chronology, either according to authorship or dramatic dates. Instead, as I suggested in the previous paragraph, I think the Republic engages Socrates in a wide field, thus opening avenues worth pursuing in other dialogues.

\textsuperscript{13} I draw on Ferrari, “Introduction to Plato’s Republic,” for this paragraph.
governor of the Piraeus by the Thirty and Plato’s uncle, lost their lives. Socrates’ associations with Critias and Charmides did not help his reputation among the returning democrats.\textsuperscript{14}

Socrates’ very first words in the dialogue – the first words of the work as a whole – *katēben*, “I went down,” also resonate with his later image of the cave in Book VII of the *Republic* and its allusions to the murder of an apparent philosopher. There Socrates describes “our education and miseducation” to Glaucon with the image of a cave and its prisoners. Supposing someone escaped and saw the severe limitations of what the rest of the world deemed reality – the shadows cast on the walls of the cave – Socrates imagines what would happen if this escapee returned:

Wouldn’t it be said of him that he’d returned from his upward journey with his eyesight ruined and that it isn’t worthwhile even to try to travel upward? And, as for anyone who tried to free them and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn’t they kill him?\textsuperscript{15}

In an earlier image from Book VI used to describe the antagonism between philosophers and polis, the image of the ship, Socrates had expatiated the response of the crew even more explicitly: the crew will fetter the shipmaster and stupefy him with narcotic or drink; taking command of the ship they will consume the ship’s stores, flattering those among them with titles like “master mariner” or “captain” who persuaded or forced the captain to relinquish control. Ignorant of what knowledge a good captain might need – the seasons, the sky, wind, and stars – the sailors call this true captain “a real stargazer, a babbler, and a good-for-nothing” (487e – 489a, 1111). Socrates’ death echoes through these texts – and throughout

\textsuperscript{14} Although one should note that Socrates disobeyed an order of the Thirty (see Apology 32c - c) and also that while the Thirty abused their power, they were not unambiguously unjust. Hence the democrats granted amnesty to many of the participants, including many who figure in Plato’s dialogues. See Nails, *The People of Plato*, 111 – 113, on the ambiguities of the Thirty and 219 – 222 on the period after the Thirty.

\textsuperscript{15} *Republic* 517a2-6, 1134. All citations to Plato’s dialogue refer to the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text (Duke, ed. for *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Cratylus, Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* or *Slings*, ed. for *Republic* or Burnet, ed. for the remaining dialogues) and the page number of the translations in Cooper, ed. *Plato: Complete Works* unless otherwise indicated.
the Republic – from his first footfall, entering the metaphorical cave of the Piraeus, home to the democrats.

Returning again to the first few lines of the dialogue, the questions of Socrates’ life and death and his relationship to democracy arise again with respect to force and persuasion. Socrates recounts that he and Glaucon had offered their devotions to the goddess and admired the parades of the Athenians and the Thracians before they started home. But at that moment Polemarchus, Cephalus’s son, had seen them and sent his slave boy to have them wait. The exchange underscores Socrates’ tense relationship to the ways of Athenian democracy:

Polemarchus said: It looks to me, Socrates, as if you two are starting off for Athens.

It looks the way it is, then, I said.

Do you see how many we are? he said.

Well, you must either prove stronger [kriittous] than we are, or you will have to stay here.

Isn’t there another alternative, namely, that we persuade [peisómen] you to let us go?

But could you persuade [peisai] us, if we don’t listen [mé akouontas]? (327c-e, 972 - 3)

Socrates may prefer returning to Athens for his own reasons, but the many – Polemarchus and his minions – assert their right of decision, the right of the majority that makes for democracy. The question of the Republic – what is justice – appears in this initial vignette in a single word: kriittous, stronger. One of its roots, agathon, means “good.” Socrates will entertain an argument that proposes that only a few can know or even come near knowing

---

the good; yet in Athenian democracy, “the good” was what the dēmos declares it to be.\footnote{As Josiah Ober puts it: “democracy tended to monopolize both political practice and the very language of Athenian politics” (Ober, Political Dissent, 29). But Ober, I think, may overemphasize the extent of democracy’s power. As I will show in what follows, Socrates frequently resists democratic tropes and conventions.}

Finally, even if Socrates had a good argument about what the group should pursue – about what course might be good for all of them – if they do not listen, Socrates appears powerless. In a twist of irony, Polemarchus plays the role of leader of the “dēmos” in this opening scene; for his involvement with the democracy, he died later at the hands of the Thirty.

The Republic further echoes Socrates’ death in the themes of the dialogue that ensues. Death and justice come together in the first sustained conversation of the dialogue, between Socrates and Cephalus, when Cephalus remarks that the approach of death gives him reason to ensure he has paid his debts; Socrates then asks him if the paying of debts constitutes justice. As Socrates and his interlocutors begin to discuss questions of justice, the various definitions stem from the lives of the participants. A view of justice entails, it would appear, a way of life – conversely, Socrates’ life contains a certain justice threatened by the existing conditions of justice in democratic Athens. On the other side of the conversation with Polemarchus at the middle of Book I, Thrasymachus’s entry in the argument introduces the imperial justice of Athens: the rule of the stronger that Athens declares in Thucydides and that Thrasymachus, as diplomat from Chalcedon, an important trading port at the mouth of the Black Sea and under the sway of imperial Athens, defended as an argument for local autonomy.\footnote{On Thrasymachus see Debra Nails, The People of Plato, 288 – 290 and Stephen A. White, “Thrasymachus the Diplomat.”} While the exchange with Cephalus connects justice to one’s own life and death, the exchange with Thrasymachus places justice in terms of the life and death of a polis; on
the one hand, Socrates’ own death comes into relief while on the other Athens’ committed execution.

II.

If the Republic recalls Socrates’ death from its very beginning, one way of reading Socrates in the Republic views the argument about justice as responding to the perceived injustice of Socrates’ execution. The discussion of the Republic about justice, on this reading, develops a concept of justice in response to the injustice perpetuated against Socrates. On this reading, the argument after Book I balances the vignette’s and subsequent conventional understandings of justice that culminated with Thrasymachus in Book I, developing a more inclusive argument for justice and a just society that would include Socrates.\(^{19}\) After the aporetic efforts of Book I to establish a meaning of justice, the investigations begin anew with Glaucon and Adeimantus’s challenges in Book II. Glaucon and Adeimantus want to believe that the just man lives well – a question that has already arisen about Socrates – but they have yet to hear a definitive argument on the just man’s behalf. In their elaborate questions, Glaucon and Adeimantus demand that Socrates show the just man living well but without any extrinsic rewards – no honors either human or divine can compensate their just man. In fact, following their example the unjust man will receive the benefits of a just reputation. Wrongly impugned and punished yet dedicated to the just life nonetheless, the just man begins to sound increasingly like Socrates (on a certain reading of the Apology).\(^{20}\)

But Socrates does not immediately talk about the just man. Responding to Glaucon and Adeimantus’s request, Socrates proposes that they look for justice not in a single human life but in a polis, a city where it might appear more visibly. This famous conceit – the

\(^{19}\) On this reading, see Leo Strauss, The City and Man and Allan Bloom, “Interpretive Essay.”

\(^{20}\) I will question this reading in Chapter 6.
conceit of the entire dialogue – allows Glaucon, Adeimantus, and Socrates to create “a city in speech” where justice and, eventually, the just man not only illumine but become possible. Only in this polis, Socrates later admits, can the truly just man exist (497cd). What Socrates calls *kallipolis* – the just and noble city – thus becomes the response to the life and death of Socrates, a regime where Socrates ostensibly could have flourished and not suffered execution. Glaucon, Adeimantus, and Socrates become its founders.

Justice as it develops in the *Republic* immediately contrasts with justice in democratic Athens. The trial of Socrates represented the Athenian practice a kind of procedural justice: a jury selected from eligible citizens, equal time for prosecution and defense, a verdict without appeal, and an appropriate sentence.21 The respect for procedure and jury participation formed an integral part of the authority of the dēmos – the democratic people – in Athens; jury trials, among other institutions, created not only places for citizen participation and learning, but also reinforced the regnant idea that the dēmos could govern itself. As we saw with Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus, the powerful polis makes the rules under these arrangements without any formalized authority for experts.22 Athens possessed a strong democratic ideology, and justice existed within its ken. With the founding of the regime within the argument of the *Republic*, this idea comes under criticism most of all.

The emphasis on founding pervades the *Republic* beginning with Book II, and tracing its contours elucidates a way of reading Socrates as founding his own perfect polis where living justly and practicing philosophy can also mean living well. The Greek words for “law-giver” and “to give laws,” *nomothētēs* and *nomothetein*, appear consistently throughout the

---

21 Although there are questions about whether the charges were trumped so as to hide the fact that Socrates was being prosecuted for involvement with the Thirty, for which amnesty had been granted. See Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith, *Socrates on Trial*, for details.

22 Athenian citizens selected all important political posts outside of generals (*strategoi*) by lot.
Republic around the development of its ideal regime, and these words also mark specific relationships vis-à-vis Athens and connect to Socrates’ trial and execution. Nomothetein (the activity of a nomothetēs) described the enactment of statutes in fifth-century Athens and, according to Martin Ostwald, marked the transition from norms thought to exist “from time immemorial” to norms regarded as “having been enacted and as being enforceable” – a crucial turn toward democracy. These words also came to form the name for the Nomothetae, the groups of ordinary citizens charged with making and revising Athenian law.

In the Republic, Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus take the role of Nomothetae but in order to create an alternative polis, a polis safe for philosophy.

Nomothetein and its derivatives appear at crucial moments throughout the text of the Republic: first, to refer to the patterns (tupoi) laid down in Books II and III, the rules about the style and subject of poetry (398b3). By referring to the tupoi previously discussed, this use of nomothetein effectively incorporates their selection of guardians (374e), calling themselves founders of the city (oikistai polēs, 379a1), and repeated assertions that their words become law. In Book III, nomothetein appears in a discussion of laws about lovers and their boys. Glaucon will lay down a law (nomothetēseis), Socrates says, that a lover (erastēs) may care for and associate with and touch a boy (philein . . . kai suneinai kai haptesthai) but may not go any farther (403b4-c2).

23 Martin Ostwald, Nomos and the Beginnings of Athenian Democracy, 96.
24 Martin Ostwald, From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law, 521.
25 According to Leonard Brandwood, A Word Index to Plato, nomothetein and its variants appear 25 times in the Republic. Among Plato’s dialogues, only the Laws has more appearances of such words.
26 They call attention to their judgments about poetry at 389a – b and discuss lexīs, or style, from 397b – 398c.
27 380c, 383a, and 383c.
lovers (erastai) marked another crucial aspect of Athenian political culture.\textsuperscript{28} The two other appearances of nomothetein in Book III also concern medicine (409e5) and the housing of the guardians (417b8), both pertaining to the new regime of the body entailed by the kallipolis of the Republic.

The most frequent appearance of nomothetein and its derivatives comes in Book IV, when Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus have completed their work, done “like a sculptor,” as Glaucon tells Socrates later in the dialogue (hôsper andriantopoios apeirgasai, 540c3-4). Yet they have given the sculpture a general form and omitted specifics, Socrates comments, for if one has educated good human beings, one has little need of legislating trivialities like silence in front of elders, how and when to stand, hair styles, and clothes and shoes to wear: “To legislate about such things,” Socrates tells Adeimantus, “is simple-minded.” (425b7-8)

Education’s purpose lies in producing a new human being, one either good or the opposite. This may sound like a back-handed criticism of the punctilious laws of the Spartans, but a subsequent appearance of nomothetein turns the critique back on the Athenians: cities believe too much in the power of laws, Socrates tells Adeimantus, and thus they pass laws on subjects (nomothetountes), amend them again or pass new ones, always thinking they can cure their feverish city “not realizing that they’re really just cutting off a Hydra’s head” (426e7). The “true lawgiver” (alethinon nomothetên, 427a4), Socrates asserts, “oughtn’t to bother with that form of law or constitution” – in the ill-governed city the lawgiver would act uselessly and in the well-governed city unnecessarily, unlike Athens’ litigious habits and constant legal

\textsuperscript{28} As I discuss more in Chapter 3, erotic relationships in Athens existed both at interpersonal and political levels and this made these a crucial space for civic education. Here Socrates and Glaucon formalize rules that would run contrary to the popular consensus while they act as lawgivers.
revisions. The nomothetein of the polis of Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus balances to perfection the limits of law and the education of citizens such that they need few laws.

How does this discussion of law-giving relate to the questions of Socrates? In contradistinction to Athens, Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus act as law-givers to create an alternative polis, and what they come to call kallipolis directly addresses the areas of Socrates’ accusations: his corruption of youth (the laws about erōs), the religious laws of the city (the education for the guardians), and the changing of laws in a regime (the steadfastness of the laws of kallipolis). Unlike the conventional Athenian democracy, the regime of the Republic – the politeia of Politeia – stands on a stable order of a “rational” cosmology and well-chosen laws. As Socrates tells Glaucon at the beginning of Book V, “We’re not legislating impossibilities or indulging in mere wishful thinking, since the law we established is in accord with nature (epeiper kata phusin etithemen ton nomon)” (456c, 1084). Effacing the unpredictable polis that executed him, Socrates and his comrades erect a city with the best possible laws and institutions, a polis where Socrates would never perish.

Yet as the kallipolis becomes kallipolis in Book V, this reading becomes imperiled. In part, the work of founding shifts from Socrates to Glaucon and Adeimantus. While often couched as the activities of the group – i.e. “look at our newly founded city” (Apoblepe toinun . . pros tēn nean hēmin polin, 431b4, my emphasis) – as Adeimantus and Glaucon become more active participants the founding becomes increasingly theirs. When Adeimantus demands a defense – an apology (here as a verb, second person aorist subjunctive: apolēgeisēi), alluding to Socrates’ trial – of the guardians’ happiness, Socrates turns the task to all of them: “Are you asking how we should defend ourselves?” Socrates responds, using the first person plural (future tense) of the same verb: apologisēsometha (420b); Socrates shifts the work from himself

---

29 As noted and examined by Melissa Schwartzberg in “Athenian Democracy and Legal Change.”
to the group, namely Adeimantus and Glaucon. The group’s question had tried to demand an answer of Socrates, but Socrates turns this task back on all of them by shifting the person of the verb and making the inquiry something shared in common. The task becomes a collective undertaking: “We take ourselves,” Socrates adds a bit later, “to be fashioning the happy city, not picking out a few happy people and putting them in it, but making the whole city happy” (420c, 1053).

In another instance of the conversants’ involvement with the dialogue, at the beginning of Book V, Socrates believes they have completed their discussion but Polemarchus, Thrasymachus, Adeimantus, and Glaucon refuse to let him stop: “In fact, Socrates,” says Thrasymachus, “you can take this as a resolution of all of us” (450a, 1078). When Socrates demurs that they lack the time for a full inquiry, Glaucon responds as if nothing else could exceed the present conversation’s importance:

It’s within reason, Socrates, Glaucon said, for people with any understanding to listen to an argument of this kind their whole life long. So don’t mind about us, and don’t get tired yourself. (450b, 1078)

Just a little later, as if to emphasize at least Glaucon and Adeimantus’s leadership in the conversation, Socrates says directly to Glaucon (in the sole use of nomothetēs as a singular subject in the entire Republic), “you, then, as lawgiver,” when discussing equal legislation for men and women (458c6). This reminds us that while the initial challenge at the beginning of Book II echoed the situation of Socrates’ trial and execution, it only echoed – the questions from Glaucon and Adeimantus came first of all from their own sets of concerns. In one of the few places where Socrates reminds us that the Republic occurs in narrated monologue, he describes the scene before Glaucon’s interruption at the beginning of Book II to

30 There are other crucial interruptions by Socrates to his own narration of the dialogue; one worth noting especially is before Thrasymachus’s entrance in Book I, where Socrates describes Thrasymachus’s behavior in order to enhance the drama.
emphasize Glaucon’s own involvement in the question that animates the remainder of the dialogue:

When I said this, I thought I had done with the discussion, but it turned out to have been only a prelude. Glaucon showed his characteristic courage on this occasion too and refused to accept Thrasymachus’ abandonment of the argument. Socrates, he said, do you want to seem to have persuaded us that it is better in every way to be just than unjust, or do you want truly to convince us of this? (357a-b, 998).

Always the most spirited and manly (aei . . . andreiotatos), Glaucon cannot see injustice defamed by Thrasymachus’ argument. He – he Glaucon – wants true conviction, not the appearance of persuasion. As Glaucon says later, he has not been satisfied by either argument (358b3). Socrates exclaims after Glaucon delivers his breathless argument – Babai! (361d4) – but before he can answer Adeimantus interrupts to add another urgent challenge to his brother’s. Once Adeimantus has finished, Socrates remarks on the ardor of Glaucon and Adeimantus’s challenge before proposing that they construct the city in speech, saying that he has always admired the natures of Glaucon and Adeimantus, but they had especially pleased him on this occasion. Something divine must have affected them, Socrates adds, to escape being convinced by such impressive arguments (“scoured statues,” Socrates calls Glaucon’s images of the just and unjust men, an image echoed by Glaucon about Socrates in Book IV).

Alongside Glaucon and Adeimantus’s shared and even leading role as founders, as the argument proceeds the city in speech also starts to appear less about creating a feasible set of laws and more about inspiring those present to live different lives. In other words, while from its origins the city apparently offers a safe place for philosophy, this purpose begins to pale as the argument increasingly focuses on affecting the interlocutors and diverting them from their conventional, unreflective lives. For one, the path of the argument follows the interruptions and demands of Glaucon and Adeimantus (372c, 419a, 449b). Socrates responds by calling attention to their characters, and as he educes their opinions
they begin to recognize themselves as implicated in the conversation. By Book X, Socrates tells Glaucon and Adeimantus to “look upon” this form in heaven as models for their own souls and inspiration for their struggles. What began as an ostensible answer to the injustice of the death of Socrates becomes an exhortation to Glaucon and Adeimantus to live just lives; Socrates may appear a founder of this regime, but his founding seems to act primarily in the souls of his disciples.31

Finally, the developing argument after Book IV seems to lose a place for Socrates. After discussions of the first “waves” in Book V – the equality of men and women and the commonality of wives and children – the third wave puts our search for Socrates within the argument of the Republic at sea, as the focus turns from constituting a just regime where Socrates’ punishment would never have occurred to describing the most just individual, the philosopher, the task of founding sets and this new image of the just life rises on the horizon. The reading of Socrates as founder thus shifts to reading Socrates as a philosopher. If the city in speech serves only hortatory purposes, the image of the philosopher seems to promise a defense of Socrates. As Glaucon and Adeimantus join ever more ardently, the initial questions’ connection to Socrates seems to diminish, raising anew the question of the place of Socrates within the Republic.

III.

Philosophy and philosophers first appear in Book II, when Socrates asks whether the guardians might want some philosophy in their nature. In addition to being spirited (thumoeides), the guardians, Socrates suggests, need a philosophical side (philosophos tēn phusin,

31 This occurs most memorably at the end of Book IX, when Socrates and Glaucon decide that the city in speech ought best reside in one’s own soul as a model: “But perhaps,” says Socrates, “there is a model of it [the city in speech] in heaven, for anyone who wants to look at it and to make himself its citizen on the strength of what he sees. It makes no differences whether it is or ever will be somewhere, for he would take part in the practical affairs of that city and no other” (592b, 1199).
375e). Like dogs that might become mean-spirited, guardians require the gentling of philosophy, the refined quality (kampson) that marks philosophy’s true practice (376b). As Socrates and Glaucon later remark, the guardians must combine high spiritedness and philosophy; for any human being to act well, the love of learning must reside in the soul (410e, 411d). Thus in the context of the argument, philosophy appears as the result of a properly-ordered soul and product of correct education, as well as being aligned with the ruling faction of the city in speech. Philosophy plays this integral yet subordinate role until the middle of Book V.32

While these philosophic dogs do not sound like “Socrates,” the introduction of the philosopher-kings in Book V confirms that the guardians’ philosophic disposition does not encompass the whole of the practice of philosophy. This further elaboration of philosophers shows the guardian dogs as proto-philosophers – and thus also as only one step toward the argument that culminates in Book V. Glaucon and Adeimantus’s own distance from the guardians first presaged that the guardians’ education and the description of the city in speech had not begun to address the questions they posed at the beginning of Book II; never in the intervening books do Glaucon or Adeimantus identify with their charges, unlike their intimate connection to the impassioned and personal questions they posed in Book II. When Adeimantus demands that Socrates answer whether the guardians live happily or not, his question even takes an impersonal form: “How would you defend yourself,” he asks Socrates, “if someone told you that you aren’t making these men very happy and that it’s their own fault?” (419a, 1052). Adeimantus himself does not seem to care so much about the

32 Indeed, the words philosophein and philosophos and their derivatives only appear just over a half-dozen times in the first four books of the Republic. The fact that these words then appear so dramatically with the introduction of the philosopher-kings in the middle of Book V (473d) and then pervade Books V and VII underscores the shift in the Republic from the ordered just city and its philosophic-spirited guardians (from Books II to the middle of V) to the ordered just soul exemplified by the philosopher (beginning with the philosopher-kings in Book V and then through the end of Book VII).
guardians’ happiness, but one might wonder. The reenactment of the opening vignette of the *Republic* that begins Book V – Polemarchus clasps Adeimantus’s cloak this time, and they agree to detain Socrates yet again – restarts the investigation, but this time the chief conversants – Glaucon, Adeimantus, and Socrates – turn from the polis to the human being, from concerning themselves with founding to beginning to consider philosophy.

After Socrates famously declares that “until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings . . . philosophize . . . cities will have no rest from evils” (473d, 1100), the discussion shifts to understanding the practice of philosophy and the identity of the philosopher. Glaucon immediately demands that Socrates answer himself before he earns the scorn and spite of Athens’ learned classes (474a). Glaucon offers to join him in finding some way to elude their assailants by explaining the meaning of their suggestion that philosophers ought to be rulers (474b). Erotic love (*erōs*) defines philosophers, Socrates and Glaucon reason – a love of the whole, of all learning and all the spectacle of truth (475e). One trait of the philosopher, Socrates reminds Glaucon a little later, lies in their ever being in love with learning (*mathēmatos ge aei erōsin*, 485b), the knowledge that discloses something eternal. Loving knowledge and not opinion, philosophers can comprehend the eternal and unchanging; only they can ignore the swarming irrelevancies of daily life and act as proper guardians (484e) – their greater knowledge itself warrants their excellence, Socrates asserts (484d).

But this optimistic discussion of the philosopher at the end of Book V and the beginning of Book VI does not last long. Philosophy’s ridicule in Athens still rings in Adeimantus’s ears, and we can also discern the charges against Socrates echoed yet again. As Adeimantus puts it:

Someone might well say now that he’s unable to oppose you as you ask questions, yet he sees that of all those who take up philosophy – not those who merely dabble
in it while still young in order to complete their upbringing and then drop it, but those who continue in it for a longer time – the greatest number become cranks (allokotous), not to say completely vicious (pamponérous), while those who seem completely decent are rendered useless (achrestous) to the city because of the studies you recommend. (487c-d, 1110-1111)

These accusations Adeimantus raises would also have sounded familiar to Glaucon and Socrates – they include charges Aristophanes leveled against Socrates in his play Clouds. Socrates repeats them again at the end of his subsequent response to Adeimantus in the image of the ship (487e – 489a, described above). Philosophy’s ill repute, Socrates continues after the image of the ship, comes most of all from the talk of the multitude – this kind of talk creates the chief sophist, asserts Socrates (492b). And when the people gather and rumors develop, philosophy becomes imperiled:

When many of them are sitting together in assemblies, courts, theaters, army camps, or in some other public gathering of the crowd, they object very loudly and excessively to some of the things that are said or done and approve others in the same way, shouting and clapping, so that the very rocks and surroundings echo the din of their praise or blame and double it. (492b, 1114)

In a description resembling the Pnyx, the rocky outcrop above the Agora where the assembly met, we can hear also the jeers and boos that echoed during Socrates’ trial when he tried to assert his innocence. The philosopher, Socrates continues, stands little chance in such a polis, incited by sophists and the echo chambers of political institutions. “It is inevitable that the multitude will censure those who do philosophize,” Socrates concludes (494a). Those drawn to philosophy the city will compel to cease, even resorting to “private intrigues” and “public trials” (494e). Reversing the charges later made against him, Socrates accuses the polis of corrupting the philosopher – even the best natures engaged in the

---

33 Clouds 228 and 1480 as cited by Diskin Clay, Platonic Questions, 252.

34 Clay, Platonic Questions, 252.
noblest of pursuits become corrupted and destroyed (495a). “Philosophy is left solitary and unwed; those most truly her own abandon her for a life of illusion and error” (495b-c).

Thus whereas the first way of answering Glaucon and Adeimantus’s demand for a defense of the just life – a demand, I suggested, for a defense of the life of Socrates – resulted in the creation of a city in speech, ostensibly the founding of a polis where Socrates might live safely, now these demands rearticulated in Book V focus in Book VI on a defense of philosophy, a defense of Socrates’ own way of life and its justice for polis, citizen, and human being. Socrates deepens these associations between the philosopher under discussion and himself when he discusses his own life shortly after the image of the ship (still in Book VI). Only a few will “worthily consort”\(^{35}\) (\(kat’\ axian\ bomilount\)) with philosophy, and Socrates mentions his case among them: exile disciplined some; others had strange affinities that drew them away from other activities; Theages’ sickly body barred his way to politics and led him to philosophy; and Socrates’ own \(daemon\), given to few, did the same (496b-c).

Socrates defends and loves philosophy, and later loses his temper when he sees philosophy “besmirched” (\(propep\ lakismen\), 536c, 1151).

Yet the philosopher of the argument of Republic does not fully capture Socrates or his practice of philosophy as it appears in the action of the dialogue. In part, the education of the philosopher detailed in Books VI and VII does not seem to describe Socrates or any education he received. In the Phaedo Socrates recalls his early infatuation with natural philosophy, in particular Anaxagoras, but nothing in his description resembles the careful progression outlined in Book VII of the Republic from arithmetic to geometry to solid geometry to astronomy to dialectic (525c – 532a). Socrates does appear to have strong powers of calculation, demonstrated when he computes the just man as 729 times happier.

\(^{35}\) This phrase comes from the Sterling and Scott translation: Sterling and Scott, Plato: The Republic, 185.
than the unjust in Book IX (587c), but no system of education seems to explain this uncanny aptitude.

At the same time, the images used to describe the philosopher in Books VI and VII also do not quite fit Socrates. To return to the image of the ship, in contrast to the philosopher’s failure to take the rudder (or convince any one otherwise), the interlocutors of the Republic seem to recognize that Socrates does indeed possess some things worth learning, or at least worth inquiring about: Thrasymachus accuses Socrates of refusing to teach what he knows; Adeimantus and Glaucon look to Socrates for a redemptive account of the just life when they pose their questions at the beginning of Book II; and all the interlocutors deem Socrates worthy of giving an explanation when they rearticulate their questions at the beginning of Book V. While Socrates does not steer the conversation, neither do the other interlocutors dominate him, in contrast to the image of the ship. Socrates introduces the topic of justice with Cephalus (331c) but then Glaucon and Adeimantus surprise Socrates by reiterating these questions; Socrates declines to take the “longer and further road” in describing the good (435d) but later Glaucon forces Socrates to continue in the beginning of Book V, reinitiating a conversation that eventually approaches the good in Books VI and VII – and the “longer way” (504b); while Socrates appears to shift the conversation to describing different regimes in Book VIII this only returns to a point that Adeimantus and others demanded; finally, when Socrates recounts the myth of Er without prompting at the end of Book X it also offers a poetic response to those that Glaucon and Adeimantus gave without prompting at the beginning of Book II. Socrates does suffer some of the insults directed at the philosopher in the image when Thrasymachus accuses him of dissimulation, but Socrates also receives praise: Polemarchus welcomes him to join their party; Glaucon and Adeimantus follow Socrates obsequiously throughout; and even Thrasymachus changes his
mind and encourages him. While he may not possess complete political savoir-faire, in contrast to the feckless philosopher in the image of the ship, in the Republic Socrates seems to play a much different, more active role.

In the other most striking image of Books VI and VII, the image of the cave, Socrates also appears to contrast with the philosopher. Socrates introduces the image of the cave to Glaucon at the beginning of Book VII, immediately after two previous images of “offspring of the good” (506e), the image of the sun and the image of the divided line that ended Book VI. The image of the cave offers “an image of our nature in its education and want to education” (514a). As an analogy for the world around them, every society appears as its own cave with its inhabitants routinely, regularly, and necessarily deceived. The image seems to imply that what we believe about the most important things fails the test of truth, but also that what we believe comes as the handiwork of puppeteers equally estranged from the truth. Yet in contrast to the grotesqueness of everyday life, the image of the cave also implies the hopeful teaching that illumination might come through philosophic education. Such an education could offer the possibility of grasping the unmediated, uncompromised truth by virtue of the ascent described in the image’s middle section. The image thus seems to fit with the declared necessity of philosopher kings and that wisdom should rule – that a person who has escaped the cave knows much more and ought to rule. Yet the image also evinces the difficulty, and perhaps impossibility of this type of rule: assuming that freedom from the bonds of the cave might be possible, the one who returns to the cave garners not just insults like the “true pilot” of the image of the ship, but most likely death:

And before his eyes had recovered – and the adjustment would not be quick – while his vision was still dim, if he had to compete again with the perpetual prisoners in recognizing the shadows, wouldn’t he invite ridicule? Wouldn’t it be said of him that he’d returned from his upward journey with his eyesight ruined and that it isn’t worthwhile even to try to travel upward? And, as for anyone who tried to free them
and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn’t they kill him? (517a, 1134)

As I mentioned earlier, this image seems at first to recall the aspersions cast on Socrates that eventually led to the accusations against him, his trial, and his execution. Yet while eliciting these echoes, the image also does not quite fit with Socrates as he appears in the dialogue. In part, the image of the cave implies that all people except the philosopher suffer from the same delusions about reality whereas the action of the Republic depicts some development and learning in the interlocutors. The image does not explain the gradual changes we witness (and experience) in the progress of the dialogue. As I noted above, Glaucon and Adeimantus become increasingly involved in the discussion as it proceeds. Immediately prior to the image of the cave, Glaucon had demanded that Socrates share his thought on the good, a request that led to the image itself (506b). Even Thrasymachus seems to change between Book I and Book V as he becomes more interested in the collective inquiry – a transformation, one could say, in spite of himself.

Also in part, while in the image of the cave the philosopher returns to jeers and scorn, and Socrates mentions the ridicule he will incur, especially in Book V, his fellow conversants almost never mock him. While one could argue that the Republic presents a select gathering where Socrates has surrounded himself with friends, in contrast to the Apology where Socrates in fact appears to elicit catcalls,36 it remains the case in the Republic that Socrates can communicate with vastly different people and suffer neither aspersions nor mockery. Thrasymachus’s sardonic accusations in Book I stand as the lone exception, but even he comes around. As we have seen thus far, Glaucon and Adeimantus always distance themselves and their own opinions from the counterarguments they bring against Socrates.

---

36 As Leo Strauss points out: Strauss, The City and Man, 62 – 63.
Socrates seems to create a community of speech in the action of the dialogue despite the gravity of the subject and the prolixity of the discussion.37

Moreover, unlike the image of the cave where someone or something must compel the philosopher to return to the cave, in the Republic Socrates agrees to return to the house of Cephalus without compulsion (although Polemarchus threatens to compel him). Before the challenges of Book II, Socrates even seems to invite continued conversation, remarking on his desire to continue when he says he “has not dined well” (ou mentos kalós ge heistiamai, 354a-b) by the end of Book I. When his fellow conversants threaten bring him to trial at the beginning of Book V, Socrates again agrees to continue without compulsion. Perhaps most striking, Socrates recounts the entire dialogue without compulsion – the words of Socrates that we read as the Republic come as an unrequested gift freely given.

Leaving the cave, Socrates does not leave philosophy “unwed and solitary” but instead declares his ardent love for it. Philosophy, as we will see in the chapters that follow, does not “stand off to the side, behind a low wall,” but occurs inside and outside the agora, up and down the polis, among aristocrats, foreigners, slave boys, and citizens.38 At the same time, the discussion of philosophy introduces terms in which Socrates’ practice of philosophy will occur – as an erotic, passionate enterprise, pursued insatiably, provocatively oriented toward those around him, and gentling of ambition and spiritedness. The practice of philosophy for Socrates provokes questions, yet the Republic helps us to ask these questions.

37 As we will see, the taming of Thrasy machus in the Republic and its overall convivial atmosphere does describe the conditions of many of the other dialogues – it in fact obscures Socrates’ edgy, provocative side that often upsets his interlocutors and hastens, we might say, his undoing at the hands of the Athenians.

38 I will develop these different aspects and locations in the work that follows. See especially Chapter 7, “An Atopic Socrates,” for a summation of Socrates’ many facets and activities.
IV.

But if Socrates does not entirely resemble either the founder – a task that seems more in the hands of Glaucon and Adeimantus – or the philosopher – who, much as it resembles Socrates also remains distant from him – then who or what is Socrates? If, as I have suggested, the chief concern of the Republic consists in responding to the life and death of Socrates, what form does this response take – if not to have the figure of Socrates create the conditions for his existence, whether as founder or philosopher? A third possibility presents itself as the conversation moves from the philosopher to other human types and their corresponding regimes in Book VIII. As Book VII ends, Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus have exhausted their description of the philosopher and the philosophic education, concluding that they must chose rulers from those that excel both in philosophy and in war. Now they reiterate their original question yet again – to observe all these regimes and their defects as well as the regimes’ corresponding human beings and “reach agreement about which is the best man and which the worst” as well as whether the best is also the happiest (544a). Resuming their earlier positions like wrestlers (544b), they initiate a new layer of their discussion.

As Glaucon, Adeimantus, and Socrates begin to describe these regimes and their corresponding human beings, we see that increasing injustice in human lives comes with a falling away from philosophy first of all but also from the balanced soul that the guardians’ education meant to create. And even the philosophers cannot maintain their perfection for long – the beginning of the slide toward corruption and dissoluteness comes with the philosophic rulers’ inability to discern the proper seasons for their citizens to mate – an error in the proverbial nuptial number (546a). The education of children will suffer and subsequent generations will prove “unworthy of their fathers” when they come to rule.
Factions appear as races – gold, silver, and bronze – intermix and the pursuit of distinction supplants that of knowledge. The aristocracy of *kallipolis* corrupts inevitably: “Not even a regime such as this will last forever,” Socrates tells Glaucon: “It, too, must face dissolution” (546a).

As anyone familiar with the *Republic* knows, vivid descriptions of postlapsarian lives follow: from timocracy to oligarchy to democracy to tyranny – the nadir of political life and the human soul. For the timocrats, war becomes most important, and the gentling presence of philosophy disappears (548c). Bereft of the guardianship provided by “reason . . . mixed with music and poetry” (*logou . . . mousikëi kekramenon*, 549b), appetite and avarice enthrone themselves. At first these appetites simply pursue wealth in the form of the oligarchy (550d, 551a), but the factions between rich and poor that this entails soon give rise to a democratic revolt and a rejection of all criteria of judgment. Democracy, in its commitment to freedom and free speech (*kai eleutherias bê polis mestê kai parrbëias gignetai*, 557b), culminates the ascendance of the appetites before they turn back against the soul and begin to dominate. Diverse and beautiful, the democratic regime would seem unobjectionable (558c), but with diversity also comes disorder: words lose their meanings (560e) and democratic citizens lack any means of judging one desire from another, leaving them condemned to flit from distraction to distraction:

And so he lives on, yielding day by day to the desire at hand. Sometimes he drinks heavily while listening to the flute; at other times, he drinks only water and is on a diet; sometimes he goes in for physical training; at other times, he’s idle and neglects everything; and sometimes he even occupies himself with what he takes to be philosophy. He often engages in politics, leaping up from his seat and saying and doing whatever comes into his mind. If he happens to admire soldiers, he’s carried in that direction, if money-makers, in that one. There’s neither order nor necessity in his life, but he calls it pleasant, free, and blessedly happy, and he follow it for as long as he lives. (561c-d, 1172)
This way of life seems innocuous enough, Socrates admits, but the democratic age preludes that of the tyrant; democracy’s excess of liberty leads it to entrust this liberty to those who first appear as protectors. But soon the protector becomes a despot, and, as in the regime, the human soul becomes entirely subject to its most powerful desires.

Increasing license and dissipation mark the spiral from the justice of kallipolis to the injustice of a tyranny. Even more striking, the image of the just human soul – ordered, moderate, balanced – finds its antithesis in the chaos of the unjust soul:

And isn’t this the kind of prison in which the tyrant is held – the one whose nature is such as we have described it, filled with fears and erotic loves of all kinds? Even though his soul is really greedy for it, he’s the only one in the whole city who can’t travel abroad or see the sights that other free people want to see. . . . He’s just like an exhausted body without any self-control, which, instead of living privately, is compelled to compete and fight with other bodies all its life. (579b – d, 1187)

Whereas the just soul acted as a citadel, protecting its possessor from the onslaught of passions, the unjust soul imprisons him. Whereas the just soul – whether guardian or philosopher – experienced the gentling power of philosophy in its erotic pursuit of learning and knowledge, the unjust soul becomes incapacitated and exhausted by its fears and erotic loves. Whereas the just soul can choose a private way of life with the image of the kallipolis as a guide, the unjust soul suffers in the public realm, driven to fight for the fulfillment of desire upon desire.

The contrast between the just soul and unjust soul, which forms the bulk of Book IX, appears most in Socrates’ and Glaucon’s proofs of the happiness of the former. Socrates declares first of all, on the basis of the preceding discussion of Book VIII, that ranked according to excellence (aretē) and vice (kakiai), the “king” – the human soul equivalent to kallipolis – appears as happiest: “that the best, the most just, and the most happy is the most kingly, who rules like a king over himself, and that the worst, the most unjust, and the most wretched is the most tyrannical, who most tyrannizes himself and the city he rules” (580b-c,
Second, the just soul also appears happiest because such a human being alone chooses knowingly—loving learning above all else, the just soul can decide a way of life based on knowledge that those who love only pleasure or only honor would not possess (580d–583b). Third, since the just soul pursues truly fulfilling pleasures of the soul, its life will prove much more pleasant than that of the unjust soul, which can never find satisfaction. Finally, the just soul will even possess a better reputation than the unjust soul, devoting its life to better ends (591c) and avoiding the odium attached to licentiousness and the tumult of political life (592).

The diptych of just and unjust souls offers a response similar in form to Glaucon and Adeimantus’s challenges at the beginning of Book II. Just as they created two statues of the just and unjust souls, the argument now juxtaposes two sets of images that seem to establish irrefragably the ultimate happiness of the just soul and the ultimate misery of the unjust one. The intrinsic rewards of justice and the detriments of injustice could not appear more clearly: stability and contentment of soul on the one hand and frantic motion and rule by appetites on the other.

As the argument of the Republic proceeds, the suggestion that Socrates resembles the portrait of the just soul and thus a response to the questions of the dialogues as well as his own life and death becomes stronger. As Socrates appears in the Apology and in the action of the Republic, he seems to demonstrate restraint, love of learning and philosophy, and a preference for avoiding the struggles of political life. At the beginning of Book X when Socrates returns to the subject of poetry the connection between the Republic’s hero—the just man—and Socrates comes into view when Socrates describes the kinds of poetry admissible to their city:

And so Glaucon, when you happen to meet those who praise Homer and say that he’s the poet who educated Greece, that it’s worth taking up his works in order to
learn how to manage and educate people, and that one should arrange one’s whole life in accordance with his teachings, you should welcome these people and treat them as friends, since they’re as good as they’re capable of being, and you should agree that Homer is the most poetic of the tragedians and the first among them. But you should also know that hymns to the gods and eulogies to good people are the only poetry we can admit to our city. (606e-607a, 1211)

Immediately following the scoured statue of the good human being and the just soul, this passage looks back to the entirety of the Republic as an example of what it describes. Poetry will always attract and seduce its listeners, but the Republic offers an antidote:

In the same way, because the love of this sort of poetry has been implanted in us by the upbringing we have received under our fine constitutions, we are well disposed to any proof that it is the best and truest thing. But if it isn’t able to produce such a defense, then, whenever we listen to it, we’ll repeat the argument we have just now put forward like an incantation so as to preserve ourselves from slipping back into that childish passion for poetry which the majority of people have. And we’ll go on chanting that such poetry is not to be taken seriously or treated as a serious undertaking with some kind of hold on the truth, but that anyone who is anxious about the regime within him must be careful when he hears it and must continue to believe what we have said about it. (607e-608a, 1212)

Thus Socrates suggests that the arguments of the Republic offer an ameliorative poetry, one that prevents poetry’s typically corrupting effects. Moreover, taken with the previous passages, the Republic’s poetry depicts a good man doing good deeds – an exemplar for all its listeners. Who could this be but Socrates?39

On this reading, the just man appears to emerge as a new exemplar and potential response to the life and death of Socrates. If Socrates did live justly and living justly makes one happy, then his death would become much more significant. In contrast to the anti-hero of the Republic, the tyrannical unjust man detailed in Book IX, Socrates becomes the hero of the dialogue through his just life. Heroes appeared in the earlier books of the Republic as

39 But, as I argue, and as J. Peter Euben writes, such a reading may be “too neat” (Euben, The Tragedy of Political Theory, 262) – the Republic, for one, gives rise to a “dual message”: “As a form that makes formlessness and mystery intelligible, it is and provides for others a sense of intellectual mastery. . . . But because both drama and dialogue demonstrate teh inpenetrability of reality, they remind their audience that they too are also actors in the world (even if only theoretical actors) and are, therefore, bound to commit errors comparable with those they have witnessed” (Ibid., 275).
examples of justice and now Socrates exemplifies the new justice of the argument. In Book II Adeimantus demanded a reform of poetry because poetry’s heroes exemplified justice incorrectly (366e). In Book III he and Socrates appropriately purged poetry of any content that might depict heroes as less than just or as receiving less than appropriate rewards for justice in their lives (387d – e). Now Socrates in the Republic offers a vision of the just soul undisfigured by the corruptions of the city (611d), one pursuing the great struggle to live justly in an unkind world and an inspiration to listeners and readers alike.⁴⁰

And yet appealing as this reading looks, it must also contend with some countervailing evidence. As I noted earlier, Socrates rejects imitation, and in Book VI he implies that he cannot be emulated: “Then there’s my own case – my divine sign – though that’s hardly worth mentioning,” Socrates tells Adeimantus. “Practically nobody in the past, I imagine, has had it happen to him” (496c). Socrates carefully distinguishes himself from the argument, as noted above, while also emphasizing the strangeness of his own example. These signs along the way of the Republic do not offer conclusive evidence, but another, longer passage indicates the possibility of a disjuncture between what emerges as the general principle of justice in the Republic – that of each doing what is appropriate for him- or herself – and Socrates’ own activities. Justice, as Socrates and Glaucon agree in Book IV, means that “each individual should follow, out of the occupations available in the city, the one for which his natural character best fitted him” (433a).⁴¹ Put more simply a little later, minding one’s own business constitutes the work of justice: τα ιατρεία πράττειν (433b). Yet Socrates never seems to mind his own business: in the Republic he acts as a spectator (viewing the

---

⁴⁰ This reading comes across strongly in Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” and echoes throughout his The Closing of the American Mind. Yet as will become evident below, I take Socrates’ heroism as more strange and thus perplexing than does Bloom.

⁴¹ This first appears at 370a – c; Socrates and his interlocutors repeated or allude to it at 374a – e, 395b, 406c, 421a.
festival at Bendis); itinerant (rambling in the Piraeus); therapist (questioning the old Cephalus about the state of his dotage); conversationalist (exploring the questions of justice with Adeimantus and Glaucon); and story-teller (recounting the Myth of Er) – to name a few of his activities. Unlike the philosopher who minds her own business, Socrates seem more interested in minding the business of others; Socrates’ way of life as it appears in the action of the Republic seems to run against the general formulation of justice that emerges from the Republic’s many attempts at definition. This undermines the suggestion that he acts in an exemplary manner within it.

In contrast to minding his business, Socrates embodies the polupragmōn, the busybody, which also forms an essential aspect of the Athenian character. For Thucydides, polupragmōn explained the psychological basis of Athenian imperialism; Pericles, Cleon, and Alcibiades all praise the polupragmōn as patriotic and quintessentially Athenian as opposed to the quietist, apolitical apragnōn or idiotēs. In the midst of a critique of Athenian institutions, Socrates maintains the appearance of an Athenian. At the same time, Socrates’ polupragmōn differs from the Athenian norm; he busies himself not with politics and litigation, but with his fellow citizens’ souls – with what they believe more than what they do. Thus Socrates neither fits the implicit ideal of the Republic nor the object of its critique – Athenian society and politics.

---

42 Victor Ehrenberg details this in “Polypragmōn: A Study in Greek Politics.” Elizabeth Markovits notes that apragnōn “was considered a Greek virtue” as well, but that it “existed alongside the Periclean and Corinthian descriptions of Athenians as restless and self-reliant found in Thucydides.” Thus, as Markovits concludes, “for committed democrats . . . watchfulness was key” (Markovits, The Politics of Sincerity, 56 – 7).

43 Ehrenberg, “Polypragmōn:,” 47.
This apparent disconnect between Socrates and the best life as it emerges in the Republic gains its starkest evidence in the Myth of Er. There, the soul of Odysseus, “a \textit{polupragmōn} if there ever was one,”\textsuperscript{44} explicitly chooses otherwise when given the chance:

Remembering the hardships of its previous life, it [the soul of Odysseus] rejected ambition, and spent a long time wandering round looking for the life of a private citizen who minded his own business \([\textit{andros idiotū apragmono}].\) After a long search he found one lying somewhere. It had been rejected by everyone else. When he saw it, he chose it gladly, saying he would have done the same even if he had drawn the first lot. (620c)\textsuperscript{45}

Rejecting his previous life as a busybody – one illustrated by the famous first lines of Homer’s \textit{Odyssey} describing Odysseus as multifarious \((\textit{polutropo}n)\) – Odysseus instead selects a private life along the lines of Republic-style justice. In this way Odysseus confirms the principle of minding one’s own business, exemplifying an overarching principle within the argument of the Republic; Socrates, in contrast, does not. Socrates’ final words – “fare well” \((\textit{prattōn eīn})\) recall “doing one’s own” \((\textit{ta hautou prattōn})\) while not reinforcing the latter’s principle. Socrates does not unambiguously play the role of the Republic’s hero.\textsuperscript{46}

V.

While no singular vision of Socrates emerges from the Republic, I hope that it has become clearer how clusters of questions develop alongside what at first appear as topoi for containing Socrates. In other words, I want to suggest that we can read Socrates out of the Republic in two ways: first, we can take his character out of the Republic literally construed, removing him from associations with the Republic’s so-called totalitarian or anti-political

\textsuperscript{44} Ehrenberg, “Polypragmosune,”\textsuperscript{60}.


\textsuperscript{46} Thus Diskin Clay notes that Socrates’ “is a new form of heroism” \((\text{Clay, } \textit{Platonic Questions}, 58).\) Socrates does act as Plato’s hero, but not in the same way as previous heroes – or even in the same way as Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus treat heroes in Books II and III.
institutions. Here we “read Socrates out” in the sense of “taking him out.” Yet at the same
time and second, I want to suggest that we can read Socrates from the Republic, that is, taking
the Republic as a starting point and reading him out of it. Here we “read Socrates out” in the
sense of “lifting him out,” that is taking an imprint of his figure as it appears in the Republic.
In this final section, I want to outline the consequences of this procedure, setting up
questions that will structure the chapters that follow. Some of this may appear more
provisional than necessary, but much of it will serve as groundwork for the different images
of Socrates I construct in what follows. These questions thus serve as the “questions of
Socrates” that open up what is to come – and the multivalent and polyvocal image of
Socrates I develop in the book as a whole.

Socrates first appears within the topos of the founder, a nomothetēs, but this did not
quite fit what we observed in the action of the Republic. A number of questions then follow:
Does not Socrates involve himself in establishing a just community besides that which
appears in the argument of the Republic? The “community of discourse” to which I alluded
earlier, might give some way of imagining the founding that accompanies Socrates’ practice
of philosophy. How might we understand this different kind of law-giving? What new nomoi
do Socrates and his interlocutors collectively articulate? What authority do these “laws”
possess? In the opening vignette of the Republic democratic authority contrasted with the
authority of Socrates: is the authority of Socrates’ publics anti-democratic? Does it rely on an
anti-democratic understanding of justice?

How does the community within the Republic come into being? We know that
Glaucon and Adeimantus had Plato as a brother, but we have no explanation for their
attraction to Socrates. Is Socrates the erotic fulcrum of his founding? What role does erōs
play in these associations? Does it motivate his interlocutors to join Socrates? As we will see
in subsequent chapters, potential interlocutors often approach Socrates with preconceived questions on which they want Socrates’ opinion, yet this did not occur in the Republic, where the questions developed more organically and the “community of discourse” spontaneously. Does this explain the ambiguous outcome of the Republic – in that we have no idea what becomes of Glaucon and Adeimantus? What would make it a success – or a failure?

Socrates also appears within the topos of the philosopher without quite fitting. What do we see in the Republic that marks Socrates’ practice of philosophy? The Republic seems to focus on the estrangement of politics and philosophy, both in terms of Socrates’ death and in the unlikely necessity of a confluence of politics and philosophy for the kallipolis, but this estrangement does not seem present in the action of the Republic, where Socrates’ practice of philosophy works against democratic conventions but also achieves popular support among those gathered at Cephalus’s house. If Socrates does not cower in the corner, as Callicles will describe philosophy in the Gorgias, why does Socrates nonetheless describe philosophy as threatened by political life? Why introduce this antithesis in the first place, an antithesis that has plagued all political thinking since – as we saw with Arendt, Wolin, and Latour?

Philosophy in the Republic always appears in the context of a discussion of education. If the philosopher of the Republic requires the education described in Books VI and VII, why didn’t Socrates? What kind of education would following Socrates require? What kind of education does Socrates offer? Whether or not Socrates educates his interlocutors and what Socrates might mean by education becomes a crucial question surrounding the figure of Socrates, as we will see especially in the Meno, Theaetetus, and Gorgias. Socrates’ questions, as we have seen, seem to focus more on moving with his interlocutors toward some deeper understanding of their chosen ways of life and the stakes of these choices. How do these
questions function? What kind of “answers” can they generate? What kind of effects can they provoke?

Finally, the topos of hero also appears to encompass Socrates, but not quite. Is Socrates, like a proper hero, good and just? Is Socrates happy? In the Republic Socrates seems to dodge these questions and instead focus his interlocutors, especially Glaucon and Adeimantus, on the arguments apart from the effects evident in Socrates’ character. But does not Socrates emerge as potentially the most compelling example? Can we separate his “proofs” in the Book IX from the proof he offers with his life, especially given the frequent resonances within the Republic to Socrates’ trial and execution?

Should we associate the word hero with Socrates at all? Could we call Socrates exemplary without falling into the trap of romanticizing him or, in Socrates’ terms from the Republic, unthinkingly imitating him? If we cannot emulate Socrates – or if we should not – then how should we respond to his character? What must we know in order to become like Socrates? How does he improve on Achilles or the tragic heroes?

***

As we have seen, the Republic depicts Socrates in the roles of founder, philosopher, and hero, each role responding in part to the life and death of Socrates by creating a place safe for Socrates’ practice of philosophy, defending philosophy and trying to win it allies, and exalting Socrates as the exemplar of the just soul – but none responds in full. Socrates’ founding, his philosophical practice, and his heroism instead raise more questions about the life and activity of Socrates. But Socrates does not simply become an empty signifier, a sign unhinged from any content. Instead, I have suggested that the Republic helps to specify the questions of Socrates – the questions that swirl around Socrates – in dialogue with the political culture and institutions of democratic Athens around him. In the Republic Socrates
assumes the Athenian topoi of the founder, the philosopher, and the hero and modifies them – becoming atopos, as I will describe Socrates in Chapter 7, in the process. Thus the Republic delineates a set of axes by which to view Socrates while avoiding defining and thus solving him; the questions of Socrates can instead take us to other dialogues and further engagements. The Republic puts us on the way to understanding Socrates, but now I turn to other dialogues as we travel farther along this path – both upwards and downwards, following Socrates.
2: THE STING OF PHILOSOPHY: Socrates Among the Athenians

The Socratic method of questioning aims to help people gain a better understanding of themselves and their nature and their potential for excellence. . . . They are discovering that the Socratic method can be of immense help in putting perplexities into better focus, in envisaging new directions of self-realization and human aspiration, and in pressing home the debate with the irrational.

– Christopher Phillips¹

Socrates allies himself with those who are powerful in the city and at the same time fascinated or charmed by him. But the charm only endures so long as he does not confront their most important concerns. . . . Those who get angry at Socrates and accuse him always see something the more gently disposed miss.

– Allan Bloom²

I.

As we have seen, the Republic raises questions about Socrates’ activity on a number of registers: the work of founding, the practice of philosophy, the heroism of his life. While the Republic does not answer these questions, it does elaborate them through the argument and the action of the dialogue. Although Socrates does not fully fit the role of philosopher-king of kallipolis, the conversation with Glaucon, Adeimantus, and the other interlocutors implicitly articulates what I have called the practice of his philosophy:³ begun with

---

¹ Christopher Phillips founded Socrates Cafés, philosophical clubs devoted to shared inquiry that I describe below. This comes from Phillips, Socrates Café, 11.

² Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind, 283.

³ In calling Socrates’ activity the “practice of philosophy,” I follow S. Sara Monoson in her use of Pierre Bourdieu: Monoson, Plato’s Democratic Entanglements, 4 n.4. The Memo, as I read it, develops the functions of this practice for Socrates.
confessions of ignorance, oriented toward persuading those around him, colorful with images and stories, and animated by a shared love of inquiry. Beginning not with his own preoccupations but with the questions of his fellow conversants, Socrates actively enlists those around him – even Thrasymachus – to explore ways of answering them. While Socrates seems to lead (and does so willingly), he also heeds the requests and demands of those around him; just as the opening vignette of the Republic in part dramatized, Socrates, however sophisticated he may be, remains part of a community where the majority almost always wins.4

Yet despite the echoes of Socrates’ trial and execution throughout it, the Republic does offer a rather cheerful portrayal of Socrates and his activity.5 After Book I, Socrates seems to have found a place where philosophy can question and explore fundamental questions of justice, the gods, and the good free from peril. But at least one question remains about Socrates’ practice of philosophy at the Republic’s end: does it matter? Does Socrates have any impact on the lives of those around him? We might expect Glaucon and Adeimantus, being Plato’s brothers, to exemplify the lasting effects – beneficial effects – of a night-long conversation with Socrates. Yet Glaucon and Adeimantus, as Plato’s readers would have known, hardly distinguished themselves in their subsequent lives. While eulogized for their fighting at Megara, perhaps in 409, neither won acclaim in any circle thereafter.6 In the cases of two exuberant and committed students – to judge, at least, by the action of the Republic and Socrates’ own praise for them (368a) – neither Athens nor anyone

4 Although I should note that Socrates does not force Polemarchus to compel him but rather invites persuasion.

5 Although one cannot forget its tragic influences or the death of Socrates as the tragic event that might have inspired Plato’s writing. On this view, the Republic “engenders a sense of loss,” as J. Peter Euben puts it: Euben, The Tragedy of Political Theory, 275.

6 On Adeimantus, see Nails, The People of Plato, 2 -3 and on Glaucon, 154 – 156.
else seems to have benefited. We may admire his displays of philosophic virtuosity, but Socrates’ practice of philosophy appears feckless at best. Can we say that it matters? Does Socrates teach anything? What evidence would we require?  

As this chapter’s epigraphs hint, the questions of Socrates’ effects and power also entail questions about the place of philosophy and thus of thoughtful activity more generally in political life today. As Allan Bloom has argued, the life and death of Socrates indicated that “philosophy” exists in tension with “politics,” and as philosophy, for Bloom, seeks to replace political prejudice, it inevitably provokes confrontation. This means that philosophy must always seek to protect itself against the excesses of the regime around it. Socrates appears bound to offend the powerful if he remains true in his commitment to inquiry. Yet this approach also denies philosophy any stable place within political life or among ordinary citizens; philosophy for Bloom – again, as embodied by Socrates – fishes for men because only a select few possesses the natures fit for philosophy. Aside from these few, philosophy will inevitably leave the masses unmoved. Philosophy then becomes irrelevant for most despite its intense relevance for others.

But Christopher Phillips has a different reading of Socrates. For Phillips, we might say that “philosophy” exists as a kind of “politics,” but such a distinction obscures the quotidian nature of philosophy and the political implications of what Phillips calls “seeking

7 I am aware that Plato as author remains the student lurking behind all of this – as the potentially exemplary student. Yet given that suggestion, I see little reason to decide the matter since Plato never appears and we have no way then of understanding his relationship to Socrates.

8 On political philosophy’s seeking to replace political prejudice, see Allan Bloom, “The Political Philosopher in a Democratic Society: The Socratic View.” Bloom’s view probably comes from Leo Strauss, What is Political Philosophy?

9 In general Catherine Zuckert advances this reading of Socrates in her recent book, Plato’s Philosophers. I should emphasize here that I do not wholly reject this reading; I just think it is incomplete. As I will argue below, for every ambiguous example of “failure” there is an ambiguous example of “success.” I engage more specifically with Zuckert’s arguments about the Meno as this chapter proceeds.
Socrates.” For Phillips, Socrates exemplifies a kind of philosophy that does not center on a single sage dispensing wisdom but rather a philosophy that lives in the people who practice it together. Phillips describes Socrates’ philosophy this way:

A type that utilized a method of philosophical inquiry that ‘everyman’ and ‘everywoman’ could embrace and take for his or her own, and in the process rekindle the childlike – but by no means childish – sense of wonder. A type of vibrant and relevant philosophy that quite often left curious souls with more questions than they’d had at the outset of the discussion, but at times enabled them to come up with at least tentative answers. A type of anti-guru philosophy in which the person leading the discussion always learns much more from the other participants than they could every learn from him. A type of philosophy that recognized that questions often reveal more about us and the world around us than answers. A type of philosophy in which questions often are the answers.10

In other words, for Phillips, Socrates’ practice of philosophy, rooted in a shared love of questioning and investigation, exists neither for the aggrandizement of a particular individual nor for the pursuit or achievement of a particular truth, but as a collective endeavor that both uplifts and humbles its participants through its tireless, reflexive practices of examination. Socrates’ philosophy, for Phillips, will make you change your life, and this exists as a possibility for every man, woman, or child who might undertake it.11

The contrast between Bloom and Phillips’ understandings of Socrates’ practice of philosophy also returns us to questions about Socrates’ role as an educator as well as a philosopher. Bloom and Phillips demonstrate two possible orientations for these activities: either Bloom’s philosophy defined against the political realm as an endeavor of the few (and thus an education only for the elite); or Phillips’ philosophy defined in terms of the political realm as an everyday activity all of us can share (and thus a democratic education). Each also has its underside: Bloom’s implicit elitism and threats of rule by experts; Phillips’ potential

10 Phillips, Socrates Café, 6 – 8.

11 Phillips quotes Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo” to this effect when discussing Walter Kaufmann and Kaufmann’s influence on Phillips’ undertakings: Ibid., 128.
reduction of Socrates to one more therapeutic pop philosophy, a commercialized pabulum that risks losing any radical implications. As we saw in the Republic, Socrates does not quite inhabit either world – his practice of philosophy exists within the polis and works through and against its languages and conventions but it also abstracts from it, creating a new community of discourse often at odds with the democratic norms around it. Bloom and Phillips translate the poles within the Republic to political life today; they heighten the stakes and intensify the questions we first saw raised by Arendt, Wolin, and Latour while elaborating potential uses of Socrates much like Nussbaum, Nehamas, and Villa in the Introduction.

In this chapter, I want to turn to another dialogue, the Meno, to explore the aspects and consequences of Socrates’ philosophic practice. While none of Socrates’ conversants in the Meno later win great repute, the dialogue’s focal question – what is excellence and can it be taught? – provokes a conversation that directly addresses the meaning and effects that dialogue with Socrates might have. While the word “philosophy” never appears, the dialogue also offers another example of what the practice of philosophy might resemble. With its three very different participants – Meno, an aristocrat from Thessaly; a Greek slave boy belonging to Meno; and Anytus, an Athenian politician but not an aristocrat – the Meno also portrays a diverse set of responses to Socrates as well as how a particular interlocutor inflects Socrates’ own ways of proceeding. The dialogue, moreover, sets forth a provocative and important image for Socrates’ practice of philosophy, the stingray, that provides a starting point for considering the ambiguous effects of association with Socrates.

Negotiating the competing interpretations of Phillips and Bloom, I argue in what follows that the Meno raises the question of what Socrates taught and to whom but does not answer it. By refusing to offer conclusive evidence for the benefits or detriments of the sting
of philosophy, the *Meno* leaves open the character of Socrates’ relationship with his fellow Athenians. And yet I will suggest that the dialogue also reveals the deeply political implications of Socrates’ practice of philosophy – a revelation made the more powerful by Antytus’s entry at the dialogue’s end. The practice of philosophy then seems to hold a distinct political meaning but does not fully articulate the consequences. We witness the sting of philosophy but we do not see its aftermath.12

II.

The *Meno* features a striking image of Socrates – the stingray. In the middle of their conversation, Meno exclaims to Socrates:

Socrates, before I even met you I used to hear that you are always in a state of perplexity and that you bring others to the same state, and now I think you are bewitching and beguiling me, simply putting me under a spell, so that I am quite perplexed. Indeed, if a joke is in order, you seem, in appearance and every other way, to be like a stingray, for it too makes anyone who comes close and touches it feel numb, and you now seem to have that kind of effect on me, for both my mind and my tongue are numb, and I have no answer to give you. (80a-b, 879)13

The sting of philosophy has struck Meno. In part, this sting describes the famous effects of any conversation with Socrates: *aporia*. This experience of dislocation and crisis, of being at a loss, or of total perplexity – all potential translations of the Greek14 – often results from conversations with Socrates. It occurs at multiple levels: the epistemological perplexity of not knowing what to say next as well as the psychological perplexity of being at a loss, of

---

12 With this approach to the *Meno*, I follow Alexander Nehamas (*Virtues of Authenticity*) as well as Roslyn Weiss (*Virtue in the Cave*) in their insistence that Socrates does not present a doctrine in the *Meno* but rather puts his interlocutors – and us – on the path of moral inquiry.

13 As in the previously chapters, I will give the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text and the corresponding page of the Cooper, ed. English translation in the text.

finding one’s reliable beliefs vanish.\textsuperscript{15} Socrates claims his own perplexity but he also infects those around him by questioning what they thought they knew and undermining their certainty until it disappeared.

In part too, Meno’s image evokes Socrates’ own strangeness. As one commentator suggests, the blunt head of the stingray resembles Socrates’ own snub nose and high forehead – he \textit{appears} like the stingray.\textsuperscript{16} Socrates’ effects exceed description in human terms – one must compare him to an animal, and an oceanic one at that.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, the association of Socrates with magic and bewitchment – at the end of this passage Meno warns Socrates that if he behaved this way anywhere else he would be accused of sorcery – furthers Socrates’ strange appearance and effects. Socrates’ conversations ensorcel their participants; the strange effects escape explanation, hence Socrates often earned the title of magician that we see here – Socrates casts a spell over souls.\textsuperscript{18} As Athens had developed a more complicated and “rationalized” political structure, magic had taken an increasingly marginal role, making accusations of sorcery akin to witchcraft in sixteenth-century Massachusetts;\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15} As Mary Margaret MacKenzie notes, Socrates also describes himself as in aporia in \textit{Protagoras} 361c, \textit{Lysis} 222c2, d7, and \textit{Laches} 200e5, among other places (“The Virtues of Socratic Ignorance,” 333).

\textsuperscript{16} R.W. Sharples also adds that the electric ray was used for food and Galen records its use for curing headaches through an improvised electric shock treatment – all strange comparisons for Socrates (Sharples, \textit{Plato: Meno}, 141).

\textsuperscript{17} John Heath argues that by comparing Socrates to an animal, Meno attempts to shame him (Heath, \textit{The Talking Greeks}, 306 - 314). As we will see, shame often accompanies the “elenchus,” and we could thus read Meno’s shaming as \textit{quid pro quo} for Socrates’.

\textsuperscript{18} As Michelle Gellrich puts it, “it is precisely the tendency of Socrates’ performances to engross and stun audiences that elicits the not uncommon observation in Plato’s dialogues that he is indeed a magician, a \textit{goē}, fitted out with techniques that involve his interlocutors in the mental equivalent of sleights of hand and prestidigitation” (Gellrich, “Socratic Magic,” 275).

\textsuperscript{19} E.R. Dodds provides the most famous argument for this in \textit{Greeks and the Irrational}. 

83
often disliked sophists received these epithets. Socrates’ strangeness does not only resemble the bestial, but the marginal and dangerous.

Socrates also acts like a stingray, and he has numbed Meno – both his mind and his tongue. As Meno explains, he has given many speeches – “on thousands of occasions” – about excellence before large audiences, but now he cannot even say what excellence is. The numbing effects of the stingray do not merely silence Meno, but they deprive him of his security, even of the certainty of his own experiences. Everything once seemed easy and straightforward to Meno; now numbed, Meno feels as if he has lost his identity. Thus to the epistemological dimensions of the effects of Socrates’ “elenchus” come a psychological or emotional dimension as well – feelings of shame, a loss of certainty, resentment and even anger. The way of questioning cuts deeply into one’s self image, replacing knowingness with self-conscious ignorance and confidence with doubt.

The image of the stingray opens a field of possibilities for thinking through the effects of Socrates’ practice of philosophy. Scholars have often discussed the “Socratic education” and “Socrates’ teaching,” and the action of the dialogue to that point suggests why. The preceding conversation offers a near-perfect demonstration of the famous “Socratic elenchus”: an investigation of beliefs with a commitment to sincerity (Meno assures this by posing the question, but Socrates also reiterates, as we see below, that Meno speak his mind); a demonstration of the inconsistency of Meno’s beliefs (twice: first Meno’s confident definition cribbed from Gorgias; then his more poetic idea); and the arrival at aperia, an impasse (the end of this first third of the dialogue and prelude to Meno’s paradox

---

20 See Gellrich, “Socratic Magic.”

21 As noted by Mary Margaret MacKenzie, “Socratic Ignorance,” 334.
and the demonstration with the slave boy).\textsuperscript{22} But the image also seems to call the language of education into question. To what (or from what) does Socrates educate Meno? What education numbs its recipients and leaves them barren? What has Socrates taught Meno – if anything – by bringing him to a such a perplexed state? What kind of power has Socrates’ exerted? What benefit might this contain? The “sting of philosophy” carries ambiguous connotations.

***

Meno began this conversation. Without introduction or setting, Meno initiates the dialogue with a series of direct and difficult questions:

Can you tell me, Socrates, can excellence be taught? Or is it not teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way? (70a, 871)

A young man about to embark on a military career, Meno has much at stake in this inquiry. His concern, excellence or \textit{aretē}, described the pinnacle of ethical and heroic achievement in ancient Athens. Often translated into English as “virtue,” \textit{aretē} marked the chief aspiration of any well-born Greek; we might think of it, as Alexander Nehamas has suggested, as somewhat akin to “success,” although with a distinct moral connotation as something “outstanding” and worthy of high regard (of \textit{kleos} in Greek).\textsuperscript{23} While originally associated with the traditional virtues of heroes, Athenians “made \textit{aretē} a virtue of the demos,”\textsuperscript{24} democratizing \textit{aretē} to form part of the democratic moral lexicon, subverting and

\textsuperscript{22} MacKenzie separates using “a series of positive theses about the nature of knowledge” from the inconsistency procedure (“Socratic Ignorance,” 332), but Vlastos’s discussion does not (Vlastos, “The Socratic Elenchus”). As will become clear below, I do not agree with Vlastos’s subtitle that “method is all,” but I do agree that “elenchus” helpfully describes \textit{part} of Socrates’ practice of philosophy, albeit a part that exists as one voice among many.

\textsuperscript{23} Nehamas, \textit{Virtues of Authenticity}, 5.

\textsuperscript{24} Balot, \textit{Greek Political Thought}, 53.
appropriating the terminology and ideals of the aristocrats in the process. As Josiah Ober has put it, “as long as the demos remained arbiter of public opinion and policy, the word demokratia was a name for a political society and culture in which the most basic and elemental human power – the power to assign meanings to symbols – belonged to the people.”25 Thus Meno asks both about a fundamental concept for any successful life as well as about a fundamentally contested concept in the constant and dynamic struggle between mass and elite within democratic Athens.26

Whether Meno seeks an aretē with its new democratic meaning or an older aristocratic one does not deny the importance of the concept. Seeming to recognize the seriousness behind Meno’s question, Socrates exudes appropriate admiration in his response:

Before now, Meno, Thessalians had a high reputation [endokimo] among the Greeks and were admired [ethaumazonta] for their horsemanship and their wealth, but now, it seems to me, they are also admired for their wisdom [epi sophia] . . . (20a, 871)

The responsibility for this reputation, Socrates continues, lies with Gorgias, the sophist. He visited Thessaly and prominent Thessalians came to love him [erastas, 70b3] for his wisdom while Gorgias also accustomed them to seek bold and grand answers to any questions they asked. Yet here in Athens, Socrates admits, wisdom does not live so profligately; ask an Athenian such a question, Socrates adds, and he would probably laugh and deny knowing not only whether excellence can be taught or how it comes to be but even what it itself actually is. “I myself,” Socrates tells Meno, “am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter, and I blame myself for my complete ignorance about excellence” (70b, 871).

25 Ober, Mass and Elite, 339. This challenges the argument of Nicole Loraux, The Invention of Athens, who argues that democracy never achieved a language or conceptual system independent of aristocratic ideas. At least for my purposes, we can see these words as between aristocracy and democracy, and their meanings as inflected by the particular backgrounds and uses of the interlocutors.

26 Ibid.
In this first exchange, many key motifs of the dialogue appear, all of which also pertain to the different possible meanings of the sting of philosophy. Meno approaches Socrates as one who knows – *exeis moi epein*, “can you tell me?”, Meno’s first words, assume that Socrates has something worth saying. This something also concerns teaching; Meno wants to know if someone could teach excellence, whether it’s “teachable,” *didakton*. Moreover, Meno contrasts the “teachable” with what results from practice, *asketón*. If what Socrates offers does not consist in teaching, perhaps its *practice* can nonetheless have an effect. Finally, Meno introduces nature, *phusis*, as an explanation. If not by being taught or practicing it, one might simply inherit excellence.

The opening dialogue also contrasts Socrates’ ignorance to the apparent knowledge informing Meno’s question. In just a few words, Meno exemplifies what Jonathan Lear has called “knowingness,” the deadness that comes from living according to settled and unquestioned answers to life’s fundamental questions.\(^27\) In other words, we could not call Meno “naive”: his question not only contains the sophists’ common categories, but its confrontational quality – what Socrates later calls “eristic” (*eristkon logon*, 80e2) – also echoes the sophists’ common practice. Rather than beginning conversation about a recent wrestling match\(^28\) or one’s agenda for the day\(^29\) – as one today might discuss the weather or last night’s baseball score – Meno goes for the proverbial jugular. Socrates’ response, on the other hand, does precisely the opposite. Referring to common opinion – the “high repute” of the Thessalians – Socrates seems almost chatty as he recounts his impressions of Meno, Thessaly, Gorgias, and Athens. Whereas Meno tells Socrates nothing about himself or what

\(^{27}\) Lear, *Open Minded*, 4.

\(^{28}\) As in Plato’s *Charmides*.

\(^{29}\) As in Plato’s *Euthypro*. 
he might know on the subject of excellence, Socrates confesses ignorance and proposes a
collective examination rather than answers.30

These motifs might also remind us of the Apology. There Socrates describes his
activity as going from young to old persuading them not to care for their bodies or wealthy
but for the best possible state of their souls, saying: “Wealth does not bring about excellence
[aretē], but excellence [aretē] makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually
and collectively” (30b, 28). Also in the Apology, Socrates contrasts himself to sophists, saying
he knows nothing while they claim to possess knowledge that they also teach. Just like his
opening lines in the Meno, the Apology foregrounds Socrates’ ignorance, its first sentence
ending with the emphatic ouk oida – “I do not know” (17a, 18). Socrates identifies himself as
a citizen of Athens from the beginning of both dialogues. He also responds to reputations –
doxai; his in the Apology (18c), Meno’s in the Meno (70a) – in each.

I want to suggest that the Meno not only gives us an avenue by which to explore the
content and effects of Socrates’ practice of philosophy but also connects to broader
reflections about Socrates’ place in Athens, the political consequences of his activities, and
the reasons for his trial and execution. The dialogue, I will argue, gives an ambiguous
triptych of possible responses to Socrates while also delineating the registers at which his
practice of philosophy occurs. As we have already seen, philosophical practice involves and
distinguishes itself from “teaching” by professing ignorance and advancing only shared
inquiry. Yet while the inclusiveness of this conversation and its open-ended quality might
point to a practice of philosophy friendly to democracy – a proto-Socrates café in line with
the epigraph from Chris Phillips – the dialogue does not offer such a straightforward

30 Nehamas quite usefully points out that Meno’s later admission of ignorance echoes Socrates’ insistence on
ignorance here – both know “not at all” (to parapan). See Nehamas, Virtues of Authenticity, 6 – 8.
reading. Rather, the presence of Anytus at its end and the ambiguity about Meno and his slave boy leaves the ultimate consequences of philosophical practice undefined. The dialogue thus continues to raise more questions of Socrates.

III.

What the first few lines between Socrates and Meno intimated, the ensuing dialogue develops. While Meno insists that Socrates answer his question, Socrates contends again that he has no answer, turning the question back on Meno. Wishing to pursue his question – note that Meno, not Socrates, initiates and continues the conversation – and left with no choice, Meno relents. The first third of the dialogue consists of his two different definitions of excellence, each of which corresponds to an inherited authority: first the sophists, then the poets. But neither can withstand much questioning.

Meno’s first attempt gives a “swarm” (smēnoi) of excellences, provoking Socrates to ask what they all have in common. As Meno puts it: “a man’s excellence consists of being able to manage public affairs and in so doing to benefit his friends and harm his enemies and to be careful that no harm comes to himself” (71e). Yet women, children, and slaves have excellence too, says Meno: “And there are very many other excellences, so that one is not at a loss to say what excellence is. There is excellence for every action and every age, for every task of ours and every one of us . . .” (72a). Do these ways of excellence, Socrates responds, have one and the same form? What makes each of them excellence?

As I described above, this style of questioning often guess under the name “elenchus,” a description of the process of purging false opinions and instilling correct ones

31 Here I differ from Robert Bartlett (“Socratic Political Philosophy and the Problem of Virtue”), who thinks there are three definitions. Roslyn Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, argues for two different attempts at defining excellence.
– although not with any pretensions to final, unambiguous knowledge. Yet while the description of Socrates’ elenchus captures part of his activity, it does not encompass its entirety. At another level, Socrates’ words evoke important associations, both within the *Meno* itself and beyond it. The word for “swarm,” also describes a hive; Socrates thus associates Meno’s initial answer with insects that sting, much like the sting of Socrates’ own image of the stingray. Ideas have a potency beyond the fibrillations of the mind – they can wound our very bodies. The image of stinging and penetration also recalls the erotic dimensions of the conversation and the intimacy that attends them. But Meno’s stinging answers do not numb or deaden their conversation. Instead, they enliven it, piquing Socrates’ curiosity and animating what follows: they inspire Socrates’ first analogy when he asks Meno to compare this “swarm of excellences” to a hive of bees and thus try to answer what makes the bees bees. Calling Meno’s answer a “swarm” (*smēnos*, 72a7; *smēné*, 72b1) also recalls the drones and swarms in the descriptions of degenerate cities from the *Republic*.

Socrates first compares the city in speech to a hive (*smēnos*, 520b6) and later Socrates describes the oligarchic son who grows up as a drone and corrupts the hive (552c3). Perhaps even more strikingly the would-be tyrant of Book IX suffers from a “swarm of pleasures” (*to smēnos tôn hedonôn*, 574d2) that lead him to housebreaking, stealing clocks, and ransacking temples. The associations that swarm around the elenchus thus evoke two

---

32 As Roslyn Weiss puts it, “in carrying out his task, the method Socrates employs is elenchus, a method that can examine and ‘refute’ opinions but that has no hope of transcending opinion and yielding knowledge” (Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 4). Weiss’s superb study of the argument of the *Meno* complements the reading I offer here; while I try to tease out implicit ambiguities in the action of the dialogue, Weiss offers a persuasive reading of the nature of moral inquiry that emerges in the dialogue’s explicit argument.

33 The Greek word for conversation or association that often appears in the dialogues, *sunousia*, also carries these erotic overtones, as does our English word “conversation,” which once meant intercourse and intimacy. I discuss *sunousia* in the following chapter, Chapter 3.

34 *Smēné* and its derivates occurs rarely in Plato’s dialogues, with only four instances beyond those discussed above in the *Meno* and the *Republic*: Cratylus 401e6; Statesman 293d6 and 301e1; and Laws 933d3.
opposing ways of reading it. Meno’s throng of answers both provoke what follows and they
overpower it; the elenchus both describes the mechanics of their dialogue and these
associations crowd and vivify it.

As the sting’s erotic resonance forewarns, we can also observe that Socrates and
Meno’s conversation enacts a classic ritual of ancient Greece – the flirtation between an
older man and a winsome younger one. Thus at another level – alongside elenchus and its
associations – smolders the intense heat of erōs. After Meno’s first definition proves
inadequate, Socrates introduces the analogy of shape and color: “What is this which applies
to the round and the straight and the other things which you call shapes and which is the
same in them all?” Socrates asks. “Try to say, that you may practice for your answer about
excellence” (75a).

Meno: No, Socrates, but you tell me.

Socrates: Do you want me to gratify you? [Boulei soi charisōmai;]

Meno: I certainly do. [Pann ge.] (75b1-3, 875)

While we might easily miss its significance, this colloquy would resonate with any
contemporary reader. Socrates’ question, while at one level referring to giving a possible
answer for Meno, at another invites an erotic relationship – to which Meno responds with a
playful, if not enthusiastic, “yes.” And this would hardly have elicited remark, even about
Socrates: Socrates often declares love for boys, including those with whom he converses,35
and Socrates had already alluded to Meno’s lover Aristippus (perhaps as a competitor) at the
dialogue’s beginning (70b). Just a few lines after this interchange, the erotic suggestions

35 As Kenneth Dover comments: “We encounter Socrates in a strongly homosexual ambience; some of Plato’s
earlier dialogues are set in the gymnasion, Socrates’ youthful friends are commonly – one might say normally –
in love with boys, and he fully accepts these relationships” (Dover, Greek Homosexuality, 154). In addition to the
Meno, Dover notes appearances of homosexual, erotic love in Enhydrinus, Lysis, Republic, Parmenides, Phaedrus,
Protagoras, Gorgias, and Symposium.
continue as Meno again demands an answer from Socrates and Socrates exclaims: “You are outrageous, Meno! You bother an old man to answer questions . . .” (76a). And when Meno promises to submit to questioning after just one more answer from Socrates, Socrates responds:

Even someone who was blindfolded would know from your conversation that you are handsome and still have lovers. . . . Because you are forever giving orders in a discussion, as spoiled people do, who behave like tyrants as long as they are young. (76b-c)

Socrates sounds at once ironic and infatuated, manipulative and powerless. Taken as sincere, we can understand this and Socrates’ subsequence submissions to Meno’s demands as evidencing his erotic attachment. On the other hand, taken as playful (or spiteful) mockery, Socrates baits Meno to continue the conversation, lest Meno’s obstinacy derail it. Does erotēs generate the dialogue or does Socrates simply use it? Considering the civic function of erotēs and erotic associations in democratic Athens at the time, this level of Meno and Socrates’ conversation deeply implicates what once appeared an abstract and philosophical discourse; they cannot help working within the political culture that surrounds them.\(^4\)

Whether or not Socrates and Meno enjoy each other – and in what sort of way – during the discussion, after Meno’s second definition fails, the dialogue becomes fragmented and threatens to fall apart. When Meno’s initial standard explanation of excellence – the “swarm of excellences” – becomes untenable, Meno shifts to a more poetic account. Excellence, says Meno, is as the poet says: “to find joy in beautiful things and have power.” So, Meno adds, “I say that excellence is to desire beautiful things and have the power to

\(^4\) This element of the *Meno* hints at themes that I develop more fully in the subsequent chapter on Plato’s *Symposium.*
acquire them” (77b).\textsuperscript{37} Meno again relies on a widely accepted understanding of excellence,\textsuperscript{38} but an underspecified one; just as Socrates asks we too can ask: What is beauty? Are all desires for beautiful things excellence? What does it mean to acquire beautiful things? Again Socrates’ questions seek to deflate these inherited opinions (doxai), and as Meno and Socrates investigate Meno’s answer, Meno’s lack of thought also reveals itself – as before his understanding of excellence relied on other elements of excellence, goods (agathá) like justice and moderation, for example (79a). “You play with me, Meno,” Socrates teases as the lack of substance in Meno’s answer becomes clearer, using a word that could also have an erotic innuendo (paízeis, 79a7).\textsuperscript{39} They must once more return to the original question and ask what excellence is. “Answer me again from the beginning,” Socrates demands, “what do you and your friend [Gorgias] say that excellence is?” (79e, 879).

Here Meno conjures the image of Socrates as a stingray. Three times Socrates asks Meno to begin his inquiry again, and Meno will not. After two attempts, Meno and Socrates have arrived at what appears an insurmountable impasse.\textsuperscript{40} They have seen that excellence has different parts – the “virtues” of justice, moderation, courage, and so forth\textsuperscript{41} – but have failed to find a suitable explanation for what these virtues share in common. Meno has heard about this before – people talk about Socrates – and now Meno has an experience to add to the rumors: he’s perplexed and numbed. Meno cannot continue. But Socrates insists that he

\textsuperscript{37} Sharples notes that “Plato is clearly portraying here a habit of appealing to poets as repositories of wisdom, a habit shared by the Greeks in general but cultivated by the Sophists in particular” (Sharples, Plato: Meno, 137). One can observe similar phenomena in Protagoras (339a – 347b), Gorgias (484b-c), and later in Meno (95d – 96a).

\textsuperscript{38} As Jacob Klein comments: “We cannot help gaining the impression that the remembered opinion of somebody else always accompanies what Meno thinks” (A Commentary of Plato's Meno, 71).

\textsuperscript{39} Liddell and Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, 1288.

\textsuperscript{40} As noted by Weiss, Virtue in the Cave, 49: 79c3-5; 79c7-8; 79e1-2.

\textsuperscript{41} The notable “cardinal virtues” of the ancient world: Whitehead, “Cardinal Virtues, 37.
suffers perplexity. If the stingray numbs those who touch it, Socrates says, he only resembles it if he (as stingray) numbs himself as well: “for I myself do not have the answer [οὐ γὰρ ἐνεπορὲν] when I perplex [ποιῶ ἀπορεῖν] others, but I am more perplexed [ἀπορῶν] than anyone when I cause perplexity [ἀπορεῖν] in others” (80c). Just as Socrates aligned himself with Meno’s own ignorance about excellence at the beginning of the dialogue, so he also joins Meno’s experience of perplexity. Yet this shared state of perplexity does not discourage Socrates from continuing the investigation with Meno: “All the same, I want to consider it with you and to join with you in searching for whatever it is” (80d), Socrates adds.

Socrates’ reassurance that he and Meno despite their shared state of perplexity can prolong their inquiry also underscores an important shift that has occurred in the dialogue. Meno had begun by asking whether one could teach excellence or whether it must come through practice, by nature, or otherwise. This question and Socrates’ response invited a contrast between Gorgias and the sophists who claimed to teach excellence, among other things, and Socrates, who denied teaching or knowing (most famously in the *Apology*). In response to Meno’s initial question, Socrates rejected the teacher-student paradigm, dispensing with a model of education that conveys knowledge from one to the other, but not proposing an alternative. Yet Socrates’ reiteration that he and Meno can recommence their conversation calls attention to what has already occurred in the dialogue: a dialogue and collective inquiry (however slow and painful at times), one that could serve as a background for continued investigation. Socrates’ language reflects this: he desires that they examine and seek [σκέψασθαι καὶ σούζειν, 80d3-4] what excellence is. This first word, from *skeptein*,

---

42 Before this, another semi-flirtatious exchange takes place between Meno and Socrates: Socrates calls Meno “a rascal” (*panourgos*, 80b8) and accuses Meno of calling Socrates a stingray so that Socrates would have to draw an image of Meno’s handsomeness (80c). Socrates also calls Meno his master a little later in the dialogue (86d).

43 *Apology* 20c.
meaning to inquire or investigate, recurs incessantly throughout the dialogues, almost always as part of Socrates’ so-called “elenchus” and acts as a hortatory call to collective examination.\textsuperscript{44} The second word, from \textit{zetein}, also occurs often as part of the elenchus, but here Socrates’ adds the \textit{sum}-prefix, denoting something pursued in common, as part of a collective.\textsuperscript{45} Together (\textit{sum}-), Meno and Socrates will continue.

Aporia, I think, plays a crucial role here. Meno and Socrates face a dead end (another meaning of \textit{aporia}) in their conversation, but rather than allow this to paralyze their inquiry as Meno fears it has (in his image of the stingray), instead we might say that the shared experience of perplexity creates a new common ground for investigation. Experiencing \textit{aporia} together provokes their recognition of a shared space that they can either accept or reject. To borrow from Jürgen Habermas, we could say that by proceeding with their conversation, Meno and Socrates choose to sustain a lifeworld, a space of shared meanings – or shared awareness of a lack of meanings, given the \textit{aporia} that brings them together – where they can now practice begin to act communicatively, deliberating about a matter of shared concern, namely \textit{aretē}. The sting of philosophy becomes a referent for the collective undertaking of philosophy, and the perplexity provoked by the sting of philosophy becomes a constituent moment for the inquiry in common that follows.

Yet the ensuing conversation hardly conforms to a perfect deliberative setting. Meno immediately throws a polemical wrench in the gears and Socrates counters with a story. This again calls into question the reading of Socrates’ practice of philosophy in the open democratic terms my invocation of Phillips’ cafés suggested. First, as Socrates encourages Meno to join him and continue their investigation, Meno poses his famous paradox:

\textsuperscript{44} Vlastos, “Socratic Elenchus,” 4.

\textsuperscript{45} Liddell and Scott, \textit{A Greek-English Lexicon}, 1670.
How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know? (80d, 880)

This paradox – actually two paradoxes\(^46\) – exemplifies a classic move of the sophists; having founded his earlier arguments on common opinion and the poets, now Meno shows Gorgias’s influence most powerfully.\(^47\) The paradox also directly refers to learning through inquiry, rather than teaching or transmission, challenging the implicit distinction Socrates has developed in the action until this point in the dialogue.\(^48\) Meno’s paradox confronts the way in which the conversation has proceeded to this point, implicitly demanding an account of how one could teach excellence that would not require foreknowledge in the student.

Socrates’ response to the paradox illuminates another aspect of his elenchus.\(^49\) Rather than engaging Meno with any straightforward argument, Socrates tells a story. Commenting on Meno’s “eristic” – *eristikon logon*, meaning a polemical argument – question (and thus alluding to Gorgias), Socrates shifts the terrain by recalling some divine matters that he once heard wise men and women discussing (81a), priests and priestesses who concerned themselves with being able to give an account (*logon*, 81a11) of their practices. Socrates continues by saying that Pindar asserts these things too, namely that the human soul is immortal, dies and is reborn, and in passing often from life to life has seen all things here and in the underworld. Therefore “there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is not

\(^{46}\) As Roslyn Weiss notes, “Meno’s paradox” contains (1) a paradox of inquiry, asking how one can search for what one does not know; and (2) a paradox of discovery, asking how new discoveries can occur at all. Socrates dismisses the first and changes the terms of the second with his story. See Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 53.

\(^{47}\) As Robert Hoerber in “Plato’s Meno” notes, Gorgias shows skepticism about the possibilities of knowledge in his *On Nature or the Non-Existent* (101).

\(^{48}\) As Julius Moravcsik has underscored in “Learning as Recollection,” 57.

\(^{49}\) Here I skip over much discussion of the paradox itself, for which I refer my readers to Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 49 – 76.
surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about excellence and about other things” (81c-d). Thus every human being can recollect – what people call “learning” (mathēsin) – and discover everything for itself, for searching and learning constitute recollection (to gar zētein ara kai to manthanein anamnēsis bolon estin, 81d4-5). “I trust that this is true,” Socrates says, “and I want to inquire along with you into the nature of excellence” (ētelo meta sou zētein arêtē boti estin, 81e2-3).

Whereas only a few lines before Socrates had posed an nearly identical question and Meno had responded with his polemical paradox, Meno’s response here marks the shift accomplished by Socrates’ story. “Yes, Socrates,” Meno answers, his first affirmative in the entire dialogue. “But how do you mean that we do not learn,” he asks, “but that what we call learning is recollection? Can you teach me that this is so?” Meno has not fully imbibed Socrates’ tale – he still asks if Socrates can tell him its truth (and Socrates immediately catches this, calling him a rascal, panourgos, again: 81e7) –but Meno revises his request, instead asking that Socrates show him (deixasthai, 82a6) what this story means.

Socrates’ elenchus may have shown the inadequacy of Meno’s inherited opinions, but Socrates’ story seems to enlist him in a new a compelling way. Again we see that Socrates’ practice of philosophy does not consist solely of elenchic question and answer but that the discussion builds itself through allusions as well as with the fabric of Athenian political culture and Greek myth. But what does this story really accomplish? In part, after the demonstration of Socrates’ story with Meno’s slave boy, Meno does engage the questions more earnestly. While Meno wonders at what has occurred, he avers Socrates’ assertion that the slave boy has shown recollection – and thus supported Socrates’ assertions; Meno further agrees to the story’s moral after Socrates has shown it:
Socrates: Then if the truth about reality is always in our soul, the soul would be immortal so that you should always confidently try to seek and recollect what you do not know at present – that is, what you do not recollect?

Meno: Somehow, Socrates, I think that what you say is right. (86b, 886)

Not only does Meno agree with Socrates about the need to seek knowledge for oneself through recollection, but he agrees to the change of life that this belief entails, a change that also includes rejecting the argument Meno had earlier parroted from Gorgias:

Socrates: We will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it.

Meno: In this too I think you are right, Socrates. (86b-c, 886)

Whether or not the story contains the truth, belief in it leads toward truth, Socrates seems to imply: if we investigate and search out the things we do not know, we might approach truth rather than simply surrender the quest before beginning it. Declaring himself and Meno “of one mind” on this matter, Socrates then reiterates his question yet again: “shall we try to find out together what virtue is?” (86c). This time Meno joins affirmatively: “Certainly.” The story seems to inspire investigation after the disillusion and confusion of perplexity. 50

But the story not only effects a change in Meno; it also creates an image that pervades the conversation that follows, providing a new language with which Socrates and Meno can conduct their dialogue. (As we will see later, this foreshadows a recurrent pattern in Socrates’ philosophic practice – albeit one with varying degrees of success.) Thus when Meno asks again whether excellence is something teachable (86d), Socrates can use the story to ask whether one can teach (or be taught) excellence or whether one must recollect it (86c). The investigation that follows focuses on how one might learn anything, and the need to

50 I do not mean to idealize Meno’s subsequent participation – it’s no sea change. But Meno does participate more actively and seem more involved.
seek despite one’s not knowing. The story thus also shifts from questions of different excellences to questions of knowing and learning and defuses the fraught vocabulary suffused with poets and their often aristocratic notions of beauty and nobility. While enthusing Meno and changing the terrain of the conversation, Socrates’ story also buttresses a shift in vocabulary within the *Meno* from the language of teaching as conveyance of knowledge – often associated with the sophists – to that of shared inquiry – seeking and searching in common – in the realm of opinion.51 Whereas the earlier conversation had emphasized one’s acquisition of excellence, the story changes the register of excellence altogether, moving it to the soul. Since the story describes an immortal soul, excellence in the soul also becomes a matter of realization rather than attainment. Excellence becomes, like the conversation itself, a matter of seeking and pursuit. And as the demonstration with Meno’s slave boy seems to indicate, the work of recollection also requires another person – not a teacher, but someone like Socrates.

In the wake of the story, then, the trajectory of the dialogue seems all to the good. The story, as others have noted, also carries an implication potentially favorable to democracy (and one reinforced by the example with the slave boy): if every human being has within itself all possible knowledge, then no well-born man or woman can claim natural advantage.52 Socrates and Meno decide that while knowledge may escape them, that they can pursue correct opinion toward truth (97b), apparently leading the way toward common inquiry for everyone; while excellence may come as a gift from the gods, coming to know

---

51 This contrast returns in Hannah Arendt’s account of Socrates in “Philosophy and Politics,” to which I return in Chapter 7.

52 As Patrick Deneen has recently commented: “By means of his demonstration of this theory on Meno’s unnamed, interchangeable slave, Socrates points out how this activity [anamnesis] can and indeed must be pursued by every human being who deservedly can and should become ‘self-rulled’” (Deneen, *Democratic Faith*, 208).
excellence lies within the human realm (99c). This reconfigures the dialogue itself – rather than showing purgation of false opinions followed by construction of true ones (or the failure of Socrates caused by the presence of less than philosophical natures), the dialogue offers a working through of existing opinions, a kind of winnowing of one’s beliefs with the elenchus as the sieve. The numbness of the stingray does seem to incite a greater activity and aliveness, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt – the apparent effects of Socrates’ practice of philosophy.

If the *Meno* ended here, we might see little reason to agree with Allan Bloom’s implying the exclusivity and endangerment of philosophy. Having relinquished his attachments to sophistic and poetic conceptions of excellence, Meno appears enlisted in sharing a collective inquiry with Socrates. The democratic implications of the demonstration with Meno’s slave boy also broaden the scope of these collective undertakings, suggesting that not only foreigners but also slaves might practice philosophy. Moreover, the end of the dialogue with its commitment to working through opinions strikes a note of humility and commitment to philosophic endeavor, one to which Meno happily assents. Chris Phillips seems right: philosophy can become popular, and political thinking can become an integral part of our collective project of, in Josiah Ober’s words, “going on together.”

---

53 As Catherine Zuckert emphasizes in *Plato’s Philosophers*: “In the *Meno* Plato thus reminds his readers of the limits of Socrates’ ability to benefit those with whom he conversed” (562). I would agree, but in part – I don’t believe that the *Meno* closes the issue, as Zuckert reads it; rather, the outcome remains more ambiguous, thus raising questions about Socrates that require continued engagement.

54 As Arendt puts it: “Socrates, knowing that we do not know, and nevertheless unwilling to let it go at that, remains steadfast in his own perplexities and, like the electric ray, paralyzed himself, paralyzes anyone he comes into contact with. . . . Yet what cannot fail to look like paralysis from the outside – from the standpoint of ordinary human affairs – is felt as the highest state of being active and alive” (*The Life of the Mind*, 173).

IV.

But the *Meno* does not end here and it does not end well. Before Meno and Socrates can finish, Meno’s host in Athens, Anytus, interrupts the conversation. A wealthy politician, Anytus joined two others in bringing the accusations against Socrates that led to his trial, conviction, and execution.\(^{56}\) Although Anytus had also participated in the oligarchic coup of the Thirty, he later won high office in the restored democracy. At the dramatic date of the dialogue, circa 401 – 2 BCE, Anytus had recently won praise from Isocrates for his support of democracy and for refraining from vendettas against those involved in the preceding oligarchic coups. While he appears as Meno’s guest-friend and host in the dialogue, his reputation as a democratic man contrasts to Meno’s aristocratic and foreign background.\(^{57}\)

Socrates reminds us of Anytus’s reputation as the latter enters the conversation. His entry immediately recalls the *Apology* not just because he accused Socrates but because of the conversation’s subject preceding him. Meno had just asked Socrates whether there are any teachers of excellence, and Socrates had responded that while he had often tried to find some, he had not yet discovered any. “And yet I have searched for them with the help of many people,” Socrates adds, “especially those whom I believed to be most experienced in the matter” (89e). This recalls Socrates’ description of searching for wisdom among poets, politicians, and craftsmen after hearing from the Delphic oracle that no one was wiser than he. Moreover, the questions that Socrates poses as he begins to speak with Anytus strongly resemble those he described asking Callias in the *Apology*: using the examples of physicians, shoemaking, and flute-playing instead of horses, Socrates asks if similar experts in human

\(^{56}\) In addressing the charges, Socrates says he fears the rumors even more than the official accusations, saying: “These [the unofficial charges] I fear much more than I fear Anytus and his friends, though they too are formidable” (*Apology*, 18b, 19). On Anytus, see Nails, *The People of Plato*, 37 – 38.

\(^{57}\) This hints at how Anytus anticipates many of the themes that culminate with Callicles in the *Gorgias*. See Chapter 5.
excellence exist. In other words, before Anytus has uttered a single syllable, his presence comes freighted with questions surrounding Socrates’ trial and the questions of the place of Socrates’ way of life as well as its political consequences. Whereas Meno comes shadowed by the sophists, Anytus bears the mark of Athenian democracy. Thus if the Meno questions and explores the nature and effects of Socrates’ practice of philosophy, then Anytus raises the issue more pointedly: Did Socrates deserve the hemlock? Does Anytus refute or confirm the justice of Socrates’ searching?

Moreover, as a \textit{politikos}, a man involved in Athenian politics at a high level, Anytus represented not only the political class but the class responsibly for educating his fellow Athenians. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Athenian democracy viewed itself as collectively educating its citizens through participation at a variety of levels. The “sophistic movement” challenged these assumptions about education by proposing an individualized, expertise-based model – the idea of education implicit in Meno’s question that began the dialogue.\footnote{As Ryan Balot notes, sophists “were part of an intellectual trend characterized by probing questions of politics, doing empirical research, thinking deeply about rhetoric and how to teach it, and speculating about the objective basis of morality, or lack thereof” (Balot, \textit{Greek Political Thought}, 99).}

Yet this dissent occurred within an overwhelmingly democratic political culture, as I noted above. As a prosperous but non-aristocratic citizen involved in politics, Anytus exemplified in many ways the model of the kind of education Athens made possible – through public participation Anytus had acquired the knowledge to become a leader of the democracy. Thus the conversation’s implicit movement toward expertise would have challenged Anytus from the beginning, and its direction following the introduction of the idea of recollection would only have intensified this. The suggestion that only through intense and focused dialogue – like that displayed by Socrates and Meno’s slave – could citizens learn excellence undercut the standard exemplified by Anytus. No longer could democratic heroes, statesmen such as
Pericles or Themistocles, offer exemplary lives to inspire their fellow citizens. The process of recollection proposes a radically different model.

The conversation with Anytus seems to confirm what his character presaged. When Socrates suggests that the sophists might offer the education to excellence that he and Meno have sought hitherto in their conversation, Anytus reacts with fury:

By Heracles! Hold your tongue, Socrates! May no one of my household or friends, whether citizen or stranger, be mad enough to go to these people and be harmed by them, for they clearly cause the ruin and corruption of their followers. (91c, 890)

Anytus will not countenance Socrates’ implication that Athenian education does not teach excellence in its collective fashion. The sophists exhort only those stupid enough to pay; any upstanding Athenian – *hoi kaloi kagathoi* – could make someone better than the sophists would. This phrase, *hoi kaloi kagathoi*, while often used by aristocrats to distinguish themselves from the masses, had also, like the ostensible subject of the dialogue, *aretē*, been taken up by democrats and incorporated into a democratic moral vocabulary. But while Meno’s explanations of *aretē* stemmed from the sophists, Anytus’s connects to democratic values: “Don’t you think there have been many good men in the city [*ē ou dokousi soi polloi kai agathoi gegonenai en teīde teī polei andres*, 93a3-4]?” Anytus asks Socrates. Excellence, he suggests, comes from all of us.

Yet as Socrates presses his questions, Anytus admits that he has no experience with sophists nor can he offer any evidence on how someone might become excellent. Anytus has never met a sophist. Moreover, Anytus cannot say how exemplary Athenians actually ensured that subsequent generations retained their excellence. Anytus has never questioned

---

59 As noted by Ober, *Mass and Elite*, 339.

60 There is a paradox here, and one that existed in an Athenian democracy that recognized expertise while also subsuming this expertise under the power of the dēmos. Both Anytus and Socrates inhabit shifting ground here because each of them claims to possess insights that the dēmos lacks while also claiming fidelity to the democracy.
his democratic ideology, and he does not wish to do so. As Socrates wonders why excellent Athenians such as Themistocles, Lysmachus, and Pericles could not raise equally excellent sons, Anytus will not listen. While Anytus could easily change his argument to claim that while democracy educates its citizens it does so imperfectly, so great do not always beget great, he does not. Socrates simply angers him, and Anytus leaves the conversation with a threat:

I think, Socrates, that you easily speak ill of people. I would advise you, if you will listen to me, to be careful. Perhaps also in another city, and certainly here, it is easier to injure people than to benefit them. I think you know that yourself. (94e, 893)

Given that we and Plato’s contemporary readers knew Anytus would later accuse Socrates, these final words sound like the executioner’s song. The suggestion that one can more easily injure people than benefit them also recasts the questions of the *Apology* that find place in the *Meno* – does Socrates’ disruptive questioning cause more harm than good? The promise of a democratically engaged philosophy seems engulfed by the tragedy of Socrates’ death. Given further that Anytus had participated in the democratic resurgence after the reign of the Thirty,61 his concerns for the democratic way of life feel even more gravid: does not Socrates threaten a fragile stability? Does not democratic life require an education that Socrates’ practice of philosophy could destroy?

The *Meno* raises these questions but does not answer them. While Meno and Socrates continue their conversation, Anytus remains in silent consternation. Whatever “progress” we might judge that Meno represents comes darkened by Anytus’s intimidating intransigence; while Meno and Socrates may conclude that despite their inability to know excellence they might still pursue it through inquiry, Anytus possesses an inflexible knowingness, albeit a democratic version. After all, Meno remains an aristocrat from Thessaly who comes armed

---

with the opinions of Gorgias. Anytus has the favor of the people and, having staked his life on behalf of democracy, will not even listen to Socrates. Socrates seems aware of both the danger of and the endangerment to his enterprise in his final words to Meno, words said – we can assume – in the presence of Anytus. Socrates remarks on Anytus’s anger (*Anutos men moi dokei chalepainein*, 95a1) when he turns his questioning back to Meno, and when Socrates and Meno conclude their conversation shortly thereafter, Socrates closes with foreboding lines:

> But now the time has come for me to go. You convince your guest friend Anytus here of these very things of which you have yourself been convinced, in order that he may be more gentle [*praioteros*, 100c1). If you succeed, you will also confer a benefit upon the Athenians [*kai Athēnaious onēseis*, 100c2]. (100c, 897)

Echoing Anytus’s warning but insisting on the benefits of the dialogue they have just conducted, Socrates also suggests that such a conversation might gentle Anytus as it has Meno – the same word Socrates uses to describe the effects of philosophy on the guardians in Republic IV.62 The final word of the dialogue, *onēseis*, also appears in slightly different form when Socrates appeals to the jury in the *Apology* to listen to his argument against Anytus’s charges because it will benefit them (as Athenians).63 It does not seem accidental that the passage of the *Apology* to which Socrates’ final words in the *Meno* allude also addresses the charges that Socrates corrupted the youth of Athenians. In these glancing references, Socrates seems to call what has occurred between Meno and himself the work of philosophy while also placing this in the context of his trial and execution, reiterating the questions of what in fact he did in Athens, and whether or not he taught anything. The *Meno*

---

62 *Republic* 376b.

63 *Apology* 30c4.
thus raises again questions about the sting of philosophy: does it cause pain and provoke vengeful retribution? Or does it enliven and improve its participants as citizens of Athens?

V.

What we know of Meno’s subsequent history does not make evaluating the potential benefits of his encounter with Socrates any easier. Meno had stayed at Anytus’s house on his way to fight for Cyrus against the Persians, but the exploits that followed hardly distinguished him. In his *Anabasis*, Xenophon spends forty-three lines discussing Meno, remarking on his eagerness for enormous wealth, his desire for rule, his prevarications, and his mockery of friends, among other winning qualities. After Cyrus perished, stranding the army deep in Persian territory, Meno’s attempts to extricate himself ultimately failed, and he reportedly suffering torture alive for a year before being tortured to death because of his history of mendacity and treachery. Meno does not seem to promise much for the benefits of associating with Socrates.

But if Anytus’s response and Meno’s later ignominy shadow Socrates’ claims to benefit his fellow Athenians, one ambiguous case remains – that of Meno’s slave boy. Some have taken the example with the slave boy as a farce, demonstrating only Socrates’ effectiveness as a teacher of basic geometry. Socrates clearly leads Meno’s slave through pointed questions, and brings him to “knowledge” unconnected to anything he knew before.

---

64 Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.2.6-3.1; 47 *passim*. *Nails, The People of Plato*, describes Xenophon’s Meno at length (204).

65 Robert S. Brumbaugh argues the contrary, asserting that “Meno becomes better through his talk” but he ignores Meno’s subsequent history (Brumbaugh, “Plato’s Meno as Form and as Content,” 108). I think that Nehamas comes closer to capturing the ambiguity of the dialogue when he asserts that “Socrates, unlike all other teachers of *aretē* does not constitute a danger to his students precisely because he refuses to tell anyone what *aretē* is, especially since he denies having that knowledge in the first place” (Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity*, 13). Nehamas does not assert Meno benefits but rather argues against previous interpretations that have uniformly deride Meno for his stupidity.

66 As Richard Kraut puts it: “True, a slave can learn geometry, but that hardly shows that he can acquire a knowledge of virtue, justice, the good, etc.” (Kraut, *Socrates and the State*, 204 – 5).
But others have viewed the episode with the slaveboy as presenting a serious reflection on the special kind of education that conversation with Socrates offers. On this reading, the conversation not only exhorts Meno to continue but also shows us how inquiry can move from perplexity to an awareness of the need for knowledge. The episode thus provides the central testing ground for the questions that have appeared again and again in our reading of the _Meno_: does Socrates completely contrive his demonstration to persuade Meno to continue? Or does the conversation with the slave illustrate the beneficial effects of inquiry?

In the middle of the demonstration, Socrates claims that Meno’s slave has benefited from being questioned: whereas before the slave did not know he was perplexed (aporein, 84a8), now he recognizes being so and does not even think he knows (oud' oietai eidenai, 84b1-2). This has put him in a better state regarding the thing he did not know, Socrates asserts:

Socrates: So in causing him to be at a loss (aporein) and to be numbed (narkan) as the stingray does, then we haven’t done him any harm?

Meno: No, I don’t think so. (84b7-9)

Socrates declares that they have done something useful (prourgou goun ti pepoieksamen, 84b10) because now Meno’s slave “can actually inquire into it gladly”; if he had thought he knew, he would not have inquired. Only through the experience of perplexity, aporian (84c6), did he realize he did not know and long to know (epothesen to eidenai, 84c6-7). Socrates has not instructed him, but only questioned, he emphasizes. But at most the exchanges that follow between Meno’s slave and Socrates show the former calculating (logisamenos, 82d4). Socrates

---

See the discussion in Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 77 - 126. I think Weiss correctly argues that Socrates’ “overriding concern . . . is to make Meno a better man by encouraging him to continue to probe with Socrates the question of what virtue is” (126) and that the demonstration with the slave boy serves this purpose. But what becomes of Meno’s slave boy? Weiss does not speculate.
may make him think, but this does not mean Meno’s slave thinks rightly or democratically (assuming that one of these would constitute “success”).

The exchange with Meno’s slave does not give us any decisive answer about the effects of philosophic conversation and thus of Socrates’ practice of philosophy. Meno’s slave can follow Socrates’ questions and recognize basic laws of geometry he did not know previously, but we would have trouble saying that the conversation accomplishes much else. Socrates does distinguish his mode of proceeding from teaching and thus from the sophists, as he had begun to do from the beginning of the dialogue, but the example of geometry neither answers the politically-charged questions that Meno posed in the first place nor does it demonstrate that dialogue can lead to correct opinions in the domain of political or ethical life. While the example seems to affect Meno, and encourage his participation as we saw above, what happens next to Meno’s slave remains unsaid.

But while we cannot say whether Meno’s slave continued to ask questions after this encounter with Socrates, perhaps we can say that Socrates introduced the possibility of asking questions to him – at least in the field of geometry. Through asking questions, Socrates has shown that one can advance to at least some basic knowledge; one may need a Socrates, but Socrates at least denies this – the experience of aporia itself, Socrates implies, leads to continued aporia. It is as if the stingray leaves his barb and the numbness never fully disappears. Such a reading opens up readings of Socrates’ practice of philosophy as available to all, or as at least engaging all and encouraging similar behavior among them. As Phillips would have it, simply “seeking Socrates” can inspire this; as we saw in the Meno,

---

68 This controverts strongly democratic readings of the demonstration, e.g. Deneen, Democratic Faith.
69 As he puts it here, Meno 84d.
70 One could compare this further to the example of the Phaedo where Socrates teases about leaving his stinger in the body of his interlocutor: Phaedo, 91c.
Meno sought Socrates and ended up with aporia and a renewed commitment to seek true opinions. This seems admirable.

Yet on the other hand, even if Meno’s slave boy does demonstrate the beneficial effects of dialogue with Socrates by intimating how belief in the power of recollection can in turn lead to the kind of confident inquiry that Socrates practices, even if the sting of philosophy might awaken somnolent citizens and enliven democracy as Hannah Arendt implies,71 Meno’s slave remains a slave. Philosophy may confine its effects to leisured aristocrats – such as Meno himself– because only they could possess the freedom to abstain from political life and thus escape, to some degree, the structures of power in democratic Athens. Meno’s second explanation of excellence had alluded to a reality that we saw dramatized in the opening vignette of the Republic: excellence requires power, he said.72 Socrates never seems to deter those figures with power whom he encounters, and if he changes the powerless, it remains unclear what consequences this can actually possess.73

But the lack of final answer about the effects of the conversation with Meno’s slave could also suggest the unknowability of the effects of any education. Conversations with Socrates do not produce clear and tangible results but rather participate in the ongoing experiments of the lives of his interlocutors. While Meno and Anytus appear fated to ignoble deaths, Meno’s slave, like the countless interlocutors with Socrates about whom we know little to nothing (most poignantly in the case of Callicles), remains a mystery. We have seen how the practice of philosophy entails an intimate relationship, the movement through question and answer enhanced by rich associations and metaphors, and the shared

71 And as Dana Villa elaborates in Socratic Citizenship (see the Introduction).

72 Meno 77b and Chapter 1.

73 I will deal more with questions of power and the limits of Socrates on these questions in Chapters 5 and 7.
experience of aporia that seems to promise collective undertakings in the future. Yet all this promise comes shadowed, as we have also seen, by the disturbing aftermaths evident in the lives of Socrates’ interlocutors as well as the foreknowledge of Socrates’ own demise. The Meno speaks in at least two voices on this account: an optimistic voice that underscores the possibilities limned by the demonstration with Meno’s slave boy; and a pessimistic voice that discounts any beneficial influence by Socrates’ practice of philosophy, pointing to Meno and Anytus.


3: Socrates ERÔTIKOS: Socrates’ Erotic Publics and the Symposium

Socrates was a sage only insofar as he was conscious of not being wise. An immense desire arises from such an awareness and this is why, for Western consciousness, Socrates the philosopher takes on the features of Eros, the eternal vagabond in search of truth.

– Pierre Hadot\(^1\)

So they go their ways – Socrates, sleepless, to the city for an ordinary day of dialectic, Alcibiades to disorder and to violence. . . . the ambitions of the soul conceal the body of Socrates from his awareness. Just as drink did not make him drunk, cold did not make him freeze, and the naked body of Alcibiades did not arouse him, so now sleeplessness does not make him stop philosophizing. He goes about his business with all the equanimity of a rational stone.

– Martha Nussbaum\(^2\)

I.

The Meno cast the education of Socrates’ practice of philosophy into doubt. We witnessed Socrates’ fraught conversation with Meno and its counterpoint in the shouting match with Anytus. This ambiguity came encapsulated in Socrates’ dialogue with Meno’s slave, where the elenchus appeared both to work and to show its own unimportance, both because of the slave boy’s inability to change his life and because of the irrelevance of the geometrical example. Socrates could thus appear as just another intellectual provocateur, an agitator whose disturbing effects unsettle his associates – unfortunately, in the case of Socrates, even the powerful leaders of the Athenian democracy.


But this “sting of philosophy” does not encompass the figure of Socrates. As we turn to the *Symposium*, we see the deeper claims that coruscated only briefly in the *Meno*, claims that stem from the passionate love the Greeks called *erōs*. We cannot escape from Socrates’ erotic side – Socrates *erōtikos*. Across Plato’s dialogues, Socrates remarks on his own erotic feelings, playfully alludes to erotic relationships with others, and seriously considers *erōs* as chief among human passions. As we saw in the *Republic*, for example, *erōs* begins the conversation on justice when Cephalus remarks on how his subsiding *erōs* allows for a more just life. In the *Republic*, a intense experience of *erōs* also characterizes both the philosopher and the tyrant, and the interlocutors’ concerns about *erōs* lead them to focus their education on taming *erōs* in their hypothetical city. In the *Meno* we observed Socrates flirting with Meno, acting out an implicit erotic relationship in the course of their conversation (albeit one to which Meno does not respond). Pierre Hadot does not stand alone in identifying *erōs* as a crucial feature of Socrates; depicting “the first theorist of love,” as one scholar has characterized it, images of Socrates often focus on his erotic legacy.

Because much of Athenian political culture and institutions rested on practices pertaining to *erōs*, turning toward Socrates’ erotic character also puts his relationship to Athens in starker relief than we have seen thus far. Seen from this angle, the erotic aspect of Socrates appears increasingly radical. In part, the relationships between older men and

---

3 I will leave *erōs* untranslated as a way of marking its unique, ambiguous meaning as well as the difficulty of any direct translation to today.

4 I use this term, “Socrates *erōtikos,*” as a way of marking *erōs* as both an attribute and an identity for Socrates: “*erōtikos*” can function both as an adjective and as a substantive noun in ancient Greek, and Plato uses it in both ways in the *Symposium*. See Liddell and Scott, 696.


younger boys, often characterized as “pederasty,” formed an important site for pedagogy and early civic education. Men would instruct youth on how to act as mature Athenians while boys would attend them and please them with their presence. These relationships consisted in reciprocal games of mutual exchange where both partners created bonds of affection which in turn could lead to friendship and reinforce the surrounding political community. Such “erotic reciprocity” stressed a bond between erastēs – the adult lover – and erōnomos – the boy beloved – that created a community of shared interests and interdependence between them.

Athenians also understood erōs as an important basis for their practices of citizenship. The trope of “citizen as erastēs,” or citizen as erotic lover, mapped the reciprocity of individual love relationships to the public sphere. As Thucydides recounts it, Pericles exhorts such an erotics of citizenship in his Funeral Oration, when he urges his fellow citizens “to gaze, day after day, upon the power of the city and become her lovers [erastai, plural of erastē].” Yet this did not entail selfless abandonment to the polis, as our Romanticism-inflected understanding of “love” might suggest, but rather the careful negotiation of a reciprocal relationship always in danger of deteriorating into domination, dependence, or exploitation. As lovers, citizens had to act with energy as well as attention;

---

7 For why “pederasty” does not describe erotic Greek relationships with complete accuracy, see David Halperin, “Platonic Eros and What Men Call Love.” On Greek male homosexuality in general, see Kenneth Dover, Greek Homosexuality.

8 These relationships had the potential for asymmetry and reciprocity offered an ideal. See Dover, Greek Homosexuality.

9 This and the subsequent paragraph draw on S. Sara Monoson, “Citizens as Erastēs,” in Monoson, Plato’s Democratic Entanglements, 64 – 87.

10 David Halperin, “Plato and Erotic Reciprocity.”

11 Thucydides 2.43.1. The citation and translation come from Monoson, Plato’s Democratic Entanglements, 64.

12 Monoson, Plato’s Democratic Entanglements, 65.
citizen reciprocity ideally created relationships of mutuality among governed and governing – a work all citizens of Athens shared in common. This in turn created the “dominant fiction of democratic Athens,” where Athenian citizenship and political erōs were considered coterminous.\(^\text{13}\) The ideal erōtikos was also a politikos.\(^\text{14}\) Thus what one scholar calls “the erotics of democracy” extended from the intimacy of the gymnasium to the publicity of the speaker’s platform in the Assembly. Erōs suffused Athenian political life at every level.\(^\text{15}\)

In this chapter I want to turn to the most famous images of the erotic Socrates – those in Plato’s *Symposium* – in order to consider the figure of Socrates from the aspect of erōs. The *Symposium*, I will argue, continues many of the questions raised in the *Republic* about the kind of community Socrates’ creates around himself and, without definitely answering them, develops these questions by dramatizing them in the symposium it depicts. In doing so, the *Symposium* helps us to see what kinds of attachments Socrates generates and the kind of associations that ensue: we observe Socrates’ own love relationships, those he provokes, and their consequences. Whereas the *Republic* depicted Socrates among relatively friendly interlocutors, the *Symposium* offers a wider set of characters with profoundly different responses to Socrates that both continue and challenge the “community of discourse” of the *Republic*. In the *Symposium*, I suggest, Socrates elicits multiple erotic publics\(^\text{16}\) – varying kinds


\(^{14}\) And this overlap plays an important function in seeing the radicalism of Socrates’ claims to act as true politikos in the *Gorgias*. See Chapter 5.

\(^{15}\) I make rather quick work here of a much more complicated dimension of Athenian political culture. As Victoria Wohl explains: “The erotics of democracy is not merely a figure of speech, then, but a dense point of convergence within Athenian social relations and subjectivity; it was what Jacques Lacan calls a ‘quilting point,’ a node that binds together the diverse and often contradictory layers of ideology” (*Love Among the Ruins*, 2). Compare Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens*, for her challenge to reading Pericles’ funeral oration in democratic terms.

\(^{16}\) As Michael Warner describes publics and counterpublics: “To address a public or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one’s
of associations around him, all defining themselves in some sense against the dominant
democratic discourse – that in turn bespeak a different kind of political founding as well as
the conventions and laws (nomoi) that might attend it.17

The Symposium also develops questions about Socrates’ practice of philosophy and
the “education” it offers vis-à-vis Athenian democracy – questions that we observed earlier
in the Meno. Whereas the Meno presented ambiguous accounts of the effects of Socrates’
practice of philosophy, the Symposium seems to offer unambiguously stark contrasts, ranging
from the impressionable Apollodorus to the catastrophic Alcibiades, contrasts that I will
argue stem from different understandings of erōs and thus also different erotic relationships
with Socrates. In this way, the Symposium helps to address whether or not something called
“education” occurs in what I call Socrates’ erotic publics, although the Symposium’s own
presentation does not so much answer our previous questions as frame a new cluster. Thus
while the Symposium seems to offer definitive consequences of Socrates’ practice of
philosophy, it also does so only “suggestively” – albeit provocatively as well – through a
third-hand age-old conversation, one distant from the time and space of Socrates and
fraught with wildly divergent perspectives. The sting of philosophy may call into question
the ultimate effects of association with Socrates, but the Symposium suggests a new kind of
response – an erotic one – as perhaps equally possible.

Finally, the contrasting readings of Pierre Hadot and Martha Nussbaum also alert us
to another reason for turning to the Symposium – that Socrates’ erotic publics have a presence
disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a
certain language ideology” (Warner, Publics and Counterpublics, 10).

17 By using the term “publics,” I commit an intentional anachronism in order to emphasize two traits of the
erotic aspect of Socrates: first, the political consequences of erōs and hence its publicness; and second, the
diverse responses and the different politics of each, all of which differ in some way from Athens’ “dominant
fiction” concerning erōs. On publics, counterpublics, and subaltern publics, see the essays collected in Craig
Calhoun, ed. Habermas and the Public Sphere in addition to Warner (above).
beyond fourth-century Athens. Whether or not we can translate αρώ to any contemporary practices,\(^\text{18}\) the seductive (as well as repulsive) erotic side of Socrates remains alluring today, as we see with Hadot’s enigmatic and evocative sage. Martha Nussbaum, however, counters that Socrates’ brand of philosophy has abstracted from αρώ and the emotions and lost a sense of the fragility of human life and goodness – a sense tragically embodied by Alcibiades.\(^\text{19}\) It would seem that Socrates could go either way. Yet Hadot and Nussbaum, I will suggest, read the Symposium from opposing angles without recognizing the coexistence of the other. I will argue that because the Symposium depicts the formation (as well as disintegration) of erotic associations, the dialogue helps us begin to imagine the political effects and implications of Socrates’ practice of philosophy within Athenian political culture while also seeing the potential losses that attend it. Socrates’ practice of philosophy does seek to utilize αρώ but in a way dramatically different from the norm – and thus from Alcibiades’ expectations as well as Agathon’s, Aristodemus’s, and Apollodorus’s. This raises again questions about Socrates’ meaning, as well as if and what consequences this has for the greater political community, both Socrates’ and ours.\(^\text{20}\)

***

In what follows I want to read five versions of αρώ and thus of erotic publics formed with and by Socrates that emerge from the Symposium as contrasting reflections on the meaning and significance of Socrates’ erotic activity. In doing so, I seek again to discern different

\(^{18}\) I discuss the questions pertaining to αρώ’s “translatability” to contemporary political life in Chapter 7.

\(^{19}\) I should note that this less sanguine reading of Socrates runs contrary to her invocation of Socrates as an exemplary political educator in Cultivating Humanity. I have not discovered an explanation from Nussbaum for this difference.

\(^{20}\) I do not mean to imply that we can directly apply what appears in the Symposium to political life today; such a proposition would violate the approach I explain in the Introduction. Rather, I want to contest the antipolitical readings of αρώ but also avoid simply declare an erotic politics as an alternative.
voices within a single dialogue and keep them in tension with one another rather than
resolve them. This seems particularly appropriate for the Symposium because of the nature of
symposia as practiced in ancient Athens. In public as well as private forms, symposia offered
a collective experience of entertainment, learning, and contest that always consisted of
multiple contending voices:

All of [the] forms [symposia might take], the singing in turn, praising, propounding
and answering riddles, the new turn on the known song, are designed to keep the
discourse collective, while at the same time highlighting each person’s contribution.
The participants must constantly respond to each other, but the full . . . forms
(riddle and answer, song and cap, variant heard against the known song) require the
work of more than one contributor.21

In addition to providing sites for the erotic pedagogy I described above, symposia also
consisted of diverse speeches in competition with one another for honor and recognition
while its formalized structure of communication helped create an atmosphere of
conviviality.22 Authors of encomia adopted agonistic stances, treating the discourse as a game
whose challenged increased with the number of contestants as each subsequent speaker
sought to improve upon those previous.23 Eryximachus evidences this in the Symposium when
he comments that if Agathon and Socrates were not so clever, they might find themselves at
a loss for words (193e). Socrates later underscores the “agonistic feature” of symposia by
commenting to Eryximachus that “you have competed beautifully [kalōs . . . ēgōnīsai, 194a],
Eryximachus; but if you were in my present position – or rather in the one I shall be in when

21 Eva Stehle, Performance and Gender, 222. (Parts of this excerpt are quoted in Rowe, Plato: Symposium, 8, and
Sheffield, “Plato’s Endoxic Method?” 27 n7.) The following paragraph owes much to Stehle’s discussion of
symposia in Performance and Gender, 213 – 227.

22 As Christopher Rowe explains: “Not only does each successive speaker ‘cap’ the one before; they also
repeatedly refer to each other, usually to take the opportunity to score points – so that the ‘responsiveness’
shades into competitiveness, although the tone remains light and witty throughout” (Rowe, Plato: Symposium, 8).
On protecting against the threat of collapsed conviviality, see Stehle, Performance and Gender, 222.

23 Nightingale, “The Folly of Praise,” 117. Nightingale also notes the references in the Symposium that I describe
in the rest of this paragraph.
Agathon has also spoken – you too would be terrified and in desperate straits, as I am now (194a). As Andrea Nightingale adds: “When Socrates ironically confesses his fear of performing badly (194a; 198a) and so becoming a ‘laughing stock’ [gelota ophlō] (199b), his pretence exposes the real anxieties felt by his fellow encomiasts in the face of this competition.”

Reading the Symposium as a symposium, then, allows us to see the work less as a progressive account culminating in Socrates’ speech or Alcibiades’ entrance but as developing what one scholar has called “an intertextual web,” that is, a collectively-produced latticework of intersecting but not always overlapping arguments and characters that embody and advance their arguments – and one fraught with agonistic tensions and anxieties. Thus just as each of the primary speakers in the Symposium delivers a unique encomium devoted to erōs (or to Socrates, as in the case of Alcibiades), I will read five characters – Apollodorus, Aristodemus, Agathon, Socrates, and Alcibiades – as presenting their own versions of erōs, Socrates, and the erotic dimensions, if any, of Socrates practice of philosophy. Just as the different speeches in a given symposia when taken together do not form a completely coherent whole, I argue that these different reflections of Socrates present tensions within the erotic aspect of Socrates rather than a singular face.

---

25 Ibid.
26 Stehle, Performance and Gender, 222.
27 I thus present an alternative to Frisbee Sheffield’s “endoxic approach,” which seeks to demonstrate that “taken together they [the accounts of each speaker] can be see[n] as parts of an overall pictures of the role of erōs in the good life” (Sheffield, “Plato’s Endoxic Method?” 27). (Sheffield puts this approach in the context of her reading of the entire Symposium in Sheffield, Plato’s Symposium, 207 – 226.)
II.

The Symposium begins with an unspoken question, and we first hear Apollodorus’s response: “It seems your question does not find me unprepared,”28 Apollodorus tells his unnamed friend. As we soon learn, Apollodorus’s comrade (hetairos, 173d4) has asked Apollodorus about a gathering at Agathon’s when Socrates, Alcibiades, and their friends had dined together and given speeches about erōs. Just a few days ago, Glaucon – the same Glaucon we met in the Republic – had asked the same question. But both Glaucon and Apollodorus’s present company have suffered from poor information, for the gathering (sunousian, 172b7) occurred years ago. As Apollodorus explains, in the process revealing important aspects of his character:

You know very well Agathon hasn’t lived in Athens for many years, while it’s been less than three that I’ve been Socrates’ companion and made it my job to know exactly what he says and does each day [ἐγώ Ἡσυχοῦσαν συντρίβοι καὶ επίμεθες πεποίημαι ἁκάστης ἡμέρας εἰδέναι ὅτι ἂν λέγῃ εἶπρητέε]. Before that, I simply drifted aimlessly. Of course, I used to think that what I was doing was important, but in fact I was the most worthless man on earth – as bad as you are this very moment: I used to think philosophy was the last thing a man should do. (172c – 173a, 458)

Apollodorus’s incredulity reveals the momentousness of the change brought by Socrates to his life. Three years ago, Apollodorus found direction when he found Socrates; since then he has recognized his previous worthlessness and the need to follow Socrates. As he later says, now his “greatest pleasure comes from philosophical conversation,” even when he only listens. Apollodorus has felt the sting of philosophy.

Yet this sting has also left Apollodorus less than tolerant of other ways of life. Before philosophy, Apollodorus says, he was a worthless man – and as bad as Glaucon. Glaucon, as we know from other sources, pursued an uneventful life in politics; Apollodorus deems that

28 Symposium 172a, 458 (translation emended). As in the previously chapters, I will give the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text and the corresponding page of the Cooper, ed. English translation in the text.
next to worthlessness. When he addresses his present company, Apollodorus shows himself hardly less cutting:

After all, my greatest pleasure comes from philosophical conversation [peri philosophias logous, 173c3] . . . All other talk, especially the talk of rich businessmen like you, bores me to tears, and I’m sorry for you and your friends because you think your affairs are important when really they’re totally trivial [hodite oiesthe ti poiein ouden poiontes, c7-d1]. Perhaps, in your turn, you think I’m a failure [kakodaimona einai, d1-2], and, believe me, I think that what you think is true. But as for all of you, I don’t just think you are failures – I know it for a fact [ego mentoi humas ouk oiomai all eu oida, d2-3]. (173c-d, 459).

“You’ll never change [aei homoios ei, d4]!” his friend replies. But this lack of understanding in the character of Apollodorus suggests one consequence of association with Socrates – and, implicitly, of erotic attachment to him – unworthy of admiration: Apollodorus exhibits an intransigent certainty that borders on dogmatism. He does not regard his choice of life with any skepticism, living his life as a question; rather, he knows its superiority to all other ways of life. We have not yet observed such inflexibility from any figures of Socrates, but Apollodorus offers a potential aftermath.29

Apollodorus has shown himself so impressionable by Socrates that he has earned the sobriquet “Softy” (malakos, 173d8)30 – and this despite his equally apparent reputation for wild behavior – a “Socratic fanatic,” as one scholar puts it31 – in his “raging and raving” [mainomai kai parapaio, 173e1-2) about his mentor. Apollodorus acts furiously with others, but

29 Harry Neuman disagrees, arguing that “Apollodorus is surely a Socratic philosophy” (Neumann, “On the Madness of Apollodorus,” 289). But I am unconvinced that Apollodorus loves philosophy more than Socrates, as Neumann would have it.

30 The translation in the Cooper, ed. reads “maniac,” accepting “manikos” as a substitute for “malakos,” but I follow Dover (Plato’s Symposium, 79) and Rowe (Plato’s Symposium, 130) by accepting “manikos” for reasons of sense. As Rowe explains, “[manikos, or “maniac”] would not make much sense of what immediately follows (‘you’re always savaging everyone’). ‘I’m mad, off my head, am?’ in c1-2 sarcastically picks up the general implications of what the Friend [i.e. Companion] has said – but is probably what misled the copyist(s) to think of manikos here” (Rowe, Plato’s Symposium, 130).

31 Debra Nails, People of Plato, 39. Nails also reports that Apollodorus had a subsequent reputation as a “maniac sculptor” who destroyed all his creations after finishing them.
not with Socrates, his comrade comments (173d). While this reputation for both infatuation (with Socrates) and impressionability (by Socrates) might seem contradictory, Apollodorus’s two other appearances in the Platonic dialogues support it. In the *Apology*, Apollodorus, along with Plato, Crito, and Critobulus, volunteer to pay thirty minas for Socrates’ release, a massive amount. Yet in the *Phaedo*, Apollodorus famously loses control despite Socrates’ ministrations, weeping at the thought of Socrates’ death even before he takes the hemlock.

Apollodorus does not tell us much of his relationship with Socrates, but from his appearances in the *Apology* and the *Phaedo* and his role as quasi-narrator in the *Symposium*, his importance as a follower of Socrates seems undeniable. Moreover, his volatile responses – large sums of money, tears, anger, mania – trouble any assumption that association with Socrates offered only benefits. Nor can we simply blame Socrates, given Apollodorus’s previously normal life. Apollodorus reminds us, then, that merely being around Socrates and having him in mind does not make one a better person or a better citizen. Apollodorus simply apes Socrates, following him every day when Socrates actually practices philosophy.

Apollodorus appears like a domesticated Meno: wealthy and interested in Socrates but not much else. Instead of rejecting Socrates’ invitations to continue dialogue as did Meno,

---

32 *Apology* 38b. As Nails points out, this offers further evidence for Apollodorus’s wealthy background, making his “conversion” to following Socrates all the more dramatic: *People of Plato*, 39.

33 *Phaedo* 59a. After Socrates takes the poison, the narrator of the dialogue notes Apollodorus a second time: “Most of us had been able to hold back our tears reasonably well up till then, but when we saw him drinking it and after he drank it, we could hold them back no longer. . . . Apollodorus had not ceased from weeping before, and at this moment his noisy tears and anger made everybody present break down, except Socrates. ‘What is this,’ he said, ‘you strange fellows. . . . Keep quiet and control yourselves’ (*Phaedo* 117c-d, 99).

34 The language of Apollodorus’s description at *Symposium* 172c – 173a (quoted above) echoes Socrates’ description of his activity in the *Apology* (38a) except that Socrates describes his practice of philosophy and Apollodorus describes his practice of philosophy.
Apollodorus makes himself a disciple, but he nevertheless ends content to cry at the foot of Socrates rather than prevaricate (and dominate) in the wilds of Persia.  

III.

As Apollodorus begins to describe the gathering, the story becomes Aristodemus’s. Aristodemus, Apollodorus explains, originally told Apollodorus about what occurred. A “real runt of a man” who always went barefoot (smikros, anupadeitos aei, 173b2), Aristodemus attended the party because he was a lover (erastēs, 173b3) of Socrates. Since Aristodemus narrates everything that follows, the entirety of the conversation comes filtered through this lover of Socrates, Aristodemus; the story – his story – has also gained enough notoriety that Apollodorus has had to retell it twice in a few days’ time. Thus while Apollodorus’s role as quasi-narrator signals one likely response to Socrates (like Meno’s but unlike one of ignorance, e.g. Meno’s slave boy or condemnation, e.g. Anytus), Aristodemus also figures as important both for his narration and for his explicit identity as an erastēs of Socrates.

Unlike Apollodorus, about whose relationship with Socrates we can only speculate, Aristodemus comes identified as a lover. Apollodorus calls Aristodemus as such (173b3), but we also learn about the consequences of Aristodemus’s erotic love for Socrates from the

35 Commenting on Apollodorus’s soft madness in comparison with his comrade, Leo Strauss says: “It is a rare case that a nameless comrade is somehow more sensible than a comrade of Socrates” (Strauss, *On Plato’s Symposium*, 23). This should call our attention even more to the problems Apollodorus highlights.

36 Kenneth Dover asserts that Apollodorus’s calling Aristodemus an erastēs “is half a joke, half an acknowledgement that the Socratics used the language of eros more freely, and with less specialised connotations, than most people” (*Plato Symposium*, 4). Dover rightly points to a use of erastēs in the *Protagoras* where Socrates refers to himself and Hippocrates as erastai of Protagoras (Protagoras 317c), which Dover translates as “fans.” I agree, and I think this only serves to emphasize the multiple registers on which erōs and thus the erotic Socrates function in the *Symposium*.

37 As Frisbee Sheffield notes, “The Symposium is itself presented as an act of erōs” (Sheffield, *Plato’s Symposium*, 8).
beginning of Aristodemus’s own narration (as recounted by Apollodorus). Rather than starting the story with the party assembled at Agathon’s, Aristodemus first recounts his meeting Socrates:

He [Aristodemus] said, then, that one day he ran into Socrates, who had just bathed and put on his fancy sandals – both very unusual events. So he asked him where he was going, and why he was looking so good [kalos]. (174a, 459)

Kalos, as Kenneth Dover notes, means “beautiful,” “handsome,” “pretty,” “attractive,” or “lovely” when applied to a human being, and often comes with erotic associations. By noting Socrates as kalos, Aristodemus in effect reminds us of his status as Socrates’ erastès. Moreover, while he does not follow Socrates everywhere like Apollodorus, Aristodemus knows Socrates well enough to find his changed appearance remarkable. Later, Agathon calls Socrates’ standing alone outside strange, but Aristodemus corrects him and explains this as a frequent habit of Socrates (175a-b). When Socrates tells Aristodemus that he (Socrates) has dressed well for a party at Agathon’s and invites Aristodemus to accompany him, Aristodemus’s response further emphasizes his attentiveness to Socrates: “I’ll do whatever you say,” Aristodemus answers (174b, 459). Whereas Apollodorus defined his way of life in imitation of Socrates, Aristodemus presents perhaps a more balanced discipleship: responsive to Socrates and yet not overly so, Aristodemus plays the role of conscientious lover.

38 Unless otherwise noted, I will hereafter write as if Aristodemus narrates the story, assuming that we can remember that Apollodorus actually recounts Aristodemus’s words.


40 In the sense of exhibiting reciprocity. See, e.g., David Halperin, “Erotic Reciprocity.”
Aristodemus lurks in the shadows of the entire *Symposium*. While Apollodorus remains as narrator, he reports Aristodemus’s comments about the speeches and activities, alerting us to Aristodemus’s editorial presence and reminding us of Aristodemus’s closeness to Socrates as well as his role as Socrates’ discipline. These facts figure Aristodemus as on the one hand highly extraordinary while on the other perfectly ordinary: Extraordinary because Aristodemus’s prodigious memory makes him very much like Socrates – he recalls the entire conversation in unbelievably minute detail – as well as his customs of going barefoot (173b), his insistence on being inferior to Socrates and others (174c), and his humble origins; But ordinary because, in contrast to Socrates, Aristodemus frequently struggles to understand the conversations taking place: he notes that he could not remember everything everybody said (178a) and skips some speeches as a result (180c); he also falls asleep towards the end of the conversation, catching only the gist of an early morning argument between Socrates, Agathon, and Aristophanes about tragedy and comedy (223c).

Aristodemus, then, responds to Socrates not simply with parroting imitation like Apollodorus but by assuming some of his traits while also admitting his insufficiency to do

---

41 Much of the text occurs in the form of indirect – i.e. reported – discourse, a detail missing from many English translations. This form constantly reminds Greek readers of Aristodemus’s role as story-teller as well as Apollodorus’ as recounted. Stanley Rosen sees profundity in Aristodemus’s silence, writing that Aristodemus “stands for the ambiguity of the religious meaning of the dialogue” (Rosen, *Plato’s Symposium*, 18), viz. the question of the divinity of *erōs*. Strauss goes farther, asserting that “Aristodemus is in a way the true image of *erōs*” (Strauss, *On Plato’s Symposium*, 29).

42 Xenophon refers to Aristodemus in the context of Socrates’ efforts to improve ordinary people in his “daily talks with his familiar friends” (*Memorabilia* 1.4.1) according to Nails: *People of Plato*, 52.

43 As Diskin Clay comments: “Thanks to Aristodemus’s drowsiness and Plato’s reticence, we shall never learn how Socrates compelled Agathon and Aristophanes to agree to his paradox that a single poet could compose both tragedies and comedies” (Clay, “The Tragic and Comic Poet of the Symposium,” 256). That the final words remind us of both Aristodemus and Plato calls attention to the latter as another potential lover of Socrates, one whom I will address at the end of this chapter.
so completely.44 As Socrates’ proclaimed erastēs, moreover, Aristodemus attends Socrates diligently rather than subserviently, appreciating his handsomeness and forgiving his quiddities. If Apollodorus represented a frequent response to the erotic Socrates – and one that continues today45 – Aristodemus seems to resemble a less obvious but nonetheless understandable and different response: the ordinary person “obsessed”46 with Socrates but not infatuated, a follower but not a sycophant.47

IV.

As Aristodemus tells it, he and Socrates embarked for the symposium, but Socrates “began to think about something, lost himself in thought, and kept lagging behind” (174d, 460), leaving Aristodemus to arrive alone and uninvited at Agathon’s house. Yet Agathon welcomes him nonetheless – our first impression of Agathon – with grace and hospitality: “Welcome, Aristodemus! What perfect timing! You’re just in time for dinner! I hope you’re not here for any other reason – if you are, forget it. I looked all over for you yesterday, so I could invite you, but I couldn’t find you anywhere” (174e, 460). (He immediately adds: “But where is Socrates? How come you didn’t bring him along?” Perhaps this lessens our impression of dear Agathon.) When Agathon notices Socrates’ absence, Aristodemus explains, to which Agathon exclaims: “How strange [atopon g’]” (175a10). Like Apollodorus

44 This, in a sense, intimates my own argument in this book: Aristodemus may come closest to the position I where I find myself vis-à-vis Socrates.

45 As seen in the unquestioning emulation of Socrates that corresponds to the first cluster of images in the Introduction.

46 The Cooper, ed. translates erastēs as “obsessed”: 459.

47 Strauss suggests that Aristodemus presents “the noblest love in the Symposium” (Strauss, On Plato’s Symposium, 66). Yet we know too little about Aristodemus for him to present a compelling example. At most, I would suggest that Aristodemus alerts us to the possibility of a beneficial erôs – yet he must remain only suggestive and such erôs only a possibility.
and Aristodemus, Agathon seeks Socrates’ presence; unlike them, he does not know
Socrates’ odd yet familiar behavior.

At first, Agathon might not seem a likely candidate for having any association with
Socrates. While his first victory as a tragedian at the Lenaean festival marks the occasion of
the dialogue (as well as its dramatic date as February of 416), Aristodemus does not profess
having any relationship with Socrates; the Symposium offers no explanation for why Agathon
invited him in the first place. Agathon appears in the Protagoras reclining with Pausanias, his
erastēs, clustered around Prodicus; this association with sophists surfaces again in the
Symposium when Socrates detects a whiff of Gorgias – as well as a bouquet of poetic
influences – in Agathon’s speech. As Aristodemus comments, Agathon remains young – a
neaniskos (198a) – at the time of the Symposium; Pausanias, also present at the Symposium,
remains his lover.

But while Agathon appears an unlikely source for reflections on Socrates, Agathon
and Socrates also share at least one crucial feature: each we could characterize as an erōtikos.
Both have reputations for understanding erotic things or being “masters of erotics,”
knowing ta erōtika. Eryximachus vouches for this “expertise” after Aristophanes delivers his

---

48 Symposium 173a. See Nails, People of Plato, 8 – 10, for more details on Agathon.

49 As Kenneth Dover details, Gorgias B6 offers the closest analogue to Agathon’s speech, but the end of
the speech also takes the form of a lyric poem: “Plato has taken considerable trouble to give Agathon’s peroration
a poetic character in addition to caricaturing its ‘Gorgianic’ structure” (Plato: Symposium, 124).

50 As Debra Nails asserts (People of Plato, 9), although I cannot find any definitive evidence in the Symposium
itself.

51 In the dialogue, what often comes translated into English as “masters of erotics” or “the erotic art” appears
as ta erōtika (or some variant thereof). C.D.C. Reeve asserts that “just as ta phusikē is ‘[the science of] physics’
and ta politikē is ‘[the art or craft of] politics,’ ta erōtika is ‘the craft of love’ (he tē erōtikē technē) – the one the god
the mystery of ta erōtika without engaging its multiple meanings across the dialogue; while ta erōtika may equate
to a craft or art of love in some ways, it may also prove the opposite in others. Moreover, in the Gorgias, as we
will see in Chapter 6, Socrates employs the phrase he tē politikē technē to describe his “true political art”; at least in
wondrous speech (193e) and neither Socrates nor Agathon contests it. The juxtaposition of their two speeches at the end of the scheduled speeches seems to emphasize the two of them as best, as does Socrates’ brief interrogation of Agathon after Agathon delivers his.

Yet despite his shared characteristics with Socrates, Agathon still responds to him with puzzlement. In this sense Agathon acts like Meno: he calls Socrates strange, as I noted above (175a); he also accuses Socrates of trying to bewitch or drug him (pharmattēin, 194a5). This word recalls the ambiguity of pharmakos famously developed by Jacques Derrida: Socrates possesses both the disease and the cure – or at least so Agathon (and Derrida) accuses him.52 Socrates also recalls the Meno at the end of Agathon’s speech when he claims to be at a loss (aporesinī, 198a7). Repeated three times in a short flurry of lines (198a7, a9, and b2), the echo seems unmistakable: just as Socrates claimed in the Meno that Meno’s perplexity (aporia) came with his own, here Socrates declares his own perplexity produced by the “beauty and variety” (kalon . . kai pantodapon logon, 198b3) of Agathon’s speech. The Meno appears once more in Agathon’s nonplussed state when Socrates briefly interrogates him. After only a brief exchange, Agathon echoes Meno when he says: “It turns out, Socrates, I didn’t know what I was talking about in that speech” (201b, 484).53 Socrates may bejewel himself in order to seduce Agathon, as Alcibiades later surmises and warns against, but Agathon responds just as Meno did – with puzzlement at Socrates’ strangeness. Agathon

---

52 See Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in Dissemination.

53 Compare Meno’s frustrated response to Socrates from the middle of the dialogue: “Yet I have made many speeches about excellence before large audiences on a thousand occasions, very good speeches as I thought, but now I cannot even say what it is” (Meno 80a, 879). In the Symposium, Agathon has just delivered what he deemed a very good speech.
thus seems to reflect a feckless erotic association, an erotic public absent common understanding and thus devoid shared purposes.

V.

We have seen some familiar sides of Socrates through his encounters with Aristodemus, Apollodorus, and Agathon: the impressive Socrates who leaves a mark on Apollodorus, forcing him to change his life; the playful Socrates quoting poetry to Aristodemus about why he must dress up to visit Agathon’s (the “Goodman’s”\textsuperscript{54}) house; and the perplexed Socrates who confesses \textit{aporia} after Agathon’s plaudit-winning encomium to \textit{erōs}; later Socrates calls himself ridiculous and claims one can easily contradict him as he argues with Agathon (201c). Each of these sides of Socrates comes with different erotic attachments – a different aspect to association (and thus the \textit{sunousia}, as we will see) with Socrates – that suggest varying consequences for associating with Socrates. The three responses, as I have argued, map responses we have seen thus far in the \textit{Republic} and the \textit{Meno}. But the \textit{Symposium} goes much farther than this.

The reflection on “Socrates” by the Socrates of the \textit{Symposium} adds another aspect to his multifaceted character. This begins with the mysterious apparent contradiction between his first words to Agathon at the party and his subsequent assertion claim that he “knows nothing but erotic things” (177d). When Socrates enters, Agathon beckons Socrates to lie down beside him, saying that perhaps we will “catch a bit of the wisdom \textit{hina kai tou sophou haptomenos sou apolausō}, 175d1] that came to you under my neighbor’s porch” (175d1-3, 461). Socrates responds with his first words in the symposium:

How good it would be, dear Agathon, if the foolish were filled with wisdom simply by touching the wise. If only wisdom were like water, which always flows from a full

\textsuperscript{54} As Rowe points out, Socrates puns on Agathon’s name (\textit{agathon} meaning “good” in Greek) by changing a verse of Homer: 174b3-c5 (Rowe, \textit{Plato Symposium}, 131). Here I try to follow suit.
cup into an empty one when we connect them with a piece of yarn – well, then I would consider it the greatest prize to have the chance to lie down next to you. I would soon be overflowing with your wonderful wisdom. Mine is of no account – a shadow in a dream – while yours is bright and radiant and has a splendid future. Why, young as you are, you’re so brilliant I could call more than thirty thousand Greeks as witnesses. (175d - e, 461)\textsuperscript{55}

We might dismiss this as “typical” Socratic irony – as an instance of exaggerated understatement for which Socrates often earns scorn.\textsuperscript{56} Combine this with Socrates’ declaration (which comes right after the passage quoted that I mentioned earlier) that “the only thing I say I understand is erotic things” (\textit{hos ouden ph\'emi allo epistathai \iota ta er\'itika}, 177d7-8), and the feeling worsens. But these first words of the dialogue within the dialogue need more attention. The term for wisdom appears three times in quick succession (\textit{sophia}, 175d4, e1; \textit{sophias} e2), and Socrates associates it all three times with Agathon. His, Socrates says (not saying “wisdom” again), is of no account (\textit{phaul\'e}, e3, meaning cheap, easy, slight, or paltry) and “disputable just as a dream” (\textit{amphisb\'et\'esimos b\'osper onar onsa}, e3-4)\textsuperscript{57} whereas Agathon’s shines forth (it is \textit{lampra}, e4, meaning bright and radiant) freely giving (\textit{epidosin}, ibid., translated here as “hav[ing] a splendid future”). Agathon’s wisdom shines so strongly and shows itself so early (\textit{exelampsen kai exphan\'e}, e5) that Socrates volunteers the equivalent of the entire citizen population of Athens – and the number of participants at the Lenaea – as witnesses for Agathon’s brilliance.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{55} This language foreshadows a crucial image in the \textit{Gorgias}, that of filling and overflowing. On this, see Chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{56} Dover observes that Agathon “perceives irony in his [Socrates’] words” (\textit{Plato: Symposium}, 85). On the contrary Rowe asserts that “there is no reason to suppose him [Socrates] not to be serious” (\textit{Plato: Symposium}, 133)

\textsuperscript{57} As Kenneth Dover notes in his commentary, \textit{amphisb\'et\'esimos b\'osper onar onsa} literally means “debatable as if in a dream” or “illusory” (Dover, \textit{Plato: Symposium}, 84).

\textsuperscript{58} As Dover adds, “‘thirty thousand’ is the traditional number of male citizens of Athens even in the early fourth century. Socrates says \textit{bellenin} [Greeks] advisedly, since foreigners went to the theater too, though at the Lenaea these would be mostly resident aliens” (Dover, \textit{Plato: Symposium}, 84 – 85).
Agathon’s response – “You’re being outrageous!” – may hint at an underlying playfulness in Socrates’ first speech, but the contrast Socrates draws between his own shadowy, oneiric and Agathon’s effulgent wisdom speaks to a polarity that develops in the second half of the Symposium between the kind of appearances Diotima attributes to the beautiful as the ultimate object of erōs and the spectacular and luminous beauty of Agathon, a beauty immediately tangible and pleasing to the eye, that eventually culminates with the entrance of Alcibiades.59 Erōs, it seems, concerns a spectrum of appearances from Agathon’s visible brilliance to Socrates’ inferior beauty (according to Alcibiades). Agathon underscores this when he continues by saying: “Dionysus will soon enough be the judge of our claims to wisdom!” (175e, 461). Dionysus, the god of wine and drunkenness, would seem to enter in the inebriated figure of Alcibiades; he too “judges” Socrates and Agathon, as we shall see.60

Wisdom becomes a crucial element for this aspect of Socrates. When Socrates describes his conversation with Diotima, who “was wise about many things” and also taught Socrates ta erōtika (bē tanta te sophē ēn kai alla polla . . . kai eme ta erōtika edidaxen, 201d3-5, 484)61, she first teaches him that something exists between wisdom and ignorance (ti metaxu sophias kai amathias, 202a1-2) – correct judgment (bē orthē doxa, a9-10).62 Because erōs seeks what it does not have (a provisional conclusion that emerged in the “elenchic” exchange between Agathon and Socrates before the latter’s speech) and erōs seeks the beautiful63 as

59 The return of the language of exainphanes heightens this connection, as Alexander Nehamas points out: Nehamas, Virtues of Authenticity, 311.

60 As Strauss comments on this later passage, “Now Dionysus, represented by Alcibiades, is the judge and crowns Socrates” (Strauss, On Plato’s Symposium, 257).

61 The Cooper, ed. translates ta erōtika here as “the art of love.”

62 This intimates a connection with the pursuit of correct in the Meno, as we saw in the previous chapter, and the commitment to correct judgment in the Theaetetus, which we will see in the next chapter.

63 That erōs responds to the beautiful is probably the safest generalization we can make about it in Athenian culture at large as Paul Ludwig argues in Eros and Polis.
well as wisdom (since wisdom is beautiful), \textit{erōs} lies between wisdom and ignorance as well:

"Erōs," Diotima tells Socrates, “must be a lover of wisdom [\textit{anangkaion erōs philosophon}] and, as such, is in between being wise and being ignorant” (\ldots \textit{onta metaxu einai sophou kai amathous}, 204b4-5). \textit{Erōs}, Diotima clarifies, is an \textit{erastes},\textsuperscript{64} an erotic lover.

The association of \textit{erōs} with \textit{philosophon}, the love of wisdom, should immediately spark a connection to Socrates; recalling the initial exchange with Agathon, this description of \textit{erōs} also seems to apply more directly. As a seeker and pursuer of wisdom and the beautiful both \textit{erōs} and Socrates never quite possess these things.\textsuperscript{65} What they do “know” remains in the questionable realm of “disputable dreams.” Moreover, just as in the \textit{Meno},\textsuperscript{66} Socrates’ declared lack of wisdom seems to mean committing himself to pursuing correct opinion: from the beginning of Diotima’s speech, Socrates and \textit{erōs} appear as images of each other.\textsuperscript{67}

The subsequent description that Diotima gives to Socrates helps us to elaborate the practices that accompany this aspect of the erotic Socrates. Socrates’ next question for Diotima – “what use is \textit{erōs} to human beings?” – leads Diotima to explain that because everyone wishes to have good things – to be \textit{eudaimonia} (204c7), i.e. successful and fulfilled in their lives’ entirety – “everyone is in love” (\textit{pantas eran}, 205a9, 488); this kind of love, the desire for happiness, is “common to all human beings” (\textit{koinon . . . panton anthrōpōn}, 205a6, ibid.). As Diotima later says, “people love the good” (\textit{hoi anthrōpoi tagathou erōsin}, 206a3-5) and they “want the good to be theirs forever” (206a, 489). Love itself, Diotima continues, is “wanting to possess the good forever” (\textit{ho erōs tou to agathon autō einai aei}, 206a11-12). Thus

\textsuperscript{64} Diotima does not use the word \textit{erastes} but refers to \textit{to erōn}, being a lover or loving (\textit{Symposium} 204c5).

\textsuperscript{65} See Diotima’s description at 203d.

\textsuperscript{66} As Socrates tells Meno: “As long as he has the right opinion [\textit{orthēn doxan}, 97b5] about that of which the other has knowledge, he will not be a worse guide than the one who knows, as he has a true opinion, though not knowledge” (97b, 895). Socrates later refers to this as “true opinion” (\textit{doxa . . . alētheia}, b9).

\textsuperscript{67} As Allan Bloom identifies, among others: Bloom, “Ladder of Love,” (in \textit{Love and Friendship}).
everyone not only has the capacity to love erotically – each person is “always already” loving in this way. The question becomes what this activity of loving resembles and why Socrates deems it significant enough to retell his education in ta érōtika.

As Diotima continues, the specific practices of erotic activity emerge more clearly. Wanting to possess the good forever constitutes the object of love but people pursue this object by “giving birth in beauty” (esti gar tauto tokos en kaloi 206b7-8, 489). As Diotima explains:

All of us are pregnant [knousin gar . . . pantes anthrōpoi, 206c1-2], Socrates, both in body and in soul, and, as soon as we come to a certain age, we naturally desire to give birth [tiktein epithumei bēmon bé phusis, c3-4]. Now no one can possibly give birth in anything ugly; only in something beautiful. That’s because when a man and a woman come together [sunousia, c6] in order to give birth, this is a godly affair [tontu theion to pragma, c6]. Pregnancy, reproduction – this is an immortal thing for a mortal animal to do, and it cannot occur in anything that is out of harmony, but ugliness is out of harmony with all that is godly. Beauty, however, is in harmony with the divine [to de kalon harmotton, d1-2]. (206c-d, 489)

Giving birth to beauty satisfies the deepest longings of human beings – to have the good forever. Since human beings will die, giving birth creates a legacy beyond their death, and every human being’s pregnancy provides for this possibility; we preserve ourselves by leaving something behind (207a). This comes, as Diotima first describes it, through association – the sunousia (206c6) – between a man and a woman; the sunousia becomes a “godly” affair when oriented (via erōs) toward giving birth. The word here, tiktein, can mean “to engender” and “to bring into the world,” extending beyond the birth of a human child and foreshadowing the kinds of births the erotic Socrates presumably inspires.69

68 See Liddell and Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, 1792.

69 I do not think Diotima describes the process that Socrates later calls “giving birth” in the Theaetetus. Beauty does not have a place in Socrates’ account, nor does erōs. This gives another reason for regarding Socrates as a midwife as different from the Socrates of the Symposium.
Giving birth to beauty takes many forms, all of which bespeak different sets of practices. Diotima explains that some people, being pregnant in body, provide themselves with immortality through having children. Others may give birth from their souls to “wisdom and the rest of excellence” (phronēsin te kai tēn allēn aretēn, 209a3-4, 491),70 which can appear in the work of the poets or any craftsmen “said to be creative” (hosoi legontain beuretikoi einai, a5, ibid.). Yet one way of giving birth earns Diotima’s highest praise: “But by far the greatest and most beautiful part of wisdom deals with the proper ordering of cities and households [hé peri ta tōn polēn te kai oikēseōn diakosmēsis, a6-7], and that is called moderation and justice [sōphrosunē te kai dikaiosunē, a8]” she tells Socrates (209a, 491). A man possessing such a pregnancy would seek beauty in others and, if he finds someone “beautiful and noble and well-formed” (kalēi kai gennaiai kai enphnei, 209b6):

such a man makes him instantly teem with ideas and arguments about excellence [enthus enporei logon peri aretēs, 209b8]— the qualities an excellent man should have and the customary activities in which he should engage; and so he tries to educate him [baion krē einai ton andra ton agathon kai epitédeuein, kai epicheirei paidenein, b8-c2]. (209c, 492)

Making contact with someone beautiful, a man pregnant in soul would keep company and always remember that beauty, forming an even firmer bond of friendship than the parents of human children while they nurture the beauty to which they give birth. Diotima continues:

Everyone would rather have such children than human ones, and would look up to Homer, Hesiod, and the other good poets with envy and admiration for the offspring they have left behind – offspring, which, because they are immortal themselves, provide their parents with immortal glory and remembrance [ha ekeinois athanaton kleo kai mnēmen parexetai, 209d2-3]. (209d, 492)

70 Note that the word translated as “wisdom” here is phronēsis, not sophia. This suggests that, as I would argue, sophia does not come as a product of erōs but rather through erotic pursuits.

71 Here I use “man” only because this is Plato’s choice of words. It seems perfectly possible a woman could give birth in the ways described, just as women could become philosophers in the Republic. In the Theaetetus, however, Socrates also implies that only men can give birth intellectually.
Diotima adds Lycurgus, the Spartan lawgiver, and Solon, his Athenian counterpart, as others who left behind hosts of beautiful deeds. These acts seem to constitute the pinnacle of erotic activity.

Yet Diotima and Socrates have not completely ascended. Diotima pauses to advise Socrates that he “could probably come to be initiated into these rites of love” (*tanta men oun ta erōtika isos . . . kan su μνήμηι, 209e5-210a1).* Yet Diotima also doubts whether Socrates will prove capable (*ouk o'id' ei hoios t' an eiēs, 210a1-2*) of attaining the “final and highest mystery” (*ta de telea kai epoptika, 210a1*) of them. She tells him, but she has also introduced a note of skepticism that marks what follows. “You must try to follow if you can,” she tells Socrates (*ēgō kai prothumias oouden apoleipo, 210a3, 492*).

Returning to the differences between those pregnant in body and those in soul, Diotima now describes a movement of erotic activity from the mundane to the heavenly. Having introduced these in terms of mysteries of *erōs*, Diotima now begins her initiation of Socrates. “If one is to go about this matter correctly,” Diotima begins, “one must begin in youth to devote oneself to beautiful bodies” (210a, 492). From there, one should follow *erōs*'s lead: first begetting beautiful ideas in one body but then seeing the necessity of moving from there to the beauty of all bodies. Next, one must recognize that beauty in soul exceeds the worth of bodily beauty, and one must seek the former above all else. But giving birth to ideas that make another better will force the lover to gaze next at the beauty of activities and laws (*to en tois epitēdenmias kai tois nomois kalon, 210c3-4*), and then see that the beauty of

---

72 The verb here is in the optative case, meaning it is a conditional verb describing possibility. This emphasizes that Diotima regards Socrates’ attainment of this final stage as only a remote possibility.

73 I emend this and the rest of the translations by using “one” in this paragraph to reflect the use of the impersonal verb *dein*, which begins the description of the ascent (*dei gar, 210a4* and *dei, 210b2*). This seems important, in my opinion, because it emphasizes the provisional, potential quality of Diotima’s description; what she describes may never have occurred – if it is possible at all.
knowledge (*epistēma*, 210c6) exceeds these even more. Thus one moves from bodies to souls and then from generalities to abstractions. Seeing the beauty of knowledge will turn one from single examples to “the great sea of beauty” (*to polu pelagos etrammenos tou kalou*, d4):

“gazing upon this, one gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom” (*theōrēn pollous kain kalous logous kai megaloprepeis tiktēi kai diatioēmata en philosophia*, d-6). Eventually this leads one to the sight of something even more wonderful and beautiful – the beautiful itself, “itself by itself with itself,” always in one form, in which all beautiful things share (*all' auto kath' bauto metb' banto monoeides aei on, ta de alla panta kala ekteinou metechonta tropon tina touionton*, 211b1-3, 493).

What often goes by the name “the ladder of love,” we might better call the “staircase of *eros*” – and one “without bannisters” – where each step builds on the previous one and relies on it for integrity. Diotima uses a similar phrase when she recapitulates the process I have just related:

One goes always upwards for the sake of this beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs [*hōsper epanabasmos chrōmenon*, 211c3]; from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful [*kai gnōi auto teleutōn bo estin kalon*, c8-d1]. (211c-d, 493)

Such an experience would change one’s life entirely, Diotima asserts; to ascend to the staircase’s summit would leave one dissatisfied with any mere image of beauty. Moreover, only once one has glimpsed beauty can one give birth not just to images of excellence but to true excellence (*tekonti de aretēn alicedē*, 212a5-6). And this constitutes a divine experience: “the

---

74 As Ruby Blondell notes on the ubiquitous “ladder of love”: “The ascent is more like a staircase than a ladder, since it leaves room on each step for company (which suits the Socratic model of ‘leadership’ [for which Blondell argues] . . . ) and suggests ascent to a temple and thus to divinity. But the traditional phrase remains more euphonious than ‘staircase of passionate desire’” (Blondell, “Ladder of Love,” 147).
love of the gods belongs to anyone who has given birth to true excellence and nourished it, and if any human being could become immortal, it would be this one” (212b5-7, 494).

Ending his account of Diotima’s speeches, Socrates declares his adherence to her lessons. “I was persuaded,” he concludes. “And in this state of conviction, I try to persuade others that for this possession [tou κτίματος, 212b3, referring to “true excellence,” ostensibly] one could not easily get a better co-worker with human nature than erōs” (212b).75

That’s why I say that every man must honor erōs, why I honor the rites of erōs myself and practice them with special diligence, and why I commend them to others. Now and always I praise the power and courage of erōs so far as I am able. (212b-c, 494)

Having begun with misgivings about being left in aporia by Agathon, Socrates delivers the longest speech of the evening, one which claims to reveal the deepest secrets of erōs. He seems to have left the earlier figures of Socrates complete behind, ascending with Diotima to new heights of erōs-inspired contemplation. But what has this told us about the figure of Socrates? What have we learned about the erotic dimension, if any, of his practice of philosophy as we see it in the dialogue itself?

***

As I suggested earlier, Diotima’s version of erōs evokes many parallels with Socrates: from the physical descriptions of the two to their “placelessness” (atopia) to the philosophic orientation of their seeking. Moreover, one could add how Socrates seems to exemplify the stages of erotic ascent that Diotima describes as the crucial practices of ta erōtika:76 in the Symposium we witness Socrates with beautiful young men, handsome in body (Apollodorus) and in soul (Aristodemus); we see Socrates moving among these different beauties (between

75 Here I use the Bernardete translation in Benardete, ed. Plato’s Symposium, 42. The Cooper, ed. translation goes as follows: “And once persuaded, I try to persuade others too that human nature can find no better workmate for acquiring this than erōs” (494).

76 Ruby Blondell persuasively advances this argument, and I follow her in this paragraph (although with some of my own examples): Blondell, “The Ladder of Love.”
Agathon and Alcibiades); we watch Socrates grappling with Athenian practices, including the theater in his celebration of Agathon; we hear Socrates’ assertion that he possesses knowledge of the things of erōs, ta erōtika – consisting, presumably, of beauty; finally, we hear of Socrates’ standing alone under Agathon’s neighbor’s porch, ostensibly contemplating a great sea of beauty (for which he prepared himself beautifully – becoming kalos, as Aristodemus puts it), perhaps even glimpsing beauty itself. Socrates seems to embody both erōs and erotic activity – hence “Socrates erōtikos.”

On this reading, we could also read all the speeches that precede Socrates’ speech as treating erōs in a way that prepares for the practices of erōs Socrates describes – all culminating in philosophy. Phaedrus praises erōs as a “great god,” arguing that the best possible system of society would equip an army with erōstai and their erōmenoi because they would fight the hardest (178d). Here erōs appears on the lowest step admiring the body of the beloved. Pausanias asserts that Athens has the best possible customs to deal with erōs because they encourage openness while separating vulgar, bodily erōs from the good erōs of the soul (184c); one can now distinguish between erōs of the body and erōs of the soul (ostensibly Pausanias loves Agathon not just for his winning smile). Eryximachus, pouncing on Aristophanes’ hiccups, declares that erōs constitutes a more general phenomenon (186b) and one that needs its healthy manifestations encouraged and its diseased forms destroyed. The speakers now take a general perspective, leaving lovers and beloveds behind for knowledge and the “sea of beauty.” Aristophanes counters by asserting erōs as a cosmic principle of the universe given by Zeus to alleviate divided human life, and that erōs should form the most important of all human pursuits, serving as our guide and coworker (193b) –
this language echoes Diotima directly in her call for *erōs* to act as leader.\textsuperscript{77} Agathon praises a eudaimonistic approach to eros, contrasting Aristophanes’ rather tragic description of human diremption with his own panegyric to *erōs*’s perfection in every respect (197d – 198) while also connecting the proper guidance of *erōs* with the successful, well-led life. Thus each speaker elaborates different activities – habits or customs or laws – where *erōs* emerges and these roughly correspond to steps on Diotima’s staircase. *Erōs* leads human beings – or, rather, *could* lead human beings – to more admirable possibilities.

For Socrates, the last speaker before Alcibiades, the practices that best deal with *erōs* would seem to peak in the practice of philosophy. As described through Diotima, the rites of *eros* appear to encompass each of the previously proposed ways of praising *erōs* while crowning them with philosophy.\textsuperscript{78} As we saw, moving from beautiful bodies to a vision of all bodies as beautiful to the soul and the decency of the soul as a primary concern, the proper *erastēs* concerns himself by moving through the sequences embodied by the previous speakers. Next, the *erastēs* gives birth to such ideas that will make young men better, gazing at the beauty of activities in laws, customs and various kinds of knowledge. Then the *erastēs* turns to a “great sea of beauty” where “in ungrudging philosophy” the *erastēs* gives birth – the *erastēs* reaches the “goal of love” where he may “discern a certain single philosophical science” (210d) to catch sight of something “wonderfully beautiful in its nature,” something that always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, itself with itself, always in one form in which all other beautiful things share.\textsuperscript{79} This all constitutes the mystery of *erōs* – one goes

\textsuperscript{77} Aristophanes calls for *erōs* to serve as “leader and commander” (*hēgemōn kai stratēgos*, 193b1) and Diotima says *erōs* should lead (*hēgoomenos*, 210a7) those who wish to ascend. Socrates echoes Aristophanes in the sense of his assertion that “human nature can find no better workmate for acquiring this than *erōs*” (212b3-4, 494).

\textsuperscript{78} Along these lines, Laurence Cooper describes Socrates’ speech as “capacious” and allowing for all the themes of the others: Cooper, *Eros in Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche*, 61.

\textsuperscript{79} Here I have used the Benardete translation: Benardete, *Plato’s Symposium*, 41.
always upward for the sake of this beauty and one comes to know “just what it is to be beautiful” (211c). Thus from conventional pederasty through the right practices and approach to the world, the erastēs can proceed to the single philosophic science of glimpsing the good, the ultimate object of all erōs and the compelling spectacle which drives all other activity.

And yet Socrates does not entirely fit the description of erōs he puts in the mouth of Diotima, much as he may resemble it. For one, we rarely see Socrates not engaged in conversation, whereas Diotima’s story would point him toward the constant realm of contemplation. The incident at the beginning of the symposium, when Socrates stands below a neighbor’s porch until halfway through dinner seems as strange to readers familiar with Socrates as it does to Agathon who calls it weird (atopon, 175a10). For the rest of the dialogue, Socrates participates in a variety of ways: challenging, asserting, moving among bodies, and so forth. The dialogue’s enactment thus runs contrary to its apparent argument.

Moreover, Socrates describes himself as a student (and Diotima as the teacher), a position that would not correspond to Diotima’s descriptions of erōs. To take just two other examples: Erōs always seeks the beautiful, but not in the same way that Socrates typically “seeks” (ζεῖται), not having the formal role that Socrates takes with Diotima. Erōs also never suffers perplexity, never being at a loss (botan enporēsēi, 203e2) whereas Socrates confesses being at a loss (aporia) after Agathon’s speech (198a7, a9, and b2 among other places). In other words, while erōs practices philosophy all his life, this purely erotic philosophy differs from Socrates’ mortal kind as we observe it in the Symposium.

80 We saw the frequent occurrence of ζεῖται in the previous chapter. In the Symposium, this language also occurs in Aristophanes’ speech (191b3 and d5) and Diotima’s speech (207d1 and 209b2), both of which describe the human condition: split human beings seeking their other halves for Aristophanes and a description of “mortal nature” longing for something else in the case of Diotima. Alcibiades also describes Socrates in these terms when recounting Socrates’ strange behavior while on military duty, standing in silent contemplation through an entire day and night.
In light of these differences, I would suggest that Diotima’s rites may offer an aspiration rather than a description, an implicit ideal that guides much of the erotic aspect of Socrates’ practice of philosophy but neither fully captures nor exhaustively explains it. Much like the end of the *Meno*, where we saw Socrates describing the pursuit of “true excellence” while understanding that its attainment might come only “with the god’s help,” here we have similar language describing a similar orientation. But still a question remains, one that becomes more urgent with the entrance of Alcibiades: does anyone other than Socrates aspire to truth, wisdom, and knowledge? Can *erōs* have a place in the practice of philosophy? If Socrates does not perfectly resemble *erōs*, as Hadot would have it, then where *is* he?

VI.

Alcibiades’ abrupt and wild entry disrupts the gathering in the *Symposium*, clouding the accounts that seemed to culminate with Socrates, and calling into question the domestication of *erōs* that had seemed realistic if not desirable and thus the possibility of founding any predictable human activity – whether philosophic or political – on this restive, powerful passion. If Diotima’s account of *erōs* offered the pinnacle of Socrates’ erotic activity, Alcibiades’ characterization of the erotic Socrates reflects a polar opposite. Seen in light of Athenian political culture, Alcibiades’ speech also shows the troubling disturbances that might come with any interventions in *erōs*’s realm. While counterbalanced by the more sedate speeches in praise of *erōs* that precede him, Alcibiades’ speech, mad yet pointedly honest, demonstrates the potential for profoundly unsettling effects when one associates with Socrates and encounters the erotic dimension of his practice of philosophy. Thus the power
and poignancy of Alcibiades’ speech seems to disturb any facile account of erōs as the root of philosophy’s activity.81

As Aristophanes tries to respond to Socrates after the latter’s speech, Alcibiades bursts in bearing crowns and the flute girl (212c). The informality of the symposium shatters with the mock formality of Alcibiades’ reconstitution of the gathering. Alcibiades sees Agathon and sits next to him but then suddenly jumps up as he notices Socrates on his other side. “It’s Socrates!” Alcibiades exclaims. “You’ve trapped me again!” (213c, 495). In response, Socrates appeals to Agathon, pleading for protection from Alcibiades. “You cannot imagine,” he tells Agathon, “what it’s like to be in love with him” (hōs emoi o toú erōs tou anthrōpou ou phaulon pragma gegonen, 213c7-8, 495). The ethereal philosophic erōs of Diotima’s account has transformed into the bathetic, Socrates’ otherworldly contemplation turns satyr play, and the friendly dynamics one might have attributed to the previous speeches on erōs disappears in a vinuous torrent.

Moreover, with Alcibiades’ entrance, the moderate and relatively egalitarian atmosphere of the gathering disintegrates. Inciting the party to drink, Alcibiades elects himself master of ceremonies in the process and sets the terms for his speech that follows (213c).82 He refuses the group consensus that he take a turn eulogizing erōs (214c). Having heard that Socrates just delivered a speech, Alcibiades rejects it: “The truth is the opposite!” Alcibiades shouts. Instead of praising erōs, Alcibiades declares he must praise Socrates – and truthfully. He may move abruptly from topic to topic, Alcibiades adds, but this is due only to Socrates’ own strangeness – Socrates is so atopos (215a2). Yet Alcibiades promises not to

81 Here I want to advance a sympathetic reading of Alcibiades, following Martha Nussbaum in important ways. Nussbaum points to the loss entailed by following the erotic Socrates, although I would not go so far as she does in asserting that Alcibiades represents genuine erōs and Socrates only its corruption.

82 Symposia normally had “symposiarchs” who led the gatherings, but in the Symposium the gathering had proceeded more democratically, with Eryximachus suggesting Phaedrus’s idea and the entire group agreeing.
diverge from the truth. Alcibiades thus presents a contrary erōs and contrary associations that follow from it; his description that follows reveals Socrates as their source and inspiration.

In contrast to all the speeches that preceded him, a conflictual account of erōs emerges from Alcibiades’ speech on the erotic Socrates. In part, Alcibiades reverses the roles implicit in Socrates’ account – contradicting Socrates’ earlier claims to truthfulness, Alcibiades asserts himself as speaking truly and Socrates as deceitful. While Socrates claims to play the part of erastēs with Alcibiades, Alcibiades’ story recasts himself (Alcibiades) as the erastēs with Socrates as the erōmenos. A series of contrasts come with Alcibiades’ speech: Alcibiades claims to knows himself and acts upon it whereas he makes Socrates appear enigmatic and bizarre; erotic desire seems to impel Alcibiades, while Socrates, on Alcibiades’ telling, stands apart from any explicable human activities; Alcibiades means well, both by Socrates and implicitly in his life while Socrates, in contrast, acts hubristically (hubristēs ei, 215b6) – “impudent, contemptuous, and vile” – according to Alcibiades. Replacing the praise of erōs with praise of Socrates, Alcibiades “turns the world upside down” just as it had coalesced in the previous speeches. And this entails a very different reflection on Socrates.

Alcibiades’ speech suggests that something volatile and dangerous lies behind the erotic Socrates and thus the erotic aspect of Socrates’ practice of philosophy. In his speech,

---


84 This charge becomes thematic for certain aspects of Socrates: Callicles accuses him of it, Anytus practically does, and it becomes an official charge in Socrates’ trial.

85 This is the Cooper, ed. translation of hubristēs: 215b6, 497.

86 Gorgias 481c. This connects Alcibiades and Callicles in another way.

87 Arlene Saxonhouse comments that “Alcibiades’ speech is at best ambivalent, if not downright nasty” (Saxonhouse, Fear of Diversity, 179). This distinguishes Alcibiades from the other highly favorable reflections on Socrates.
Alcibiades uses an image to praise Socrates – a statute of Silenus sitting with his flute, hollow inside but full of little gods. Similarly, like the satyr Marsyas, Alcibiades asserts, Socrates’ words have an extraordinary effect – Socrates enchants others with his divine melodies, but they consist of words alone. “Let anyone . . . listen to you [Socrates] or even a poor account of what you say – and we are all transported, completely possessed (ekpeplegmenoi esmen kai katechometha (215d5-6, 497),” Alcibiades says.

Still, I swear to you, the moments he starts to speak, I am beside myself: my heart starts leaping in my chest, the tears come streaming down my face, even the frenzied Corybantes seem sane compared to me – and, let me tell you, I am not alone. I have heard Pericles and many other great orators [allôn agathôn rhetorôn, 215e4-5], and I have admired their speeches. But nothing like this even happened to me: they never upset me so deeply that my very own soul started protesting that my life – my life – was no better than the most miserable slave’s. (215e1-216a1, 497-498)

Because of this mix of seduction and repulsion, Socrates’ words make Alcibiades feel as if he were drunk, outside himself and possessed. Socrates makes it seem as if Alcibiades’ life is not worth living. While Alcibiades’ has preoccupied himself with attempting to escape from Socrates’ spell, to elude the trap implicating Alcibiades’ whole way of life (216b), Socrates shames Alcibiades whenever Socrates comes around:

So I have become a runaway [drapeteuo, 216b5] and avoid him; and whenever I see him, I am ashamed of what has been agreed upon. And many is the time when I should see with pleasure that he is not among human beings; but again, if this should happen, I know well that I should be much more greatly distressed. I do not know what to do with this human being [ouk echô batî chrêîsomaî toutôi toi anthrîpoî]. (216b-c)

---

88 This word and its derivatives appear only three other times in Plato’s dialogues, and all three come in the Meno: 97d10, 97e1, and 98a2. There they describe the statues of Daedelus, which Socrates has likened to opinions that flee without being “tied down” with true knowledge. Do you hear anticipations of Alcibiades?

89 Benardete’s translation: Bernardete, Plato’s Symposium, 47.
Alcibiades’ wild and erratic response to Socrates – his “philosophic madness and bacchic frenzy” (218b) – he likens to a snakebite (217c):90 one can only talk about it with fellow victims because only they understand the pain. Yet Socrates’ effects exceed even a snakebite:

Well, something much more painful than a snake has bitten me in my most sensitive part – I mean my heart, or my soul, or whatever you want to call it, which has been struck and bitten by philosophy [pλέγεις τε καί δείχνεις ὅπω τόν εν φιλοσοφία λογόν, 218a4-5],91 whose grip on younger and eager souls is much more vicious than a viper’s and makes them do the most amazing things. (218a, 499-500)

Later, Alcibiades also warns Agathon of Socrates’ mistreatment of those he erotically loves; being a beloved of Socrates, he suggests, can have dangerous effects (222c). Erōs seems to possess an explosiveness and flammability that exceeds the self-control and mastery suggested by the earlier speeches in the Symposium and that peaked in Diotima’s account. Or perhaps this is Socrates’ doing.

According to Alcibiades’ description, Socrates’ erōs upsets the settled conventions of symposia thereby undermining the intuitive sureness with which Alcibiades seeks to live. Symposia established a place where men gathered to perpetuate and celebrate aristocratic values, performing the masculine ideology of mastery, part of which included celebrating moderation.92 Alcibiades accuses Socrates of hubris, and thus of breaking these norms through sexual excess. Yet Socrates’ effrontery also appears strange – he transgresses by not transgressing, by refusing to break norms normally broken. His comparison of Socrates to the satyr Marsyas further emphasizes this strange side to Socrates’ outrageousness. In the Greek imagination satyrs represented hypersexualized desire, marked by boundless sexual

---

90 Alcibiades uses the same word to describe being bitten and Socrates’ bite five times in quick succession here, as if to emphasize his pain and its repetition: 217e6 and e8 and 218a2, a3, and a4.
91 The second verb here, δακνεῖν, Socrates uses to describe reactions to him in the Theaetetus (151c6). The multiform beast of the appetites in Republic IX also bites and kills the other parts: 589a4.
energy and enlarged genitalia. Thus Alcibiades depicts Socrates and his ἔρως as wild and erratic, dangerously destabilizing symposiastic conventions – this despite the fact that Socrates remains chaste while Alcibiades wishes for something more.

Socrates’ demand that Alcibiades must change his life overwhelms Alcibiades. What Socrates seems to require of Alcibiades thus puts Alcibiades at a loss; Socrates’ claim on Alcibiades’ way of life is painful, leaving him feeling purposeless yet enslaved. Yet unlike in the case of Meno, this perplexity does not result in a desire for further inquiry but irritation, anger, and resentment. When Socrates claims to have interest in beautiful boys, Alcibiades says, Socrates doesn’t actually care if the person is beautiful; this challenges Alcibiades’ expectations and subverts Athenian practices. Socrates seems more concerned with boys’ souls (216e) and with what they possess inside, but such a concern, and Socrates’ claims to love Alcibiades’ erotically, conflict with norms around him and cause painful friction and dislocation rather than energized inquiry.

Alcibiades thought Socrates wanted a conventional erotic relationship, and Alcibiades recounts how he attempted to develop one with Socrates, trying to let Socrates have his way in order that Socrates might teach Alcibiades what he (Socrates) knows (217b). But despite finding himself alone with Socrates, taking exercise together with him, even inviting Socrates to dinner as if Alcibiades were the lover, Alcibiades could not establish a normal pederastic relationship and the expected exchange of favors with Socrates (217c-d). Socrates refused to give Alcibiades what Alcibiades wanted, to hand over the wisdom in exchange for Alcibiades’ pleasing presence. Rather than turning Alcibiades toward care for

---


94 This may also point to how it could overwhelm any of us, as I discuss in Chapter 7.

95 As Arlene Saxonhouse puts it: “Socrates, scorning what other men value, scorns the beauty and popularity that give Alcibiades pleasure” (Saxonhouse, Fear of Diversity, 181).
himself, Socrates maddens him. And Socrates cannot conciliate Alcibiades as he tried (and apparently achieved) with Meno.

When Alcibiades confronts Socrates, confessing that he wishes to become the best possible, Socrates chastises him. Should Socrates accept “bronze for gold”? he asks. Socrates admonishes Alcibiades to think again and consider what is best for both of them. But such coyness drives Alcibiades crazy! Socrates spurns Alcibiades’ beauty (219c), which Alcibiades thinks stems from nothing but Socrates’ amazing arrogance and pride; Alcibiades is “deeply humiliated” yet also cannot bear to lose Socrates’ friendship (219c). “I had no idea what do to,” Alcibiades says, “no purpose in life; ah, no one else has every known the real meaning of slavery!” (219e, 501).

Socrates’ strangeness marks another crucial aspect emphasized by Alcibiades in his speech. Socrates’ strangeness makes Alcibiades unable to account for him – and unable to account for Socrates’ uncanny power of seduction. There is no parallel for Socrates, Alcibiades asserts. All of this began on the campaign in Potidaea, where Socrates and Alcibiades shared a mess. Socrates stood up to hunger, could drink copiously without becoming drunk, and proved amazingly resistant to cold (220a-b). Standing aside all day, dawn to dawn, giving Alcibiades a medal that Socrates himself deserved, showing courage at the retreat in Delium, Socrates presented a powerful and impressive figure (220c-e; 221a-b). One could say many marvelous things – Socrates appears unique, so bizarre with his ways, and so unusual in his character:

The sort that this human being in his strangeness [atopian] proved to be, both in himself and in his speeches [kai autos kain boi logoi auton], one could not even come

96 This echoes the exchange between Agathon and Socrates at the beginning of the Symposium and connects Alcibiades (and his relationship to Socrates) to Agathon (and his relationship to Socrates). I address this below.

97 I expand on Socrates’ strangeness, or his atopia, in Chapter 7.
close to finding, whether one looked among the men of today or among the ancients. (221d)

Socrates strangeness exceeds explanation. But Alcibiades still suspects that Socrates withholds something from him: Like those hollow statues of the Silenus, Socrates appears ridiculous at first – talking about pack asses and other things, “making the same old tired points in the same old tired words” (221e, 503) – but once you see behind these words, Alcibiades asserts, you can never go back: “they’re truly worthy of a god” (222a, ibid.).

“They’re of great – no, of the greatest – importance for anyone who wants to become a truly good man” (mallon de epi pan boson prosèkei skopein tòi mellonti kaloi kagathòi ekesthai, 222a, ibid.). You can hear Alcibiades struggling with Socrates’ language here – skoptein – and what I have called the aspirational quality of Socrates’ practice of philosophy; Alcibiades, however, proves unable to do it.

Moreover, despite his attractiveness to Alcibiades, Socrates stands opposed to the conventions of Athenian life in seemingly every aspect; Socrates thus repels Alcibiades from everyday life around him. Socrates’ strange behavior on the battlefield calls attention to his undermining of the “erotics of Athenian democracy” at a fundamental level, and echoes of this opposition between Socrates and the erotics of Athenian citizenship resound throughout Alcibiades’ speech, echoes of which we will hear later in the Theaetetus and the Gorgias: the comparison to Pericles (215e); Socrates’ convincing Alcibiades to turn to himself rather than to political affairs (216a); the unsettling of the dynamics of shame in Athenian political culture (216b–c); and the ways in which Socrates seems to embody aspects of political

---

98 Here I use the Benardete translation: Benardete, Plato’s Symposium, 52. The Cooper, ed. translation reads as follows: “But this man here is so bizarre, his ways and his ideas are so unusual, that search as you might, you’ll never find anyone else, alive or dead, who’s even remotely like him” (503).

99 Bernard Williams, Shame and Necessity.
excellence such as courage and moderation without their being grounded in conventional political practices (219d). Socrates’ strangeness and his countercultural erōs leave Alcibiades nonplussed – Socrates seems both “wonderful” and “vile,” both enchanting and disgusting. Socrates resembles no other human being and escapes any words or categories with which Alcibiades might try to contain him. Socrates eludes Alcibiades’ grasp – his plots, his ruses, his beguilements. “I do not know what to do with this man,” Alcibiades concedes.

I think we need to sympathize with Alcibiades. For as much as his drunkenness and the crude imagery of his speech give reason to question his character, Alcibiades deserves better. A promising youth who lost his father – killed in the battle of Coronea in 446 – at the age of six, Alcibiades and his younger brother became the wards of Pericles I. Having descended from a noble family and then coming of age in the shadow of Pericles, great expectations long surrounded Alcibiades. Then Socrates starting hanging around, we can imagine, attracted by Alcibiades’ beauty of body and soul. What could Alcibiades do? Socrates persisted, waiting as he explains at the beginning of the Alcibiades I until he felt impelled to approach Alcibiades directly. An older man advances toward a much younger one – Alcibiades knew this story, and he behaved as appropriately as he knew how.

What is more, Socrates continued to follow Alcibiades in his own strange way. He declared his love for Alcibiades, yet this love only demented Alcibiades further. As Alcibiades tells it in the Symposium, being around Socrates shames and arouses Alcibiades, contorting his soul as he wishes both to possess Socrates, to hold those little “figures of

100 This connects to the Apology where Socrates claims he deserves honor for the true practice of courage and compares himself to Achilles. See Chapter 6.


102 I take these historical details about Alcibiades from Debra Nails, The People of Plato, 11.
excellence” (agalmat' aretēs, 222a4) he imagines Socrates contains but also to flee him like the vagabond erōs. Yet Socrates’ extreme abnormality prevents any genuine relationship on the terms Alcibiades can offer; if Socrates knew Alcibiades – we can infer from Alcibiades’ speech – Socrates would know that Alcibiades needs more than Socrates has given. But Socrates ignores this. His demands exceed Alcibiades’ abilities.

The only way Alcibiades knows to describe Socrates’ treatment and the derangement it has brought on Alcibiades comes in the language of hubris. Alcibiades accuses Socrates of arrogance and contempt, of violating the proper order of things (an accusation we will hear again in the Apology). Hubris encapsulates Alcibiades’ description of Socrates and gives us insight into another aspect of Socrates’ erotic character.103 Alcibiades declares Socrates to be hubristic from the very beginning of his speech, as we saw, saying “You are hubristic! No?” [hubristēs ei, é ou; 215b7] immediately after Alcibiades has described Socrates as a Silenus. Socrates’ silence indicts him, Alcibiades continues. Socrates’ sexual strangeness, his refusal of conventional sexual relations, perhaps constitutes his greatest outrage for Alcibiades. This appears again in the second accusation of hubris against Socrates. After describing his attempts at conducting a normal affair with Socrates, Alcibiades says: “He so far prevailed over me and despised and laughed at my youthful beauty [katephronēsen kain kategelasen tēs emēs hōras] and committed an outrage against it [hubrisen] . . .” (219c5).104 Returning to the association of Socrates with satyrs, Alcibiades reiterates the accusation of hubris a third time at the end of his speech, saying that Socrates’ words may strike you as ridiculous at first (phaneien an panu geloiōi to proton, 221c3) because they come cloaked in words as coarse as the

103 The word and its variants appear only four other times in the Symposium, and one of them comes from Agathon accusing Socrates of hubris: 175c7. (The other three instances are as follows: 174b6 when Socrates accuses Homer of hubristic violation of a fable; 181c4 when Pausianas calls youths hubristic; and 188a7 when Eryximachus calls the “hubristic” side of erōs dangerous.)

104 I use Benardete’s translation again here: Benardete, Plato’s Symposium, 51.
hubristic hides of satyrs (*saturon de tina hubriston doran*, 221c3-4). Socrates’ *hubris* deceives as well as outrages; its deception creates its outrage: Socrates deceives by appearing to love but then actually makes his beloved love him, reversing the role and upsetting expectations as well as conventions. Alcibiades’ final use of *hubris* puts this point emphatically:

> Here, men, is what I praise Socrates for; and I mixed in with it what in turn, I blame him for *[ba memphomai . . . humin, 222a8]*, when I told you how he committed an outrage against me *[ba me hubrisen, ibid.]*. And what is more, he not only did this to me, but to Charmides the son of Glaucon, Euthydemus the son of Diocles, and many others – for while deceiving them into thinking of him as the lover, he brings it about that he is the beloved rather than the lover *[hous autos exaptōn hos erastēs paidika mallon autos kathistatai ant’ erastou]*. (222a7-b4)\(^105\)

Socrates’ *hubris* for Alcibiades revolves around *erōs*: Socrates refuses to conform to expected erotic behavior and his deviance (and deception) outrages not only Alcibiades but other promising young men such as Charmides and Euthydemus. Socrates turns their worlds upside down.

Finally, Socrates never interrupts Alcibiades’ speech to contest its truthfulness, acting as if he knows the effects on Alcibiades of his (Socrates’) love. In fact, Socrates accuses Alcibiades of being perfectly sober and of delivering his speech only to make trouble between Agathon and Socrates. Socrates does not take Alcibiades seriously, and swipes back at him:

> You think that I should be in love with you and no one else, while you, and no one else, should be in love with Agathon – well, we were not deceived; we’ve seen through your little satyr play. Agathon, my friend, don’t let him get away with it: let no one come between us! (222d, 504)

Agathon rises to sit next to Socrates, and Alcibiades writhes: “My god!” he cries, “how I suffer at his hands!” (222e). Another turn of the screw, another bite like a viper – we can begin to understand why Alcibiades starts and screams when he first sees Socrates:

“Herakles! What is the meaning of this! Socrates is here? You’ve trapped me again!”

(213b).106

VII.

With Alcibiades’ dramatic entrance, I have argued, the possibility of a philosophical *sunousia* constructed around an *erōs* for the beauty of truth and wisdom comes into question. Even if Socrates calls the participants to this higher form of “being together” – the literal translation of *sunousia* that we saw in Diotima’s speech – Alcibiades reminds us of the vast distance between Socrates’ aspirations and the reality ‘on the ground,’ as it were, even in the conducive confines of a symposium.107 Instead of exemplifying the associations that Socrates and Diotima paean, each participant in the *Symposium* who responds to Socrates thus evokes a different kind of *sunousia*: the acolyte Apollodorus, the disciple Aristodemus, the bemused Agathon, and the berserk Alcibiades. No single erotic response to Socrates exists, and I want to suggest further that evidence suggests that no single portrait of an erotic Socrates does either. Alcibiades’ entrance unsettles the very meaning of *erōs*, enacting the volatility that may even underlie Socrates’ philosophy itself.

We can pair Apollodorus and Aristodemus as one set of possible responses to Socrates, giving us some purchase on one way of viewing the erotic Socrates and his effects. Unlike Alcibiades and Agathon, neither Apollodorus nor Aristodemus appears as beautiful.

---

106 Taking the side of Alcibiades, Martha Nussbaum puts his confusion in these compelling terms: “I can live in *erōs*, devoted to its violence and its sudden light. But once I have listened to Diotima, I see the loss of light that this course, too, entails – the loss of rational planning, the loss, we might say, of the chance to make a world. And then, if I am a rational being, with a rational being’s deep need for order and for understanding, I feel that I must be false to *erōs*, for the world’s sake” (Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 198).

107 Nussbaum rightly contrasts this *sunousia* with the one later described by Alcibiades: “Sexual ‘being-with’ (the words used at 211d6, ‘*suneinai*’, is also the ordinary word for intercourse) cannot be stably prolonged, both because of its internally ‘impure’ structure of need and repletion, and also because it relies on the presence of an object that is not the lover’s to command. Intellectual intercourse (‘*suneinai*’ is used of the form at 212a2) is free of these defects” (Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 182). Yet I would argue that the action of the *Symposium* shows that intellectual discourse does in fact contain these defects, and that each form of *sunousia* comes with instability.
Yet they both identify as erastai of Socrates, and they exhibit this passion with their infatuation (Apollodorus) and memory for times passed with Socrates (Aristodemus). Each has chosen to follow Socrates as a way of life, either leaving behind their wealth and prestige (Apollodorus) or finding themselves elevated from even humbler beginnings (Aristodemus). Socrates has captivated them so much that they can each recall long stories about him – the same one that we hear in the Symposium – and know his appearance and habits well.

Apollodorus and Aristodemus reflect in a different way what we saw intimated in the flirtations between Meno and Socrates in the Meno. Whereas Meno approached Socrates with a mouthful of questions and some hours spent with Gorgias as ammunition, Apollodorus at least recounts how his encounter with Socrates fundamentally changed his life; Apollodorus had not headed toward philosophy before Socrates demanded a detour. Meno also came with an aristocratic and foreign background, and he challenged Socrates as an adversary more than a friend and collocutor. Socrates perhaps tried to elicit friendliness with his double entendres and coquetry, but Meno never bit (although he felt stung). With an erotic relationship already established between themselves and Socrates, Apollodorus and Aristodemus seem to have moved past Meno’s state and towards the philosophical sunousia that constitutes the erotic Socrates’ ideal.

Yet Apollodorus and Aristodemus also warn of the narcotic effects of Socrates’ practice of philosophy – that we may simply knowingly imitate Socrates, in Jonathan Lear’s phrase, rather than engage him. 108 Socrates as stingray numbed Meno, but into action. For all their subservience and fawning, Apollodorus and Aristodemus seem to have suffered

---

108 As Lear writes: “For Socrates, the unexamined life is not worth living: it is not a form of living, but a form of deadness. To live openly with the fundamental questions is to avoid assuming that there are any fixed answers which are already given. It is, above all, to avoid all forms of ‘knowingness’” (Lear, Open Minded, 5).
somnolence instead – Lear’s “deadness.” But their mindless parroting of Socrates – most apparent in Apollodorus – would seem anathema to Socrates’ practice of philosophy, at least as we saw it in the intense elenchic exchange, the stories and exhortations, the interplay of affection and aggression, of the *Meno*. Admittedly, the *Meno* seemed to lead nowhere, but we hear nothing close to philosophic conversation between either Aristodemus or Apollodorus and Socrates, and perhaps this explains it: what would they discuss when in their unthinking imitation they mirror Socrates in both thought and deed? Disagreement would seem precluded. It would sound as if Socrates were sitting quietly in a room alone.

But Apollodorus and Aristodemus do not offer the sole responses to Socrates in the *Symposium* – Alcibiades’ response to Socrates forms a second in a pair along with Agathon. Taken together, Alcibiades and Aristodemus emphasize Socrates’ strangeness and disturbing qualities. Both beautiful and young, Alcibiades and Agathon also each appear as a beloved (erōnomos) of Socrates; however, both respond with bewilderment to Socrates’ presence – each one calls Socrates strange (atopon), and each also calls him hubristic. Agathon and Alcibiades both confess some attraction to Socrates, but neither finds any satisfaction of these desires, as we heard from Alcibiades and as we might infer from Agathon’s drowsy exit at the end of the *Symposium*. Both Agathon and Alcibiades also seem to seek Socrates in order to possess his wisdom: Agathon beckons Socrates to sit beside him so that he might receive Socrates’ wisdom; Alcibiades, as we saw, imagines possessing Socrates and breaking open his “hubristic hide” in order to discover the wisdom within. This desire manifests itself as a kind of manic erōs, an erōs oriented toward possession, as we saw in Alcibiades and in his

109 Here I would contest the suggestions of Neumann, Strauss, and Rosen (all cited above) that Apollodorus and Aristodemus somehow demonstrate “true philosophy” of even the beneficial effects of association with Socrates. The subsequent evidence just does not substantiate such a claim.
warning to Agathon. In a way, Alcibiades portrays a later version of what remains incipient when we meet Agathon.

Alcibiades and Agathon call our attention to the potential for volatile responses to Socrates as well as his implication in the broader political culture of Athens. Apollodorus and Aristodemus did little significant in their lives, but Agathon and Aristodemus both participated broadly and memorably in Athens. Agathon won the Lenaea and subsequently enjoyed a successful career as a tragedian – so successful that Aristophanes mocked him in a number of his plays. Alcibiades, of course, presented a tragedy of his own in the form of his own life: a playboy avant la lettre, magnificent speaker (perhaps too effective), a successful general, accused of profaning the mysteries in abstentia and recalled back to Athens, defected to Sparta, recalled again to Athens, murdered mysteriously after another banishment. While we surely cannot connect any single action to Socrates, the legacy of Alcibiades nonetheless contains a link to him.

Although one could also make more of the differences within each pair, the contrasting pairs heighten the distance separating different responses to the erotic Socrates as well as the different erotic publics that might follow. The sheer notoriety of many of these characters – and I have not yet even mentioned Aristophanes – arrayed around Socrates would have struck any contemporary reader of the Symposium, and further underscore the diversity of responses to (and disregard of) Socrates. David Halperin analogizes the context:

It would have been impossible for a contemporary Greek to read the Symposium unironically. (It is as if a modern American writer were to depict, on the eve of the Congressional vote on the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, an all-night seminar featuring Robert Kennedy, Mick Jagger, Paul Tillich, Ethel Merman, Robert Frost, Martin Luther King, Rock Hudson, and Michel Foucault.) Readers of the Symposium already know how it all turned out, and we bring to bear on our judgment of the characters our retrospective understanding of how their lives and loves have stood the test of
time, how well their words matched their deeds, how intimately their desires contributed to their fates.\textsuperscript{110}

All of these characters reflect a particular life and thus a particular love. Whether or not Socrates instigated or inspired them, this still reflects on the erotic Socrates: ineffectual while also provocative; inviting while also hubristic; mysterious – the responses varied wildly.

These pairs of responses also call to mind the opposition between Chris Phillips’ version of Socrates’ practice of philosophy and Leo Strauss’s version – and thus different responses to the questions of what Socrates’ activity might mean politically.\textsuperscript{111} Whereas the \textit{Meno} portrayed the ambiguous effects of Socrates’ practice of philosophy, the \textit{Symposium} gives us more definitive consequences, albeit across a disparate spectrum of responses. While Socrates seeks the philosophic \textit{sunousia} as the site for his \textit{erōs} and its pursuit of the beautiful, neither one single character nor all the characters taken together appear to participate in such an activity. Instead, wildly different erotic publics emerge, as I have argued, as different kinds of \textit{erōs} and responses to the erotic Socrates. But two more possible responses need mentioning.

***

The \textit{Symposium} ends, we might recall, with an early morning discussion about comedy and tragedy among Socrates, Aristophanes, and Agathon. Here is Apollodorus recounting Aristodemus’s description:

He woke up just as dawn was about to break; the roosters were crowing already. He saw that the others had either left or were asleep on their couches and that only Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates were still awake, drinking out of a large cup which they were passing around from left to right. Socrates was talking to them.

\textsuperscript{110} David Halperin, “Love’s Irony: Six Remarks on Platonic Eros,” 56. Leo Strauss puts this a little less dramatically: “The \textit{Symposium} is an assembly of the cream of Athenian intellectuality. This we must never forget” (Strauss, \textit{On Plato’s Symposium}, 25).

\textsuperscript{111} See Chapters 1 and 2 above.
Aristodemus couldn’t remember exactly what they were saying – he’d missed the first part of their discussion, and he was half-asleep anyway – but the main point was that Socrates was trying to prove to them that authors should be able to write both comedy and tragedy: the skillful tragic dramatist should also be a comic poet. He was about to clinch his argument, though, to tell the truth, sleepy as they were, they were hardly able to follow his reasoning. In fact, Aristophanes fell asleep in the middle of the discussion, and very soon thereafter, as day was breaking, Agathon also drifted off. (223c-d, 504-5)

This conversation might seem strange considering the circumstances – what do tragedy and comedy have to do with *erōs* and that evening’s activities? What connects Socrates, Aristophanes, and Aristodemus? How could they remain awake after all their carousing?

This reminder of Aristophanes’ importance in the dialogue, I think, gives reason to reassess his speech. While his speech does not appear to reflect on Socrates, Aristophanes at least *intended* to address Socrates directly – until Alcibiades’ entrance interrupted him. Yet of all those present, Aristophanes had already given the most significant reflection on Socrates, and one to which Socrates would later allude in the *Apology* – namely, the *Clouds*. I want to suggest briefly that this play’s depiction of the ridiculousness of philosophy stands as the backdrop for Aristophanes’ speech in the *Symposium*, one that also comically impugns philosophy and connects to Alcibiades’ later speech in its informal censure of Socrates. In other words, Aristophanes’ account of *erōs* calls into question any attempt to connect *erōs* to philosophy and thus provides a comic reminder of the strangeness of Socrates.

Aristophanes’ speech famously depicted *erōs* as a gift from Zeus to ameliorate human misery following the loss of their other halves. Before the introduction of *erōs*, human beings possessed round bodies with four hands, as many legs as hands, and two faces exactly alike.

---

112 With the *Symposium* set at the dramatic date of 416, *Clouds* probably predated it by about six years. Of course, Plato wrote the *Symposium* much later, long after *Clouds* became known. On the date of *Clouds*, see Alan Sommerstein, *Aristophanes: Clouds*.

113 This would provide a fitting place to discuss Aristophanes’ *Clouds* and its figuration of Socrates as ridiculous. For reasons of space and my desire to concentrate on Plato, I leave this task for another place.
on a rounded neck (189c). Everything came in twos, sexual organs included. But human beings proved too ambitious, and when they attempted an ascent on heaven to attack the gods, Zeus punished them by cutting them in two (190d), leaving them literally dirempted – taken apart “just as people cut sorbapples before they dry them or the way they cut eggs with hairs” (190c, 474). This left human beings at a loss:

Now since their natural form had been cut into two, each one longed for its own other half [ποτβον ἐκαστὸν τῇ βῆμίσῳ τῷ βαντῷ συνεῖ, 191a6], and so they would throw their arms about each other, weaving themselves together, wanting to grow together. In that condition they would die from hunger and general idleness [ὑπὸ λίμου καὶ τῆς ἀλλῆς ἀργίας, a8-b1], because they would not do anything apart from each other. (191a-b, 474)

Pitying their fate, Zeus moved human beings’ genitals to the front, inventing interior production “by the man in the woman” (191c) so that they could enjoy the satisfaction of intercourse and then return to the other needs of life. “This, then, is the source of our desire to love each other,” declares Aristophanes:

Erōs is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature. (191d, 474)

Sliced “like a flatfish,” each one of us has and seeks a “matching half,” one whose sex depends on our original constitution. When we meet our original half we become struck by the sense of love, by a sense of belonging to one another and by desire and we never wish to leave each other.

Felicitous as it may sound, Aristophanes’ speech on erōs has a dark undercurrent, and one that illuminates his implicit critique of Socrates. While speaking as the foremost Athenian comic poet, Aristophanes warns his listeners “not to make a comedy” of his speech (193d). Erōs names “our pursuit of wholeness . . . our desire to be complete” (193a), but bringing love to its perfect conclusion makes for a very difficult way of flourishing compared to Socrates’ proposals. Unlike in Diotima’s characterization of erōs our happiness
now depends on finding another and on that other’s happiness. In Aristophanes’ speech, human beings present much more vulnerable beings, as our goodness becomes fragile, and the fulfillment of our humanity fleeting.\footnote{This borrows language from Martha Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness, to which I owe many insights in this section.}

Not only does Aristophanes’ speech call Diotima’s account of \textit{erōs} into question, but it also implies the ridiculousness of Socrates’ erotic practice of philosophy. In a dirempted world where we all seek our distant other half, the erotic practice of philosophy’s insistence on transcendence away from bodies would, on Aristophanes’ argument, only increase our misery. When our best hopes lies in finding this person and the illusion of completeness in such a \textit{erōs}-filled relationship, Socrates’ practice of philosophy distracts us from such a task. Moreover, the seriousness with which Socrates declares his knowledge of things erotic and the earnest language about the “great sea of beauty” becomes laughable if we accept Aristophanes’ characterization of human beings as seeking only one other match. Aristophanes insists that we must treat the gods with due reverence and hope for a restoration to our original nature (193d), but Diotima’s speech looks past human nature and towards the divine. Diotima’s speech threatens to reenact the original crime in punishment for which Aristophanes’ human beings lost their other halves. We can imagine that before Alcibiades interrupted him, Aristophanes might have wished to ask Socrates if he had listened at all.

Yet while Aristophanes does not respond to Socrates, Alcibiades’ speech picks up from where Aristotlephanes ended. The final gesture of the \textit{Symposium} thus implicates both Aristophanes and Alcibiades and their critiques – in word (Aristophanes) and deed (Alcibiades) – of Socrates’ erotic practice of philosophy. We could say, in other words, that
Alcibiades criticizes Socrates from an Aristophanic point of view: Socrates forgets the body and the need for bodily fulfillment; Socrates acts hubristically just like human beings prior to Zeus’s punishment; even Alcibiades’ descriptions of Socrates seem to echo Aristophanes’ imagistic speech. But most important, both Aristophanes and Alcibiades criticize the lack of attention to particulars in Diotima’s erotic ascent – such an account of erōs seems to deny the humanity of erōs, its bodily contours and human intimacies. Just as Aristophanes depicted a foolish Socrates oblivious of the reality of the world – measuring gnats’ legs or their farts while floating in a hot air balloon – in the Clouds, Aristophanes combines with Alcibiades in the Symposium to reveal the fatuity of an erotic philosophy that forgets the world of human reality encompassed by erōs, a world that for Aristophanes and Alcibiades offers “the greatest hope of all” (193d).¹¹⁵

***

But the allusion to Aristophanes as yet another reflection on Socrates does not mark the final word of the Symposium. While one could read the concluding passage of the dialogue in many different ways in addition to the one I just advanced,¹¹⁶ I want to suggest that it calls our attention to yet one more lover who does not appear in the Symposium (although one could say that we feel his presence in every word): Plato. By reminding us that Apollodorus has recounted the story thus far (as told to him by Aristodemus), echoing the elaborate frame at the beginning of the Symposium, this passage invokes Plato as the narrator behind

¹¹⁵ As Martha Nussbaum characterizes Socrates at the end of the Symposium along these lines: “The ambitions of the soul conceal the body of Socrates from his awareness. Just as drink did not make him drunk, cold did not make him freeze, and the naked body of Alcibiades did not arouse him, so now sleeplessness does not make him stop philosophizing. He goes about his business with all the equanimity of a rational stone” (Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness, 199).

¹¹⁶ See, for example, Jonathan Lear’s compelling argument for how the final passage of the Symposium reminds us of its tragedy – the tragedy of the human soul exemplified in the difference between Socrates and Alcibiades: Lear, “Eros and Unknowing,” in Open Minded, 148 – 166. For Lear, this points to the need for psychoanalysis.
these narrators, the original scribe and follower of Socrates. Tragedy and comedy pertain to erōs and the evening’s activities because Plato inscribed them together, so too with Socrates, Aristophanes, and Aristodemus. Plato, we might presume, has kept them awake with one more philosophical conversation.117

By appearing, however elusively, in the final passage of the Symposium, we might surmise that this “Plato” suggests himself as an erotic response to Socrates.118 Like Aristodemus and Apollodorus, we could say that this Plato followed Socrates, appearing at Socrates’ trial and noticeably absent at his death. But unlike these two, Plato memorialized Socrates – a very multifaceted Socrates – through his writing. While not alone in writing “Socratic dialogues,” Plato nonetheless created artifacts that won reverence and attention generations and millennia after his death. Around these texts, we might say, philosophic sunonsia might become possible. But this suggestion remains only the faintest of intimations.119

Yet without the presence of Plato as a potential consequence of association with Socrates, the Symposium seems destined to leave us at a loss: the underwhelming examples of Aristodemus and Apollodorus combined with the rejections by Aristophanes, Agathon, and – most vehemently – Alcibiades leave little room for hope from the erotic practice of

---

117 I do not mean to broach the question of what Plato intended here – I will deal with this more in Chapter 7 – but rather highlight the suggestive reference to another lover of Socrates that I think the Symposium contains. It remains only a suggestion, and I would not want to make too much of it.

118 I put “Plato” in scare quotes to remind the reader of the speculative nature of this paragraph and of any discussion of “Plato’s” intent.

119 J. Peter Euben notes this as a possible reading of the Republic, although he does not elaborate on how this might occur or what it might resemble today: “As with Thucydides, the Republic establishes a community with its readers distinct from the historical community whose corruption is the occasion for theoretical reflection. It is to this community of unlimited, anonymous, necessarily individual partners, located in an unspecified time, place, and culture, that Plato offers himself as a teacher, providing an experience of cultural reconstitution against the dismemberment of discourse and practices surrounding him. In one sense this community could be considered a third ideal ‘state’ and way of doing philosophy, although it has affinities with the community of interlocutors and perhaps with the audience’s experience of tragedy” (Euben, The Tragedy of Political Theory, 276).
philosophy. Whether or not Socrates’ activity will prove feeble becomes, in fact, the question of the *Theaetetus* — and of the next chapter.
4: BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS: Socrates as Midwife

What Plato later called *dialegesthai*, Socrates himself called *maieutic*, the art of midwifery: he wanted to help others give birth to what they themselves thought anyhow, to find the truth in their doxa. . . . Socrates wanted to make the city more truthful by delivering each of the citizens of their truths.

– Hannah Arendt\(^1\)

Once we are so related and drawn to what withdraws, we are drawing into what withdraws, into the enigmatic and therefore mutable nearness of its appeal. Whenever man is properly drawing that way, he is thinking – even though he may still be far away from what withdraws, even though the withdrawal may remain as veiled as ever. All through his life and right into his death, Socrates did nothing else than place himself into this draft, this current, and maintain himself in it. This is why he is the purest thinker of the West.

– Martin Heidegger\(^2\)

I.

In many ways, the *Symposium* left us at a loss: while seeming to promise a constructive account of the dynamics of philosophical association through the *sunousia* engendered by Socrates and his practice of philosophy with its forwarding of characters such as Apollodorus and Aristodemus, the emphatic entrance of Alcibiades called any favorable conclusions into questions. Although the *Symposium* suggested the possibility of erotic publics as places for the practice of philosophy free from interference, the effects of Socrates’ erotic activities on Alcibiades demonstrated dramatically what catastrophic political

\(^1\) Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 81.

consequences could follow, despite these activities’ innocuous appearance. Alcibiades’ subsequent history and the history of Athens around the dramatic date of the Symposium shadow all considerations of erōs and Socrates’ erotic publics – and would seem to indict its politics.

Yet the Symposium also raised questions about the dynamics of Socrates’ associations by introducing the language of sunousia and placing the practice of philosophy in a collective context. As we saw in the Meno, Socrates enacts a practice of philosophy that takes place in the realm of opinion; this showed itself in the example of Socrates and Meno working through common opinions about excellence, finding their own opinions insufficient, and resolving to seek true opinion by the dialogue’s end – even while acknowledging the impossibility of ever fully reaching knowledge of any truth. This language reappeared in the Symposium and served as one way of understanding Socrates’ associations while also intimating the possibility of a “community of discourse” beyond the dialogue itself, a community constituted by the text of the Symposium (and first broached in the Republic). Thus while Alcibiades’ entrance severely complicates an entirely rosy account of Socrates’ practice of philosophy, the Symposium also built on earlier aspects of Socrates’ character that intimated constructive practices.

Taken together, then, the Meno and the Symposium rearticulate many of the questions about Socrates that arose in our initial reading of the Republic. The Republic, on the earlier argument, evokes questions about Socrates in terms of three topos: first, about the kind of founding he advances through his activity, its laws and practices, and its forms of associations; second, about his practice of philosophy, its political consequences, and the “education” it offers (if any); and third, about his possible role as hero, whether Socrates demands emulation (of us or of his interlocutors), about his happiness, and about the
seeming inseparability of his arguments and his life. The *Meno* and the *Symposium* suggest the possibility of an association (*sunousia*) with Socrates that might work within existing Athenian cultural structures – perhaps in terms of *erōs* specifically – and reorient participants around a project of shared and collective inquiry. Neither the *Meno* nor the *Symposium* promised any definitive political results or consequences from this shared work, but they did suggest rudiments for beginning to answer the questions from the *Republic*: inquiry (*elenchein*), associations (*sunousia*), opinion (*doxa*), *erōs*, and philosophy.

In this chapter, I turn to one of the most striking and suggestive of the images used to describe Socrates in Plato’s dialogues, the midwife,3 and the dialogue where this image appears, the *Theaetetus*,4 in order to continue investigating these questions. The *Theaetetus*, I will argue, advances some of the constructive suggestions from the *Republic*, *Meno*, and *Symposium* while also shadowing any confidence in these accounts with the specters of anti-philosophic “politics” and a politically feckless “philosophy.” On the one hand, the *Theaetetus* depicts Socrates’ practice of philosophy as beginning from an awareness of ignorance and concerned with opinion (both evident in the *Meno* and the *Symposium*). But at the same time the *Theaetetus* orients itself by an idea of pure knowledge connected to the divine, and one foreshadowed in both dialogues as well. Thus the *Theaetetus* offers a fulcrum for the project I have advanced to this point: it depicts the practice of philosophy as provoking and sustaining collective inquiry through the creation of philosophic associations described in terms of the *sunousia*, the kind of association that functioned as a building block in Athenian civic life, and thus works within and against Athenian political culture much like the erotic

---

3 Or in Greek, *maias* (see *Theaetetus* 149a2). I will use “midwife” as a translation for *maias* in what follows, but for the substantive and adjective I will use an English transliteration of the Greek: *maieusis* and *maieutic*. On *maias* and its meanings, see Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1072.

4 As in the previous chapters, I will give the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text and the corresponding page of the Cooper, ed. English translation in the text.
publics limned in the *Symposium*. At the same time, however, the practice of philosophy as either turning away from political life and toward the eternal and changeless, the true and the beautiful “itself by itself with itself”\(^5\) or as latent “philosophical tyranny” puts in doubt any certainty about a completely beneficial – for either the polis and for the individual – practice of philosophy. The question thus becomes this: could the philosophic *sousias*, if it were actually possible, exist in tension with its surrounding contexts – between engagement and withdrawal or “philosophy” and “politics”?

The contrasting invocations of Socrates from Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger that frame this chapter put the centrality of the *Theaetetus* to the story I have told thus far in further relief.\(^6\) Arendt’s Socrates in “Philosophy and Politics” aligns her with Dana Villa and Martha Nussbaum by introducing a salutary Socrates to the political realm whereas Heidegger’s Socrates turns away from politics as did Alexander Nehamas’s. Yet both Arendt and Heidegger insist on the enduring presence of Socrates rather than expunging him as Sheldon Wolin and Bruno Latour would have had it. For Arendt, the *Theaetetus* holds the promise of a politically-oriented practice of philosophy prior to Plato’s distrust of persuasion and declaration of the necessity of philosophical tyranny. In Socrates’ maieusis (the activity of the midwife), Arendt sees a version of philosophical practice that could help develop speaking and acting beings, beings that could contribute to the making of a world in common and thus a beneficial politics. In contrast to Arendt, Heidegger’s invocation of Socrates enlists him in a project of turning away from the political world, a withdrawal that Heidegger deems necessary for genuine philosophy and the purity of thinking. On this

\(^{5}\) *Symposium* 211b1-3, 493.

\(^{6}\) I use Arendt and Heidegger as a frame while acknowledging their own different uses of Socrates could constitute an essay (at least) of its own. Margaret Canovan (“Socrates or Heidegger?”) and Dana Villa (*Arendt and Heidegger*) both offer fuller accounts of the contrasts between the two as well as the variety of “Socrateses” that appear in their work.
reading, Socrates exemplifies the abstraction of philosophy from the “real world” and the 
abjuration of political responsibility. And yet Heidegger’s Socrates does not threaten 
political life directly as Wolin and Latour accused him. Taken together, Arendt and 
Heidegger offer poles of interpretation, the one aligning Socrates with politics and the other 
with philosophy, while also underscoring the presence of Socrates in contemporary political 
reflection.

Yet the *Theaetetus*, as I will argue in this chapter, refuses the either/or that Arendt and 
Heidegger seem to demand. Instead, the dialogue depicts a Socrates between “philosophy” 
and “politics” while also suggesting both that neither exists without the other – that at least 
in democratic Athens they seem to require and support each other – and that this 
coexistence comes fraught with potentially destructive tensions. In this way Socrates’ 
practice of philosophy *cum* maieusis could “midwife democracy,” as Arendt would have it, 
but it could just as easily also prove irrelevant or even harmful. Caught between ‘philosophy’ 
and ‘politics,’ the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* again provokes new questions about the politics 
of his practice of philosophy as well as its effects and role within democratic Athens. 
Socrates as the midwife elicits more questions – and the questions of Socrates continue to 
lack definitive answers.

II.

The Socrates we encounter in the *Theaetetus* has many familiar features. The dialogue begins, 
as did the *Meno*, with a “typical” Socratic question: what is knowledge? Socrates meets the

---

7 This language describing Heidegger comes in light of Arendt’s reading of Heidegger in “Heidegger at Eighty,” in Arendt and Heidegger, *Letters*. 

8 This either/or also appears in the reading of the dialogue advanced recently by Paul Stern in *Knowledge and Politics in Plato’s Theaetetus*. My specific differences with this argument will become clear in the course of the chapter. 

9 The dialogue actually begins with an elaborate framing device, which I discuss in Section V below.
young Theaetetus and asks him how he knows what he thinks he knows. One learns in order to become wise, and wisdom amounts to knowledge. This quick set-up puts the entire dialogue in motion:

Socrates: Now this is just where my difficulty comes in [Tout’ auto toinun estin bo aporō]. I can’t get a proper grasp of what on earth knowledge really is [epistēmē boti pote tugchanei on]. Could we manage to put it into words [ar’ oun dē echomen legein auto]? What do all of you say? Who’ll speak first? (145e-146a, 162)

Socrates has already become perplexed and experienced aporia (aporō, 145e8); he wants to know what knowledge is (epistēmē boti pote tugchanei on, e9-146a1). Can they find words (legein, 146a1) for knowledge? Can they give an account, as they will later demand (148d2)? All of the elements and questions of “Socratic dialogue” seem present.10

Yet Socrates continues in a slightly different vein, one that departs both from the “eristic” feel of the Meno – recall the effrontery of Meno’s initial question put to Socrates – and the “erotic” feel of the Symposium and its formalized speeches.11 Instead, Socrates seems playful and even perhaps a bit chagrined at his own enthusiasm:

Anyone who makes a mistake shall sit down and be Donkey [onus, 146a3],12 as the children say when they are playing ball; and anyone who comes through without a miss shall be King and make us answer any question he likes. – Well, why this silence? Theodorus, I hope my love of argument is not making me forget my manners [on ti pou . . . ego hupo philologias agroikizomai, 146a5-7] – just because I’m so anxious to start a discussion and get us all friendly and talkative together [prothumoumenos bēmas poieisai dialegesthai kai philous te kai prosēgarous allelois gignesthai, a7-8]. (146a, 162)

10 As David Sedley notes, the Theaetetus “possesses all the hallmarks” of so-called “Socratic dialogues” (Sedley, The Midwife of Platonism, 1).

11 While the Theaetetus seems to lack all of the aggressiveness present in the Meno, erōs does appear, if only briefly when Socrates declare his erōs for the argument at Theaetetus 169c.

12 As Kenneth Sayre points out, the Theaetetus “is replete with analogies and similes from the common crafts and trades,” a feature that further links it to other dialogues discussed thus far. See Sayre, Plato’s Literary Garden, 212.
Here Socrates jokingly likens their conversation to a gathering of children (perhaps also
alluding to the young Theaetetus, who has just come from the gymnasium) and confesses
that his love of argument (\textit{philologias}) can often make him rude and boorish (\textit{agroikizomai}). Yet
Socrates cannot help his enthusiasm (\textit{prothumoumenos}) – his eagerness proves too much for
him to check. This Socrates departs from the flirtatious but “all business” Socrates of the
\textit{Meno} – here he declares his wish that they become friendly and talkative, as if in the agora
(\textit{philous te kai prosègorous}). This Socrates also differs from the versions of his figure we
encountered in the \textit{Symposium} – here he disclaims familiarity with knowledge and instead
emphasizes his desire to seek in common. From the beginning of the dialogue, then,
Socrates appears distinctly different from the “Socrates” seen hitherto.

But more than his particular style, the image Socrates adopts for himself in this
dialogue distinguishes the Socrates of the \textit{Theaetetus} most dramatically from those we have
thus far engaged. It also builds on the dynamics of friendly exchange and openness that
made the opening exchanges peculiar. Shortly after they begin their search for the meaning
of knowledge, Socrates and Theaetetus reach an impasse. After Theaetetus has tried to
answer Socrates’ questions (giving, in a moment reminiscent of the Meno’s “swarm” of
arguments, far too many explanations of knowledge), Theaetetus confesses he cannot
continue. Anxiety racks young Theaetetus. He knows what Socrates wants – or at least he
thinks he does – but he cannot persuade himself that his answer merits consideration:

\textit{But I assure you, Socrates, I have often tried to think this out [\textit{pollakis dê auto
epecheirësa skepsasthai}, 148c1-2], when I have heard reports of the questions you ask. But I can
never persuade myself that anything I say will really do; and I never hear anyone else state the
matter in the way you require. And yet, again, you know, I can’t even stop worrying about it [\textit{ou men
de au dou’ apallagenai tou melein}, e5-6]. (148c, 165)}

Theaetetus’s perplexity threatens to abort the dialogue just as it has commenced. Unlike
Meno, Theaetetus has even prepared for this conversation, having “often tried to think this

\begin{center}
168
\end{center}
out” in terms of Socrates’ questions – even using Socrates’ language of *skeptein*. Now Theaetetus finds himself paralyzed: unable to persuade himself that he can answer these questions but equally incapable of freeing himself (*apallagēnai*) from concern (*melein*). In response, Socrates describes himself as a midwife.13

Theaetetus’s suffering, Socrates explains, comes from his labor pains – you “suffer the pains of childbirth” (*ōdieis*, 148e7), Socrates tells him – that come from Theaetetus’s being pregnant (*egkumôn*, e8). Fortunately, Socrates practices the same art of maieusis that his mother practiced, and this promises Theaetetus some relief. Theaetetus has not ever heard of this, but Socrates insists:

Socrates recognizes his own extreme strangeness – being *atopōtatos*, “most strange” – that “perplexes” (*aporein*) those who encounter him; this comes from his art of maieusis, although most people do not know this as the cause. Yet it has provoked a reputation.14

The midwife practices a “highly important” art, Socrates continues, but not as important as his own practice (*ellaton de tou emou dramatos*, 150a7-9). While conventional

---

13 Myles Burnyeat, in “Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration,” questions the historicity of the image, concluding that Plato invented the “midwife” to describe Socrates as part of his philosophical project. Julius Tomlin disagrees in “Socratic Midwifery,” finding evidence in Xenophon and Aristophanes that associates the image with the historical Socrates. Here I do not advance claims about whether the midwife described Socrates in reality but rather how the image helps explain his character in this dialogue and thus one aspect of the figure of Socrates across the works of Plato.

14 Reputation, also a translation of *doxa*, becomes key in the *Apology* where Socrates must contend with his poor reputation in a democratic society where reputation carries great importance. In fact, Socrates’ reputation for strangeness, as I suggest in Chapter 7, helps explain the animosity he provoked that led to his trial and execution.
midwives deliver only infants, Socrates as midwife sometimes delivers phantoms (édola) and sometimes realities (alēthina, 150b1). Thus Socrates’ art of maieusis differs in at least one important respect from his mother’s: in addition to attending men, not women, “the most important thing” about his art consists in distinguishing among “children”:

Now my art of midwifery [emēi technēi tes maieuseōs, 150b6] is just like theirs in most respects. The difference is that . . . I watch over the labor of their souls [tas psuchas auton tiktonas episkeyein, b8-9], not of their bodies. The most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth [megiston de tout’ eni tei hēmtera technēi, basanizein dunaton einai panti tropōi poteron edolon kai pseudos apotiktei tou neou hē dianoia e gonmon te kai aieteis, b9 – c3]. (150b6 – c3, 167)

Here Socrates uses the language of his elenchus – episkopein – to describe how he assays these intellectual “offspring,” suggesting both the midwife as an image to describe “Socratic dialogue” as well as a way of interpreting the Theaetetus itself in what follows (a suggestion I will follow in Section III below). Moreover, like ordinary midwives who no longer bear children themselves, Socrates continues, “I myself am barren of wisdom” (agonos eimi sophias, 150b4, 167). The process of maieusis, then, brings opinions or ideas into the world for collective evaluation (the elenchus) without a predetermined standard of truth or knowledge by which to judge. They discover the truthfulness of a “child” by “running it around the hearth,” as Socrates describes it a little later in the dialogue.

“The god” has ordered Socrates to practice maieusis while forbidding Socrates from giving birth himself – not that it matters, says Socrates, since his barrenness means he cannot claim any discovery worth wisdom’s name (150d). Instead, Socrates attends the travail of others, although with varying results:

But whoever associates with me [boi d’ emoi suggignomenoi, 150 d2-3], some appear at first as even very foolish, but all – whomever the god allows – as the association [sunousias, d4] advances, make an amazing lot of progress. It’s their own opinion and everyone else’s too. And this too is as plain as day, that they never learnt anything from me, but they on their own from themselves found and gave birth to many
beautiful things.\textsuperscript{15} (150d, 167)

The hard work belongs to the birther. Their development, and the development of their ideas, depends not on Socrates’ own learning but on working together with Socrates. Proof of this, Socrates asserts, lies in those who have abandoned his company too abruptly and then failed to care well for their “offspring”: taking all the credit upon themselves they have neglected these “children” Socrates helped them to bear and lost them by setting more value on lies and phantoms than on truth. While many have changed their mind and returned, it often came too late and the “child” was lost. Suspecting that Theaetetus is indeed in labor, Socrates promises to allay his pains and examine what he says so that they together might see if it be mirage or truth. While often people have reacted negatively – “ready to bite” – when Socrates has disposed of their nonsense, Socrates insists that Theaetetus should believe that Socrates practices his art with “good will”; Socrates can neither accept non-truth over truth nor can the god who compels Socrates’ activity.

Finishing his self-description, Socrates initiates their investigations anew and Theaetetus responds vigorously, encouraged by Socrates’ explanation. The image of the midwife seems to elicit the dialogue that follows and the birth pangs disappear.\textsuperscript{16} Yet the midwife description continues: Socrates repeatedly refers to the midwifing process during the ensuing conversation\textsuperscript{17} and at the dialogue’s end, Socrates confirms that they have been engaged in maieutic activity all along. Their series of definitions of knowledge, Socrates asks

\textsuperscript{15} Benardete’s translation: Benardete, \textit{The Being of the Beautiful}, I.13.

\textsuperscript{16} I owe this point to Ronald M. Polansky, who enthusiastically puts it this way: “The midwife image thus appears as itself an instance of Socrates’ maieutic activity! Hastening the onset of Theaetetus’ labor, the image serves both as an image of Socrates’ lack and an instance of its performance” (Polansky, \textit{Philosophy and Knowledge}, 59).

\textsuperscript{17} This occurs at the following places: 151e, 157c – d, 160e – 161b, 184b, and 210b.
Theaetetus, haven’t they all shown themselves as “wind eggs,” unfertilized eggs unfit for further development? Theaetetus agrees.

After Socrates has introduced his role as a midwife, he continues to refer to the image as the dialogue proceeds. Immediately after his description, the image has the effect of encouraging Theaetetus to try again: Socrates asks Theaetetus to “begin again . . . and try to say what knowledge is” (151d3-4, 168) and Theaetetus responds excitedly that “after such encouragement from you [Socrates],” he must continue (d7, 168). Much like the story of recollection in the *Meno*, the image of the midwife encourages continued investigation, even when Theaetetus feels dispirited. Socrates recalls the image again after Theaetetus has offered his first new definition, using the image to spur the conversation to continue, and suggesting to Theaetetus that they examine his first definition, that knowledge is perception (epistamenos ti aisthanesthai touto ho epistatai, 151e1-2).

There’s a good frank answer, my son. That’s the way to speak one’s mind. But come now, let us look at this thing together, and see whether what we have here is really fertile or a mere wind-egg. (151e3-6, 168)

In proposing that they “look at this thing together” [skepsōmetha, 151e5] – i.e. whether Theaetetus’s proposal proves fertile or a wind-egg (gonimon è anemiaion, e5) – Socrates repeats the language of collective inquiry we saw in *Meno*. Moreover, accepting the definition Theaetetus has just offered, Socrates’ willingness to pursue the investigation ostensibly rests on Socrates’ perception that they might benefit from working through Theaetetus’s own ideas.

Later in the dialogue, the image of the midwife recurs when Socrates and Theaetetus resolve again to work together in bringing Theaetetus’s opinion to light. Theaetetus complains that he cannot see whether Socrates means what he says or if he is just “trying [Theaetetus] out” with these continued questions and objections, Socrates responds by
reminding Theaetetus of Socrates’ own barrenness, a qualification of the midwife because
the midwife must always focus on the thoughts of the pregnant one:

T: I really don’t know, Socrates. I can’t even quite see what you’re getting at –
whether the things you are saying are what you think yourself, or whether you are
just trying me out [emou apopeirai, 157c6].

S: You are forgetting, my friend. I don’t know anything about this kind of thing
myself, and I don’t claim any of it as my own. I am barren of theories; my business is
to attend you in your labor. So I chant incantations over you and offer you little
tidbits from each of the wise till I succeed in assisting you to bring your own belief
forth into the light [to son dogma sunexagagō, d2].

T: All right, go on with the questions [Erōta dē]. (157c4-d6, 175)

This reiterates the friendly dynamic of maieusis: the conversation does not consist in a trial
but rather in sharing the work of bringing opinions to light. Theaetetus’s encouraged
response seems to evidence the effectiveness of maieusis; they continue to investigate
without the stops and starts we saw in Meno.18

As the conversation continues, Socrates and Theaetetus agree that knowledge is
perception and that this definition stems both from Heraclitean and Protagorean sources.
Now, Socrates asks, “shall we say we have here your first-born child due to my maieusis?”
(160e2-3, 179).19 Socrates continues:

This, then, it appears, is what our efforts have at last brought forth – whatever it
really is. And now it has been born, we must perform the rite of running around the
hearth with it [tai logos]; we must make it in good earnest go the round of discussion
[skopoumenous, e8-9]. . . . What do you say? Is it your opinion that your child ought in
any case be brought up and not exposed to die? Can you bear to see it found fault

18 While they examine Theaetetus’s opinion (and while they begin to find flaws), a connection in the argument
to Parmenides briefly distracts them. Socrates invokes the midwife once again to remind Theaetetus that they
must focus exclusively on his ideas and on bringing them to bear (184b). Throughout the maieutic process,
then, Theaetetus’s opinion – and not the truth or a pragmatic solution or anything else – remains the
correspondence’s cognoscenti. Maieusis never swerves from the object of its ministrations; the “child” before it
consumes all attention.

19 Translation emended.
with [elenchomenon, 161a2-3], and not get into a rage if your first born is stolen away from you? (160e – 161a, 179)

Theatetus and Socrates have produced a logos (τὸ λόγος) that they must now inspect (skopoumenous); we see here the language of the elenchus return integrated into the image of the midwife, appearing even more explicitly in Socrates’ final question to Theaetetus when he asks if Theaetetus could bear seeing his logos subjected to elenchic evaluation (elenchomenon). From perceiving something in Theaetetus’s pains – some significance worth investigating – now Socrates and Theaetetus turn to examining what has come of his “birth,” judging its truth or falsity. All Socrates knows, he reminds Theaetetus, is “how to take an argument from someone else – someone who is wise – and give it a fair reception” (161b, 179). Having fully elicited Theaetetus’s opinion concerning knowledge – i.e. that it consists of perception – they proceed to assay it, testing it together in the open air. Now they must discover if truth resides in Theaetetus’s opinion.

Within the first part of the dialogue, then, a rough outline of maieutic activity emerges. First, Socrates’ use of the image encourages Theaetetus, exhorting him to continue the conversation, and in good humor; second, maieusis focuses on eliciting something unique from Theaetetus through the asking of questions and refusing to detour from examining these opinions; third, maieusis requires an account of Theaetetus’s opinion, testing it (elenchomenon, 161a2-3) after it seems to have appeared fully in the course of their conversation. Socrates summarizes all of this at the dialogue’s end, surmising that while the entire dialogue has produced only wind-eggs – and Theaetetus confesses that Socrates has

---

20 This translation might confuse the reader a little bit. A more literal version comes in Benardete: “Well this, it seems, we have at last generated with difficulty, what in fact it is. But after its birth, on its name-day, it truly has to be run around in a circle by the speech, as we examine it, lest, without our being aware of it, that which is coming to be be unworthy of rearing but be a wind-egg and a falsehood. Or do you believe that in any case, regardless, you must rear that which is your own just because it is yours and you must not expose it, or will you in fact put up with seeing its being tested, and will you not be vehemently distressed if someone slips it away from you though you are giving birth for the first time?” (Benardete, Being of the Beautiful, I.25).
made him say “far more” than he imagined possible – that it has nonetheless proved worthwhile. Socrates continues:

And so, Theaetetus, if ever in the future you should attempt to conceive or should succeed in conceiving other theories, they will be better ones as the result of this inquiry [dia tén nun exetasin, 210c2]. And if you remain barren, your companions [tois sunousi, c3] will find you gentler and less tiresome [bêmerōteros sophronós, ibid.], not thinking that you know what you do not know. (210b11-c4, 233-4)

While Theaetetus may always remain barren, he will have improved: his associations with others (tois sunousi, the language of the sunousia) will become less wild and more moderate because of his commitment to inquiry (exetasin, the same word Socrates uses repeatedly to describe his questioning of poets, politicians, and craftsmen in the Apology).21 By all appearances, Socrates has initiated Theaetetus into the practice of philosophy through associations, the very same activity that would seem to have formed Socrates’ lifelong pursuit.22

The suggestion that what has occurred in the Theaetetus resembles Socrates’ own practice of philosophy becomes more pronounced as Socrates continues in the final lines of the dialogue: “This is all my art can achieve,” Socrates says, “and nothing more” (210b):

I do not know any of the things that other men know [oude ti oida hoi alloi, c5] – the great and inspired men of today and yesterday. But this art of midwifery my mother and I had allotted to us by god; she to deliver women, I to deliver men that are young and generous of spirit, all that have any beauty [eîgô de tôn neîon te kai gennaiôn kai hosoi kaloi]. (210c-d, 234)

Just like Theaetetus, Socrates knows what he does not know23 – those things other men claim to know. Instead, Socrates practices philosophy as maieusis, pursuing the beautiful, to

---

21 Apology 22c7.

22 As Kenneth Sayre describes the midwife: “What is important in this description is not so much the metaphor of birthing itself, which seems to have been invented for the particular occasion, but rather the dynamics of interaction – the sunousia – between Socrates and the young people who seek his company in hopes of philosophical advancement” (Sayre, Plato’s Literary Garden, 17).

23 This anticipates the Apology, as I detail more in Chapter 6.


kalon, but in a more intimate and interpersonal way than what we saw Socrates describe in the Symposium. Socrates’ art comes as the gift of the god, and no other explanation seems necessary to him, anticipating his defense in the Apology. However, as I will argue below, the dialogue as a whole dramatizes the claims about knowledge and inquiry broached by the image of the midwife; the Theaetetus, in other words, both displays and theorizes Socrates as midwife.24

III.

The description of himself as a midwife would probably have struck Theaetetus and Theodorus as remarkably strange. While we know very little about the midwife in ancient Athens, it clearly differed from doctoring and any “professionalized” expertise in medicine in being traditionally a woman’s role, not systematized in texts, and not a source of social status.25 By calling himself a midwife, then, Socrates implicates himself in a lower status occupation than would conventionally benefit an Athenian male citizen.26 Through his use of the image, Socrates abjures the power such positions would accrue and instead embraces a shared practice among relatively powerless women. Moreover, in comparing his work to a traditionally female occupation, Socrates might well have repulsed Theaetetus and Theodorus given the heavily masculine world of ancient Athens. Subverting traditional

24 Thus I disagree with readings that view the Theaetetus as presenting a coherent doctrine (e.g. Rosemary Desjardins, The Rational Enterprise) as well as those readings that try to distinguish the Theaetetus in a strong way from earlier “aporetic” dialogues like the Meno. As representing this second group, Eugenio Benitez and Livia Guimares note that “Socrates’ attitude about the apparent failure of his conversation with Theaetetus is markedly distinct from his express attitude (ironic or not) in those early dialogues with which the Theaetetus is compared. Whereas early dialogues conclude with self-deprecation and exhortation to continue the question, the Theaetetus concludes in satisfaction indifferent to the possibility of further study” (Benitez and Guimares, “Philosophy as Performed in Plato’s Theaetetus,” 297-8).

25 See John Younger, Sex in the Ancient World, 81 on midwives during this general period and Ann Ellis Hanson, “The Medical Writers’ Woman,” on the role of women. I put “professional” in quotes because of the lack of such a vocabulary at this time in Athens.

26 One sees a similar image invoked by Socrates in the end of the Phaedo with the cock of Asclepius: Phaedo 118a.
Athenian expectations through this unexpected analogy, Socrates retains a degree of edginess that resists easy translation to our modern understanding; for Socrates to compare himself to a midwife in ancient Athenian culture might be more akin to one calling oneself a magician today. Socrates has a friendly audience in Theaetetus, but he could have earned catcalls or simply been ignored as a lunatic or a madman.27

The midwife in Athenian society also did not possess a knowledge deemed capable of systemization, being omitted entirely from the Hippocratic corpus.28 Almost certainly only women practiced maieusis, forming a non-professional – in our modern sense – and somewhat marginal, if highly important, class of mostly non-citizens (because they were women). The knowledge that informed it was oral and experiential.29 Midwives thus constituted part of what G.E.R. Lloyd calls “the pluralism of Greek medicine” beyond the Hippocratic traditions and cults of Asclepius (which themselves existed without disciplinary boundaries or any systematic coherence) and lacked official recognition or treatment in texts.30 Calling himself a midwife thus further explains Socrates’ reputation for strangeness (atopia).

Yet while the image of the “midwife” would have probably appeared bizarre, the invocation of the sunousia and the kinds of associations Socrates describes would not have

---

27 One could also compare this to the different reactions of Meno to Socrates as a stingray or Alcibiades to Socrates as erotikos, a puzzling practitioner of the arts of eros.

28 Younger, Sex in the Ancient World, 81.

29 Theodore Cianfrani notes that “midwives received no special instruction; they depended on experience entirely”: Cianfrini, A Short History of Obstetrics and Gynecology, 62 – 63. John Younger points out that the Greek writer Soranus gave midwives great respect, but that the systematizing writings of the Hippocratic corpus did not mention midwives at all: Younger, Sex in the Ancient World, 81.

seemed too unfamiliar to Theaetetus and Theodorus – the *sunousia* formed the backbone of Athenian education in a strongly oral culture.\(^{31}\) As Eric Havelock explains:

> The mechanism . . . for maintaining this “education” [a ‘general education’ in an oral culture devoid of textbooks and formal disciplines] by guaranteeing its transmission from generation to generation was one typical of an oral society: namely the habit, sedulously cultivated, of close daily association (*sunousia*) between adolescents and their elders who served as ‘guides, philosophers, and friends.’\(^{32}\)

In fifth-century Athens, the *sunousia* continued this oral practice albeit in a culture “growing more literate by the decade.”\(^{33}\) While in a technical sense *sunousia* referred to “regular association with older, more accomplished men by younger men . . . in need of formation and training, both social and civic” and thus often carried an erotic overtone, the *sunousia* also constituted an institution much like *xenia* (guest-friendship) and the *symposium* where the oral instruction and conversation that constituted traditional education took place.\(^{34}\) Not only does Socrates describe the work of the midwife in terms of the *sunousia*, he, Theaetetus, and Theodorus participate in it as they speak – the dialogue constitutes its own *sunousia*.\(^{35}\)

The juxtaposition of the midwife and the *sunousia* offers a different way of imagining Socrates’ philosophical practice; by speaking of *sunousia*, Socrates explicitly takes up a traditional institution of Athenian political culture, but by connecting the *sunousia* with the

\(^{31}\) Josiah Ober warns against viewing the *sunousia* as the only important mode of Athenian education because it “risks assuming that Athenian culture is homogenously aristocratic” (Ober, *Political Dissent*, 170 n. 30). But we have seen Socrates already in *sunousia* with non-aristocrats such as Meno’s slave boy and Aristodemus. How Socrates takes up and changes this originally aristocratic institution remains a question.

\(^{32}\) Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write*, 4. In the last part of the quotation, Havelock quotes from “Why Was Socrates Tried,” 100 (in Havelock, *Preface to Plato*).

\(^{33}\) Robb, “Asebeia and Sunousia,” 83.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 78 – 84.

\(^{35}\) Kenneth Sayre usefully connects the discussions of the *sunousia* in the *Theaetetus* to its appearance in Plato’s *Seventh Letter*, arguing for Plato’s dialogues as “surrogates of dialogical conversation,” i.e. as forming their own kind of *sunousia* (Sayre, *Plato’s Literary Garden*, 1 – 32). I will address how the text itself might form a *sunousia* in Section V below.
image of his activity as a kind of intellectual midwifing, Socrates also shifts these traditional institutions in a different direction—towards the collective practice of philosophy. If maieusis characterizes shared philosophical activity and the *sunousia* describes the associations that form through and by virtue of this activity, we can see further evidence of Socrates’ publics, although ones not charged with *erōs* as in the *Symposium*. Thus it could appear as if Socrates continues the oral and conversational Athenian education while also undermining its patriarchal and traditional basis by placing maieusis and a collective mode of inquiry at its center. This would cast the *Meno* in a different light, if we see Anytus’s scorn toward Socrates’ questioning as stemming from a defense of traditional institutions. As in the case of Socrates’ erotic activity described in the previous chapter, Socrates thus might appear to work both within and against Athenian democratic life, utilizing traditional institutions while also orienting them in an untraditional, perhaps even anti-traditional, direction.

But the combination of the midwife and the *sunousia* could also have more benign, perhaps even beneficial effects. Socrates’ suggestion has an inescapable countercultural sense: playing on the institution of the *sunousia*, Socrates introduces a countervailing way of understanding and practicing it. But the midwife, as we saw, possessed a subaltern status in contrast to the *sunousia* and its aristocratic bent—publics become “counterpublics.” Socrates’ “counterpublics” would seem to begin from a position of inferiority or subordination. This reading gains support from the concern Socrates shows for Athens at the beginning of the *Theaetetus*—he tells Theodorus that he loves Athens better than Cyrene (Theodorus’s home) and that he is “anxious to know which of our young men shows signs

---

36 As noted by Robb, “Asebeia and Sunousia,” 85 – 89.

37 Michael Warner introduces this distinction in *Publics and Counterpublics*. 
of turning out well” (*Theaetetus* 143d, 159) – as well as Theaetetus’s lack of noble background.\(^\text{38}\) In other words, the maieutic *sunousia* could mean to improve Athenian political life rather than threaten it.

Both of these understandings of Socrates’ maieutic associations have some merit.\(^\text{39}\) It seems important, I think, to avoid choosing one over the other – the dialogue does not offer a directly political touchstone by which to judge. Instead, as I will argue in what follows, the activity of the midwife as it appears in the dialogue as a whole dramatizes maieusis as both antagonistic and friendly toward Athenian democracy without resolving it. Moreover, as we turn to the dialogue, its discussion of knowledge further illuminates the dynamics of maieusis and the politics of the maieutic *sunousia*. The different accounts of knowledge that the dialogue explores, I will argue, explain the stages of maieusis as Socrates describes it – the practice of maieusis incorporates the different provisional understandings of knowledge developed in the conversation among Socrates, Theaetetus, and Theodorus.\(^\text{40}\) But these accounts of knowledge and truth both build on Athenian democratic knowledge and thus democratic institutions while also threatening to disturb them.

**IV.**

It might seem tempting to begin a reading of the *Theaetetus* by saying “what it is about” and that “the *Theaetetus* is about epistemology.”\(^\text{41}\) But such a starting point misses how the

---

\(^{38}\) Nails describes Theaetetus as being “in no danger of being anyone’s beloved” both for his ugliness and for his lack of property: Nails, *People of Plato*, 275.

\(^{39}\) At least one other interpretation of the *sunousia* seems possible – viewing the text as creating its own *sunousia*. In fact, the frame of the *Theaetetus* suggests such a reading. I address this in Section V below.

\(^{40}\) I thank Jill Frank for bringing me to this way of viewing the argument of the dialogue.

\(^{41}\) So John Cooper calls the Theaetetus “a founding document of what has come to be known as ‘epistemology’” and also asserts that “despite its lively and intellectually playful Socrates . . . *Theaetetus* is a difficult work of abstract philosophical theory” (Cooper, “Introduction to *Theaetetus*,” in Cooper, ed. *Plato: Complete Works*, 157-8).
conversation undermines and resists any stark definitions of knowledge. Reflecting back on
the dialogue, a stunning irony becomes inescapable: in a dialogue about knowledge and
expertise the dialogue itself and Socrates in particular both undermine all claims to
knowledge. Yet the dialogue’s frame and participants seem to indicate its theme as about not
just knowledge but about expert knowledge:42 Euclides and Terpsion, Socratics from
Megara, initiate the dialogue when they are reminded of Socrates’ prediction that much
would come of Theaetetus and the dialogue would seem to demonstrate Theaetetus’s
youthful genius. Moreover, the dialogue’s participants – Theaetetus, Theodorus, and
Socrates – all come with claims to knowledge: about mathematics for the first two and about
maieusis for Socrates. In a dialogue dedicated to investigating what knowledge is, everyone
involved appears to have intimate acquaintance with the subject matter before the dialogue
has even begun.

Yet as the dialogue proceeds, none of these expertises withstands questioning: the
action of the dialogue destabilizes the claims to knowledge that circumscribe it. Theaetetus’s
enthusiastic definition of knowledge as perception and his claims to expertise diminish as
these positions become untenable. Theodorus’s reluctance to join the conversation
implicates his pretenses to knowledge – in his role of teacher to Theaetetus – as mere
posturing. Finally, as the argument begins to question the reliability of any knowledge not
acquired by eye-witnesses, most famously in the example of jurors who issue verdicts while
lacking perfect knowledge of the events they judge (201c), the dialogue itself – as recounted
hearsay now being read – becomes questionable to its readers.

42 Burnyeat comments that Plato places “dramatic emphasis” on the notion of expertise: Burnyeat,
“Introduction,” 3.
But perhaps most importantly, Socrates’ own art of maieusis does not withstand the demands of knowledge that the dialogue proposes. Whereas the dialogue ends by asking that all knowledge must consist in “true judgment with an account” – a definition that while rejected remains by far the most developed in the conversation – Socrates’ art of midwifery brooks no such accounting. Socrates tells a story of how he acquired this knowledge rather than offering arguments for its truth: he learned this art not by investigation, judgment, and giving an account of its principles but through his mother and by virtue of the god’s compulsion. Socrates’ only proof that he knows something lies in the activities of his life (the story I have been in effect retelling) – that he has a reputation for strangeness based on his philosophic hectoring of people around him (remember the anticipation of the Apology in Socrates’ description of the “inquiry” [exestasin] he and Theaetetus have just undertaken). Yet Socrates’ ultimate claim, that he benefits those with whom he consorts, belies the only tangible proof he seems to offer – that more often than not Socrates makes others “ready to bite,” angry and vindictive like Anytus (in the Meno) and Meletus (as we will see later in the Apology). Here an additional irony presents itself: we know Socrates will be executed at the hands of many vengeful Athenians, a fact presaged by the Theaetetus’s end.

Rather than being “about epistemology,” I want to suggest that the Theaetetus enacts its own claims about the provisional and ongoing character of knowledge, and coming to know, a version of knowing encapsulated by the image of the midwife presented by Socrates. Thus knowledge and truth come into being, if at all, through the collective work of inquiry, moving from perceptions to opinions to arguments (logoi) that remain uncertain and subject to further scrutiny – not all that distant from Athens’ own critical and political practices.43

43 As G. E. R. Lloyd writes: “No doubt writers and audiences alike were well aware of the differences between the actual situation in a court of law and the polemical contexts of intellectual exchange. But perhaps the widespread experience of the former both encouraged that style of presentation of intellectual debates and
When understood in its own terms, then, the *Theaetetus* isn’t “about” anything, but rather exists as an unfolding claim on its readers – on Euclides and Terpsion and also on us. Rather than rejecting Socrates’ apparently antipolitical practice of philosophy, we can instead recognize the political work accomplished by his practice of philosophy by engaging the image of Socrates as midwife.

***

In Theaetetus’s first attempt to answer the question – what is knowledge? – he opines that knowledge is perception (*epistamenos ti aisthanesthai touto ho epistatai*, 151e1-2). Socrates immediately compares this account of knowledge (*logon . . . peri epistemes*, 151e8-152a1) to Protagoras’s assertion that “man is the measure of all things” (*pantôn chrematôn metron anthrôn einai*, a2-3). Since every person perceives the world in a different way, each person measures the world according to his or her own perceptions. Moreover, something exists in the sense that if knowledge is perception, what we perceive becomes known, and the known exists – it is. As Socrates puts it: “as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you – you and I each being a man” (152a6-8, 169). This also means, Socrates continues, that nothing that is itself is just one thing. Because knowledge must correspond to what is and each person’s perception of a thing constitutes knowledge, nothing can be the same; everything must be in motion, changing according to how it is perceived. The flux of the world in turn creates a flux in knowledge; since “all things become relatively to something” (157b, 174) we must abolish the verb “to be” and always speak only of things in motion (157c).

---

provides a relevant background for their interpretation. . . . The fundamental point remains, however, that much Greek philosophy and science presupposes an audience that prides itself on its ability in the evaluation of evidence and arguments; and if we ask where that ability came from, then the experience in law courts and political assemblies provides at least part of the answer” (Lloyd, “Greek Democracy, Philosophy, and Science,” 47).
This argument would pose a problem for anyone who claims to teach knowledge and for expertise of any kind. If everyone knew what they perceived, then no one could assess another’s experience better than another nor could anyone claim authority to examine another’s judgment in order to determine its truth or falsity. In other words, no wisdom would exist in the world:

Or what are we to say, Theodorus? If whatever the individual judges by means of perception \[ \text{di’ aisthēsos doçæζει, 161d3} \] is true for him; if no man can assess another’s experience better than he \[ \text{belton diakrinei, d4} \] or can claim authority to examine \[ \text{episkepstasthai, d4-5} \] another man’s opinion and see if it be right or wrong; if, as we have repeatedly said, only the individual can judge \[ \text{doçæζει, d6} \] of his own world, and what he judges is always true and correct: how could it ever be, my friend, that Protagoras was a wise man \[ \text{sophos, d8} \], so wise to think himself fit to be the teacher of other men \[ \text{allon didaskalos, d8} \], and worth large fees; while we, in comparison with him the ignorant ones, needed to go and sit at his feet?” (161d-2, 179-180)

Turning to Theaetetus, Socrates asks: Isn’t Theaetetus surprised that he is now equal in wisdom to Protagoras? This conclusion would make them all look silly \[ \text{gelota, 161e5} \]: “So, I think,” Socrates explains, “does the whole business of discussion \[ \text{sumpasa h é tou dialegesthai, e6} \]: “To examine and try to refute \[ \text{episkopein kai epicheirein elegchein, c7} \] each other’s appearances and judgments \[ \text{doçæζ, e8} \] . . . this is surely an extremely tiresome piece of nonsense \[ \text{ou makra men kai diiologiæ pbluaria, 161c7-162a1, 180} \]. If this argument stands, examining and trying to refute (here again in the familiar language of \text{episkopein and elegchein}) others’ opinions (\text{doçæζ}) would appear as laughable nonsense (\text{gelota . . . pbluaria}). In other

---

44 The Greek word \text{doçæζεin}, translated here as “judgment” presents some problems for translation. As John McDowell explains his translation of \text{doçæ}: “I have used the translation ‘judgment,’ suggesting an act, rather than ‘belief’ or ‘opinion,’ suggesting a state . . . However, the Greek word (\text{doçæ}) could equally well mean either; and in fact belief or opinion would be a better candidate to appear in a definition of knowledge than judgment. Plato shows no sign of having explicitly distinguished the act from the state” (McDowell, \text{Plato: Theaetetus, 193}). I will indicate whenever \text{doçæ} or its forms appear in order to remind readers of the ambiguity in meaning, whether translated “opinion” or “judgment” or otherwise.
words, if knowledge means perception, the present conversation would appear as foolish, and Socrates’ practice of philosophy would mean nothing.45

Theaetetus admits astonishment, but Socrates’ response also shows how the argument thus far applies to the description of maieusis we saw earlier. Knowledge cannot merely equate to perception, yet perception would seem to offer a first step (163b, 181). Socrates suggests that Theaetetus listens too easily to the many and has accepted that “knowledge is perception” simply because of its ring of plausibility. Theaetetus needs to go farther. Clearly, Socrates says, Protagoras could not have meant to deny the significance of his profession; obviously some people possess more expertise than others. Socrates too claims expertise in his role as midwife. Thus Socrates’ dismissal of this argument also implicates Socrates in the claims of Protagoras, giving a sense to Socrates’ practice of philosophy as maieusis. This also anticipates Socrates’ trial and execution – just as “the many” claim that knowledge is perception, contradicting any claims to expertise, so too has “the many” viewed Socrates as one of the sophists, an imposter claiming special access to the truth.

Yet characterizing knowledge as perception also could describe the theoretical basis of how Athenian democracy actually functioned. Athenian democracy worked under the assumption that each person’s opinion, or doxa, counted toward the construction of knowledge, and the democratic regime constituted its knowledge by democratic procedures such as trials, votes, examinations and cross-examinations, and other forms of deliberations in order to create what Josiah Ober has called “democratic knowledge.”46 From this angle,

45 As we will see in the next chapter, Callicles suggests exactly this. In a way, his argument represents the implicit view of politics that neither “Protagoras” nor Socrates will accept in the Theaetetus.

46 Josiah Ober, Political Dissent, 33.
Arendt appears to have had Socrates right – his practice of maieusis can elicit and test these opinions as did other formal and informal institutions in democratic Athens. Since everyone in such a system knows what they perceive, no midwife would seem necessary, but neither could it harm.

But just as this phase of the argument suggests that perception provides an insufficient basis for knowledge, so too Athenian democracy did not simply aggregate perceptions or accept the relativistic view of every perception being equal and irrefragable. Rather, “epistemic institutions”47 grounded in practices of accountability, transparency, and legitimate dissent, functioned to aggregate, align, and codify knowledge48 – individual perceptions formed a baseline, but these perceptions became opinions and gained recognition of knowledge only in a dynamic process of exchange and development. In a way, this does not sound so far from the description of maieusis but expounded at a much larger scale. Both begin with perceptions but then subject these perceptions to scrutiny, leading to the formation of opinions and judgment that can eventually be subjected to evaluation.

Back in the *Theaetetus*, the argument has seemingly reached an impasse: if knowledge is perception, then any claims to expertise would appear as illegitimate pretense; yet claims to expertise make the very inquiry possible. And yet as we have also seen, this very contradiction appears in Athenian democracy: expertise has its place while knowledge

47 Josiah Ober characterizes features of these institutions as follows: “institutionalized forums for participatory and deliberative decision making at multiple scales. . . ; systematic development of extensive social networks featuring both strong and weak parties; managing state business through ‘real teams’; procedures for rendering social commitments credible; extensive publicity media for building common knowledge; public architecture maximizing intervisibility among participants; instruments and rules to drive down transaction costs by reducing information asymmetries among parties to exchanges; incentives at various levels for productive innovations; sanctions against free riding; an abiding concern for rotation, transparency, and accountability; a cultural commitment to civic education that stopped well short of totalizing social institutions” (Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge*, 267).

48 This language comes from Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge*, 265.
understood as “democratic knowledge” requires democratic, collective procedures of inquiry and evaluation. Thus the question becomes how to define knowledge that can survive being rooted in individual perceptions yet also subject to collective procedures with some authority of expertise (and populated by experts themselves to some degree). What definition of knowledge allows for the authority of the people as well as the authority of experts? The activity of the midwife as the dialogue unfolds enacts the beginning of an answer.

***

Socrates and Theaetetus have found the apparent contradiction in Protagoras’s argument and at this point Theodorus objects: “Protagoras was my friend, Socrates,” Theodorus interjects. “I could not consent through agreement of my own for Protagoras to be refuted” (ἐλεγχθαι Προταγόραν, 162a5, 180).49 The elenchus needs personal investment and without Protagoras present, Theodorus implies, one should not proceed. Socrates and Theaetetus attempt again to escape this contradiction but fail, and Theodorus asks if they might rather rescue the orphan of Protagoras’s argument (165a). In response, Socrates impersonates Protagoras to advance the latter’s position. Rather than simply accepting the common perception of Protagoras, then, Socrates, Theaetetus, and Theodorus take up his argument as a way of developing their own. They intensify self-scrutiny by expanding the conversation, bringing their opinions into conversation with the opinions of others.

They have not treated Protagoras fairly, Socrates says, because clearly Protagoras would respond that wisdom and wise people exist (165e, 184). Wisdom, Protagoras would argue, depends on the ability to change appearances: the wise man is “the man who in any case where bad things both appear and are for one of us, works a change and makes good things appear and be for him” (166d, 185). Some states are better than others and the

49 Translation emended.
education (\textit{paideias}, 167a4) Protagoras and others offer (for a fee, of course) changes the worse state to the better. Thus like a doctor, Protagoras would argue that as a teacher he can make people better by moving them away from the worse: the doctor does this by the use of drugs whereas the teacher (\textit{sophistēs}) does it by use of words (\textit{logoi}, 167a, 185).

Protagoras’s arguments extend to political life, giving a view of his expertise as friendly to democracy.\textsuperscript{50} Just as a good gardener, finding her plants sickly, would nurse them to health and goodness, making them “true,” the “wise and efficient \textit{rhetor}” (\textit{sophous te kai agathous rhētoras}, 167c2-3)

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
\textit{is the man who makes wholesome things seem just to a city instead of pernicious ones [\textit{ta chrēta anti tôn ponērōn dikai dokein, 167c3-4}]. Whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable [\textit{dikai a kai kala, c5} is just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself [\textit{héos an auta nomizēi, c5-6}; but the wise man replaces each pernicious convention by a wholesome one, making this both be and seem just. (167c, 186)}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

Poleis need leaders, Socrates later adds, to inform their deliberations (170b, 189). Whatever view a polis takes on an issue becomes “truth and fact” for that city; to follow their best interests, they require advising (172). These questions of knowledge become important political questions (172a, 191), and “Protagoras” (as impersonated by Socrates) seems to find a way to place knowledge between philosophy and politics.

Such advising also depends on a friendly relationship between philosophers and politicians, Socrates continues. Treating Protagoras fairly, as they have done by allowing him to defend their initial mischaracterization of his argument (in the previous section) demonstrates this amiability. Protagoras, as impersonated by Socrates, also warns them not

\textsuperscript{50} Thus on the basis of the \textit{Theaetetus} I would tend to agree with Cythia Farrar’s characterization of Protagoras as “democratic political theorist” (Farrar, \textit{The Origins of Democratic Thought}, 77) in that one could view his work as not antithetical democracy. However, I also agree with Josiah Ober’s critique of Farrar (and others) that the possibility of democratic applications does not a democratic theorist make. See Ober, “The Athenians and Their Democracy,” in \textit{The Athenian Revolution}, 123-139.
to proceed unjustly (167e), lest those who seek to associate with them (*sunousion*, 168a) blame Socrates and Theaetetus for their difficulties (*aporías*, 168a3) and come to hate philosophy (168e). Yet as Theodorus joins the conversation, he and Socrates continue to struggle with the apparent need and recognition of expertise on the one hand and the arguments of Protagoras that lead to a relativistic position on expert knowledge claims on the other.

Haunted by this question, Theodorus and Socrates digress to treat the differences between the philosophic and the political life and assert a much starker contrast between Protagoras’s vision of philosophy and another, apolitical version. This “digression” calls into question the compromise proposed by Protagoras and the place of the midwife in democratic Athens.

Socrates explains that unlike philosophers, who enjoy “plenty of time” (*scholē*, 172d4), the men of the law courts hurry everywhere, always with an eye on the clock: “as a result of all this, they become sharp and shrewd, knowing how to cozen their master in speech and beguile him in deed, but they become small and not upright in their souls, for their enslavement since their youth on has deprived them of the possibility of growth, straightness, and liberality” (173a1-5). For the philosopher, in contrast, Socrates offers this description:

The philosopher grows up without knowing the way to the market-place, or the whereabouts of the law courts or the council chambers or any other place of public assembly. Laws and decrees, published orally or in writing, are things he never sees or hears. The scrambling of political cliques for office, societal functions, dinners, parties with flute girls – such doings never enter his head even in a dream. . . . Because it is in reality only his body that lives and sleeps in the city. His mind, having come to the conclusion that all these things are of little or no account, spurns them and pursues its wingèd way . . . throughout the universe. . . . (173c9 – e6, 192)

Socrates continues by telling the story of Thales, who gazed so intently at the heavens that he fell into a well. Philosophers do not know their neighbors; they are too busy asking

---

“What is man?” Such a man appears clumsy and fatuous in the law courts and elsewhere (hé aschémosuné deiné doxan abelterias parechomené, 174c6). Praises of men of reputation sound pointless to him and the philosopher regards such men without time for philosophy as “quite as coarse and uncultivated as the stock-farmer” (agroikon de kai apaideton hupo ascholias, 174d8-e1). In all of these cases, “the philosopher is the object of general derision [ho toioutos hupo tôn pollon katagelastai], partly for what men take to be his superior manner [huperéphanos échón, b5], and partly for his constant ignorance and lack of resources in dealing with the obvious [ta b'en posin agnōn ten kai en hekastois aporón]” (175b6). And yet when he draws someone “to a higher level” (helkusei anó, b9) asking questions about justice and happiness, the philosopher appears perfectly comfortable – a savant.

Socrates explains that there are two human types: the philosopher brought up in true freedom and leisure who fails at the mundane jobs of daily life such as making a bed, sweetening a sauce, and delivering a flattering speech, for example (174e); and the practical man, who proves keen and smart at doing these jobs but “does not know how to strike up a song in his turn like a freeman or how to tune the strings of common speech to the fitting praise of the life of the gods and of the happy among men” (theón te kai andrôn eudaimonôn bion, 176a, 194-5). While Theodorus hopes that everyone will see the philosophers’ wisdom and that peace will follow, Socrates responds that the evils of life will never completely disappear. For this reason, Socrates says, a man should become as god-like as possible, pursuing justice and purity through understanding, the truth which seems far from everyday life (176b). Those who fail to see this may believe they possess qualities “necessary for survival in their community,” but they believe in ignorance of truth.
These two human types correspond, Socrates continues, to “two patterns set up in reality” (paradeigmaton . . . en toi onti bestoton, 176e3):52 “one is divine and supremely happy [theion endaimonnutatous, 176e4]; the other has nothing of god in it, and is the pattern of the deepest unhappiness” (tou de atheou athliotatou, 176e4). The one who comes to know reality can live her life in accordance with it, and thus live happily as if a god. The one who fails to perceive reality acts unjustly and “pays the penalty” (tinousi dikên) becoming increasingly like the pattern of the deepest unhappiness (177a).

Yet Socrates also adds that “there is one accident to which the unjust man is liable,” an accident that might intimate a different way of life. If the unjust man attempts to give an account of the things he disparages (logon dei dounai te kai dexasthai peri bon psegousi, 177b1-2) – the things philosophers claim to know – a strange (atopos, b4) thing happens Socrates says. Such a man will see the insufficiencies of what he thinks he knows: “In the end the things he says do not satisfy even himself; that famous eloquence of his somehow dries up, and he is left looking nothing more than a child” (177b). But this also points to a problem with their own – Socrates’ and Theaetetus’s – understanding of knowledge as the true judgment of the philosopher.

This so-called digression has an undeniable comic element. The ridiculous philosopher and the rushed man of the courts both echo Aristophanic satire.53 Yet coming on the heels of the “discussion” with “Protagoras,” the tendentious account of political life and the inordinate praise for philosophy strike an antipolitical note. The practical man of the digression appears to cast aspersions on “Protagoras” and his politically-oriented philosophy that lacked any commitment to truth; the philosopher of the digression in this sense does

52 “In that which is” would translate “in reality” more literally.

53 As noted by Mark H. Waymack in “The Theaetetus 172c – 177c,” 483.
not sound so different from Heidegger’s “pure thinker” of “withdrawal.” On the one hand, the practical man views knowledge as instrumental, as useful for victory in the courts or pleasing a superior; the philosopher, on the other hand, wins only the ridicule of Thracian maids for his lack of common sense, not even knowing the location of the marketplace or the public assembly. The practical man inhabits the spaces and times of power and influence: the law courts, the assembly, social functions – all regulated by the water clock that presides in trials. The philosopher, in contrast, defines himself by his scholē, his leisure and lack of rush. Where is Socrates between these two?

In the description, Socrates seems intent on aligning Theaetetus, Theodorus, and himself on the side of the philosopher. Theodorus and Socrates begin their comparison by commenting on the leisure they have to investigate these questions – “we have plenty of time [scholēn], haven’t we, Socrates?” Theodorus asks Socrates before they begin (172c1) – and this trope returns in the dialogue that follows, always contrasting the leisurely conversation the three interlocutors enjoy and the urgency of occurrences in the law courts. Socrates and Theodorus also comment on the setting of their conversation as unlike that of practical men, for Socrates and Theodorus have no jury and no audience “sitting in control over us, ready to criticize and give orders” (epitimēsōn te kai arxōn epistatei par’ hēmin, 173c5-6, 192). Finally, Theodorus expresses great pleasure at Socrates’ talk. The digression would

54 Robert E. Wood, in “Self-Reflexivity in Plato’s ‘Theaetetus’: Toward a Phenomenology of the Lifeworld,” advances a Heideggerian reading of the dialogue, concluding about “philosophy” in the dialogue: “What such philosophy shows are the eidetic features involved in the lifeworld as indicated by the characters and incidents in the dialogue. It provides a phenomenology of the lifeworld and thus illustrates Heidegger’s claim that phenomenology is a return to Plato and Aristotle” (832).

55 See 187e and 201b.
seem to offer an indictment of Protagoras’s relativistic and political philosophy and a
concomitant defense of the “purity” of thought and its apolitical bent.\footnote{Although Paul Stern suggests that in fact the digression shows the necessity of philosophy’s concern with political things, an argument not too dissimilar from mine. See Stern, “The Philosphic Importance of Political Life.”}

But all of this praise of the philosopher comes from Theodorus – Socrates does not explicitly identify with the description. When Socrates introduces the thought that in turn leads to the digression, he tells Theodorus that Theodorus’s comment reminded Socrates of a recurrent idea about why “those who study philosophy”\footnote{Benardete notes that the word used here, philosophias, is a hapax legomenon in Plato’s work: Benardete, Being of the Beautiful, 1.187. This would seem to indicate that Socrates does not mean the description that follows in any general sense.} appear foolish in the lawcourts. Socrates does not, then, equate Theodorus, Theaetetus, or himself with the philosophers of the digression; Theodorus, however, immediately does so, accepting the description as identical to what the three of them undertake at that moment (173c). During the course of the digression, Theodorus never dissents once: he declares that what Socrates says is true (176b8); he asserts that everyone should be as persuaded as he is by Socrates (176a2-4); and he voices his regret that Socrates calls an end to their digression in order to return to the original inquiry (177c3-5).

Unlike Theodorus, Socrates neither accepts nor embodies the philosopher of the digression.\footnote{As Mark H. Waymack notes: “Though Theodorus may amiably agree to the character, it stands in striking contrast to the Socrates of the dialogue itself” (Waymack, The Theaetetus 172c – 177c,” 482).} In contrast to the philosopher, Socrates shows concern for Athens and his fellow Athenians from the beginning of the dialogue, a concern for politeness and common sense, and for successful political life – Socrates has just digressed out of concern about the apparent need for expertise in politics so that people may live together well. When the idea for the digression occurs to him, Socrates declares that they (he and Theodorus) resemble
the philosopher only in their leisure to begin a third new discussion, taking a newcomer if they prefer. “It does not matter to such men [those practicing philosophy] whether they talk for a day or a year, if only they may hit upon that which is,” Socrates says (172d). Yet Socrates cuts the digression short, despite Theodorus’s wishes otherwise, and, more dramatically, the ending of the *Theaetetus* shows Socrates’ own lack of leisure, having to hurry to face Meletus’s indictment (210d).

Although one might conclude that the “flying philosopher” of the digression offers little more than a joke, this contrast between Theodorus’s and Socrates’ reactions actually emphasizes, I think, some similarities between Theodorus’s friend, Protagoras, and Socrates. Theodorus, as Socrates notes in the *Theaetetus*, had gained reputation for his geometrical proofs and teaching of mathematics. Yet what Theodorus has taught Theaetetus, as we see in the beginning of the dialogue, never leaves the abstract realm of number. Theaetetus can, as Myles Burnyeat characterizes it, “formulate a general definition of the important mathematical notion of linear incompleteness” (147d-148b) but he cannot answer Socrates’ question about what it means to know these things – or anything. Theodorus, in other words, disseminates expert knowledge, but he does not teach his students how to translate this knowledge into action or even to discuss the assumptions with which such knowledge understands itself. Theodorodus cannot give an account, a logon, of what knowledge is (148d2). (Theaetetus will learn otherwise.)

In contrast to Theodorus, Socrates and Protagoras both attempt to give accounts that might receive broad understanding – they try to speak to publics, or to speak publics

---

59 As Harry Berger describes the philosopher of the digression, whom Berger distinguishes from Socrates: “Metaphorically, Theaetetus is flying . . . But if he is going to talk with Socrates he will have to sit, and not fly away – as Socrates chose to sit in prison” (Berger, “Plato’s Flying Philosopher,” 406).

60 See Myles Burnyeat’s analysis of this in the context of Greek mathematics: Burnyeat, “The Philosophical Sense of Theaetetus’s Mathematics.” The quotation comes from page 489.
into being. The sophist and the midwife both seek to improve the opinions of those they encounter, whether by making them better by means of speech in the case of Protagoras or through helping others to “give birth” and then evaluating these offspring, as for Socrates. Neither Protagoras nor Socrates resembles the philosopher or the “practical man” of the digression; they inhabit the space between “philosophy” and “politics.” Socrates does not come to political life out of “philosophic interest” but rather finds himself in political life – between the caricatured extremes of the digression – and must work from within this situation.

Yet Socrates also retains the notion that better and worse accounts may become possible. The practice of philosophy presupposes that one might find truth – that such a goal might prove possible. This assumption undergirds the activity of the midwife. As we saw anticipated in the description of the image, Socrates sees his activity as testing and assaying the opinions of others through the discussion forming the *sunless*. Such shared collective inquiry might lead to recognizing true reality – or it might not: every “offspring” has the chance of being a mere phantom or the truth itself. But unlike Protagoras, Socrates inspirits these encounters with a hope for truth, even if Socrates never seems to reach it, as we come to see by the end of the *Theaetetus*.

I would suggest, then, that we can take the digression not as a paean to the philosopher but rather as an elaboration of the stakes of choosing either side of the dilemma posed by “Protagoras” in the dialogue – one can choose either expertise or opinion. Viewed in this way, the digression then clarifies what Socrates as a midwife attempts to do in the dialogue. By investigating knowledge without knowing in advance what knowledge is,

---

61 This highlights a difference between my account and Paul’s Stern’s in “The Philosophic Importance of Political Life.” The quotation in the following sentence comes from page 276.
Socrates finesses the same paradox we saw Meno propose, believing in the possibility of knowing without claiming certainty of knowledge. The truth may reveal itself, then, but never so completely as to end one’s searching. The subsequent investigations of knowledge in the *Theaetetus* elaborate the terms of this inquiry by rejecting truth and false opinion as insufficient by themselves and settling on the circular but necessary definition of knowledge as correct opinion with an account. This account will itself become exemplified in the speech, the *logos*, that Theodorus, Theaetetus, and Socrates construct in common through their dialogue.

***

The contrast between the practical man and the philosopher forms a backdrop for the remainder of the argument in the *Theaetetus*. From it follows the suggestion that sets in motion a definitive argument to prove “knowledge is perception” as insufficient – that one cannot accept a world without better and worse opinions (177d). Immediately after the digression, Socrates observes that legislation always aims at what seems most useful, but that governments err and some people see more accurately what will prove useful in the future (177e). Political life, more than anything else, shows the obvious need for judgment among opinions. Thus, they conclude after more examples, this argument cannot stand. “We are set free,” Socrates declares; this prepares the way for a wholly new set of arguments, argument that in fact build from the ground cleared by the discussion thus far as well as the digression.62

---

62 Despite the differences between Theodorus and Socrates, the language here reemphasizes the collaborative nature of the discussion (note the emphasis on “we” at 183c). After 184b, however, Theodorus does not speak again in the dialogue (which ends at 210d, over 26 Stephanus pages later, making Theodorus silent for roughly the final third of the dialogue).
Following the digression and the dismissal of the “knowledge is perception” argument, the tone of the conversation shifts. Theodorus steps away, insisting that Theaetetus must “render account” (dōseis logon) to Socrates for the rest of the discussion (183d5). While the previous discussion had raised an argument from Parmenides, Socrates insists that “what we must do is to make use of our midwife’s art to deliver Theaetetus,” and not worry about Parmenides (184b1-2). As Theaetetus proposes a new possible definition, Socrates admires the “good will” of his answer (prothumós, 187b10), and they begin again.

The sheer abstractness of the following investigations would seem to further corroborate the portrait of the philosopher Socrates and Theodorus constructed. The contrast with political life also reappears as a reason for dismissing arguments. After Theaetetus and Socrates digress again on the question of “false opinion” and its possibility, they return to the second definition Theaetetus had proposed, that “knowledge is true opinion” (tēn alēthē doxan epistēmēn einai, 200e4). Socrates asserts that “a whole art” indicates that knowledge is not true opinion (201a) – the art of the “greatest representatives of wisdom,” that of rhetoricians and lawyers. Such professions make an art of producing conviction, persuading or causing jurors to judge one thing or another. Yet jurors’ opinions, whether correct or not, do not necessarily hinge on knowledge, Socrates argues. Clearly jurors do not know – rhetoricians and lawyers rather persuade them that one thing has more plausibility than another. If true opinion were knowledge, Socrates asserts, even the best juryman in the world could not form a correct opinion without knowledge (201c).

This argument leads Theaetetus to add another layer to his second definition, forming a third: knowledge consists of true opinion with an account (tēn men meta logon alēthē doxan epistēmēn einai, 201c8-d1), Theaetetus says. This definition repeats the earlier

---

63 187a. Note that the Cooper edition translates as judgment what I have translated as “opinion.”
formulation word for word, adding only “with an account.” Theaetetus explains that he heard a man say that “it is true opinion with an account that is knowledge; true opinion without an account falls outside of knowledge” (201c-d). Knowing something under their provisional definition means having “correct opinion about any one of the things that are” and grasping “in addition its difference from the rest” (208e). But if correct opinion must concern itself with the differentness of what it is about (209d), then adding an account requires that one get to know the differentness, not merely judge it – a tautology. “This most splendid of our accounts of knowledge,” Socrates says, “turns out to be a very amusing affair. For getting to know of course is acquiring knowledge” (210). Thus they have defined knowledge in terms of knowledge:

So it seems, the answer to the question “what is knowledge?” will be “correct opinion accompanied by knowledge of the differences” – for this is what we are asked to understand by the “addition of an account.” (210a-b, 233)

The dialogue comes full circle: Knowledge is neither perception nor true opinion nor an account added to true opinion. Theaetetus’s perceptions have come to naught – the opinions they formed appear to have led Socrates, Theodorus, and Theaetetus himself to another dead end.

V.

But while the argument of the Theaetetus taken by itself appears without a conclusion, if we rethink the conversation that has taken place in terms of the the midwife, the conversation reflects on the activity of the midwife, highlighting the elements of maieusis in the enactment of the dialogue. At one level, the argument offers three starting points for understanding knowledge: perception, opinion, and an account or argument. None of these

---

64 In addition to “with an account” (meta logou) the word men appears, but this does not affect the sense of the sentence taken by itself; rather, it forms a connection with the contrasting second half of the sentence.
satisfies a definition of knowledge, but such a lack of knowledge by the end of the dialogue aligns with the image of midwife as barren of wisdom and always in pursuit of something true and beautiful, even if these truths always remain unfound. Moreover, the successive definitions, as I showed earlier, align with steps in the process of maieusis: beginning with perception (recognizing “pregnancy”), developing opinions (i.e. the “birth”), and attempting to give an account (the testing, “running the child around the hearth”). This process does not define or achieve knowledge, but it moves toward some knowledge by illuminating what we do not know. At this level of the argument, the aporetic ending demands continuing inquiry; knowing what one does not know – that one cannot even define knowledge – incites further questioning.

At another level, the midwife also appears as a third way between the “practical man” and the philosopher of Socrates’ digression. The “practical man,” as we saw, flitted from opinion to opinion, pandering and pleasing without the compass of true knowledge, a dispensation only from gods. The philosopher of the digression, in contrast, oriented all his pursuits around the paradigm of the good and the true, which gave him an almost otherworldly aura, being so preoccupied with the the realm of the true that he presented a laughable and ridiculous figure. Yet the midwife as enacted in the dialogue worked through perceptions to form opinions, beginning with the position of the practical man and moving toward that of the “flying philosopher.” Unlike Protagoras, the midwife pushed beyond manipulating opinions in different ways. Yet unlike the philosopher, the midwife insisted on appearances around him – the opinions of his fellow citizens. Yet given the dialogue’s aporetic ending and Socrates’ repeated claims of ignorance, we cannot say the midwife ever reaches truth. Instead, the activity of maieusis continues without end among the citizens of Athens.
At a third level, we could say that while the dialogue ends without any definition for knowledge, that the conversation in fact creates an account or argument, a *logos*, that puts its readers on the way toward knowledge. As Socrates reminds Theaetetus at the end of the dialogue, one is better off knowing what one does not know than remaining in ignorance. In this sense, one comes closer to knowledge as one also recognizes one’s ignorance. Questions about one’s own knowledge, we might say, start the dialogue within oneself that Socrates calls “thinking” (*Theaetetus* 189e6): “a talk which the soul has with itself about the objects under its consideration.” The dialogue of the *Theaetetus* raises questions that makes this talk possible.

By encouraging us to view the dialogue as a whole, as a *logos* itself, this third possible reading of the *Theaetetus* in terms of the midwife also leads back to the dialogue’s beginning. The prologue or frame of the *Theaetetus* reinforces this third possible reading by situating the conversation that follows – the dialogue with which we have engaged thus far – as a *text*, a text being read aloud by a slave to two philosophers, Euclides and Terpsion. The *Theaetetus* thus alerts us to its own status as an artifact subject to differing interpretations and as forming a potential community of discourse; I want to suggest in this final section that we can see the dialogue extending the image of the midwife beyond what Socrates demonstrates within the dialogue by illuminating how a text can function in a similar fashion – i.e. how a text might midwife its reader. Yet the beginning of the *Theaetetus* does not prescribe one particular reading but rather sets out reading as a “problematic,” as constituting another cluster of questions, questions that in turn affect how we might read Socrates as a midwife.

***

---

65 “As Socrates plays the midwife to Theaetetus,” Mark H. Waymack comments, “so the *Theaetetus* is meant to act as a midwife to the perceptive reader” (Waymack, “The *Theaetetus* 172c – 177c,” 485). Waymack may overstep with “is meant”: this seems right in part, but not definitively so.
The *Theaetetus* begins with a frame unique among Plato’s dialogues: a brief conversation between Euclides and Terpsion, Megarians and followers of Socrates present at Socrates’ death in the *Phaedo.* They encounter each other in Megara at or near the marketplace.

Terpsion has been looking for Euclides, and Euclides has just returned from the harbor where he met Theaetetus. Theaetetus was being taken to Athens from the camp at Corinth after being badly wounded and suffering from dysentery. “What a man to lose!” exclaims Terpsion about Theaetetus. For Euclides, Theaetetus means something else:

As I was coming back, I thought of Socrates and what a remarkably good prophet he was — as usual — about Theaetetus. It was not long before his death, if I remember rightly, that he came across Theaetetus, who was a boy at the time. Socrates met him and had a talk with him, and was very much struck with his natural ability [*suggenomenos te kai dialechtheis pann agasthēnai autou ein ipsisin*, c7-8]; and when I went to Athens, he repeated to me the discussion [*tous . . . logous*, c8] they had had, which was well worth listening to. And he said to me then that we should inevitably hear more of Theaetetus, if he lived to grow up. (142c-d)

The encounter with the dying Theaetetus reminds Euclides of the dying Socrates and his prophecy. In fact, Theaetetus had so impressed Socrates that Socrates originally recounted his conversation with Theaetetus to Euclides. Now the sight of Theaetetus many years later has reminded Euclides of this conversation, which he, fortunately enough, had noted when Socrates told him. He “recalled it at [his] leisure” [*kata scholēn*, 143a2] later and wrote it out, clarifying some inconsistent bits with Socrates on subsequent trips to Athens. “The result is that I have got pretty well the whole discussion in writing [*bœste moi schedon ti pas ho logos gegraptau*, 143a4-5],” Euclides concludes.

Not from memory but from notes and consultation with Socrates, Euclides has created a “discussion in writing” [*ho logos gegraptau*, 143a5]. Terpsion has heard of this before, and has meant to ask Euclides to show the writing before. Why not listen now? Terpsion

---

*66* Cooper, among others, notes this device as unique among all of Plato’s dialogues: Cooper, “Introduction to the *Theaetetus*,” 157.
suggests. He wants a break [ἐγώ ἐκάει ἀναπαυσασθαι δεομαί, 143a8-9] and Euclides responds that he would not mind sitting either. “We will get the slave to read it to us while we rest [ἡμῖν ἥμαν ἀναπαυσομένοις ὁ παῖς ἀναγνώστει, 143b3],” Euclides declares. For the sake of convenience, Euclides adds, Euclides did not directly transcribe the conversation as Socrates recounted it to him but rather represented [διαλέγομεν ὁι εἴπη διαλέχθηναι, 143b7] him (Socrates) as speaking directly with Theaetetus and Theodorus, leaving out the formula of “and I maintained” and “I said” and “He agreed.” Now we listen.

This brief setting raises a number of questions: what kind of connection exists between Socrates and Theaetetus such that Socrates would recount their entire conversation to Euclides, Euclides would transcribe it and work on it with Socrates only much later to encounter a dying Theaetetus and be reminded of it? What makes this conversation so salient (or poignant)? What does the interest of Euclides and Terpsion tell us about the dialogue? Who are these Megarian disciplines of Socrates and what do their ways of life tell us about Socrates and his practice of philosophy? What does their practice of resting while listening to a slave boy read them this “discussion in writing” tell us about their commitment to philosophy?

I cannot begin to answer all of these questions, but I want to suggest that the leisured approach to philosophy evident in Euclides and Terpsion contrasts with the fate of Socrates to which the end of the dialogue alludes and thus Socrates’ practice of philosophy as a midwife. First we should note that Euclides and Terpsion had a reputation as “Socrates” – followers of Socrates – and thus as philosophers. While we know few specifics about Terpsion outside of what occurs in the prologue itself, Euclides founded the Megarian school of philosophy and wrote Socratic dialogues. But unlike the midwife, Euclides and

---

67 On Euclides, see Nails, The People of Plato, 144-5; on Terpsion, 274.
Terpsion as we witness them in the *Theaetetus* do not pursue inquiry in any form: they appear content to talk with other philosophers and to enjoy reposing while listening to the conversations of Socrates, even changing the words so that it flows more smoothly. Rather than following Socrates with more “Socrateses,” as Socrates prophesies in the *Apology*, Euclides and Terpsion present us with Apollodorus-like imitators – un-Socratic Socratics.

The example of Euclides and Terpsion thus could suggest the limits of the philosophical *sunousia* described and enacted in the *Theaetetus*. If Euclides and Terpsion’s approach at all exemplifies the *sunousia*, it would seemed destined to the fate of the philosophers in the digression of the *Theaetetus*: leisured philosophers who “ignore the political.”68 We hear nothing of the war that has killed Theaetetus, nor about the circumstances of Socrates’ death, both of which would seem to point to a world out of joint around Euclides and Terpsion. Yet these two philosophers appear blissfully unaware, supine and letting the words flow over them. After the slave boy begins, we never hear another utterance from either.

And yet by contrasting Euclides and Terpsion’s passivity toward a “discussion in writing” and their lack of eager, even erotic, pursuit of discussion itself, the prologue limns another possible approach toward the practice of philosophy – even a possible approach toward what comes captured in writing. Euclides and Terpsion may demonstrate how not to midwife a text, but the discussions that Socrates and Euclides shared, discussions about a written text but shared by two people in person (albeit across time), do suggest that texts can

68 This phrase comes from Andrea Tschemplik, who continues: “Both mathematicians [Theodorus and Theaetetus] think of themselves as being nothing other than mathematicians: they forget or suppress that which makes it possible for them to be mathematicians, namely, being human, being situated in a city. The frame reveals what the dialogue conceals: the mathematician is the man. Euclides [sic] explains his absence from the city as the result of his encountering Theaetetus, who was suffering from war wounds and dysentery. Is this Theaetetus other than or like the Theaetetus of the dialogue?” (Tschemplik, “Framing the Question of Knowledge: Beginning Plato’s Theaetetus,” 175).
enliven thought and possibly the practice of philosophy. The self-conscious presentation of itself as a text in the *Theaetetus* thus suggests a connection between Socrates’ activities and the activities elicited by the dialogues depicting Socrates (something that also appeared in the *Symposium*). Given the development of the *sunousia* during this period from an oral to a literary basis, the *Theaetetus* thus underscores Socrates’ version of the philosophical *sunousia* while also suggesting the changes the *sunousia* will undergo after Socrates. Taken with the *Symposium*, then, this suggests a link between Socrates’ practice of philosophy and subsequent practices of reading. Yet these remain only suggestive possibilities.
5: SOCRATES’ *POLITIKOS*: The “True Political Art” in the *Gorgias*

As a philosopher, Socrates never reflected on the politics of Athens. He is the only Athenian to “do politics,” to be involved in politics *in truth* as opposed to all that is done in Athens in the name of politics. The first encounter between politics and philosophy is that of an alternative: either the politics of the politicians or that of the philosophers.

– Jacques Rancière¹

Reading the Socratic dialogues one has the feeling: what a frightful waste of time! What’s the point of these arguments that prove nothing and clarify nothing!

– Ludwig Wittgenstein²

I.

In the last three chapters, a description of a politics of Socrates’ practice of philosophy has emerged through a partial coalescence of Socrates a stingray, as a master of erotics, and as a midwife. Taken together, we have seen, then, the political consequences and ramifications of Socrates’ philosophic practice understood in terms of inquiry into perceptions and formation of opinions, the *sunousia* and its dynamics, and the aspirational pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and truth. While Socrates as a stingray in the *Meno* presented an ambiguous face, raising the question of the effects of conversing with Socrates, Socrates as master as erotics in the *Symposium* and as midwife in the *Theaetetus* showed the possibility of more constructive practices built in terms of the existing forms of life within Athenian political culture, transforming the *erōs* of citizenship into an *erōs* of philosophical friendship that might generate its own new customs (*nomoi*) and knowledges (*epistēmai*), thus forming insurgent associations within the Athenian democratic hegemony. Viewed through the different

¹ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, ix.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 14c.
images that Socrates uses to describe himself and understood within the diversity of Athenian political life, this practice of philosophy does not appeared abstracted from the polis but rather enmeshed in it.

At the same time, however, each of these sides of Socrates came accompanied by warnings. The apparently feckless conversation in the *Meno* cast doubt on Socrates’ importance. Alcibaides’ speech in the *Symposium* made us question Socrates’ erotic demands and feel the pull of Aristophanes’ contrasting account. Even in the *Theaetetus*, the frame of the dialogue seemed to undermine the promise of Socrates’ maieusis. We might say that Socrates’ residual aura of strangeness, the strangeness that provokes his reputation for atopia – outlandish or odd behavior – and that makes him inscrutable if not utterly disturbing to Alcibiades and other would-be disciples can lead many to suspect Socrates’ motives. We have seen some possible examples of such negative response: the dismissive Anytus, the volatile Alcibiades, and the lack of understanding of potential jurors in the *Theaetetus*. From their perspectives, Socrates upsets Athenian political life in a literal sense, jarring its tranquility through provoking perplexity (*aporia*) and stirring routine habits, reorienting their desires and purposes, but not always to his benefit or the perceived advantage of his fellows.

Thus in suggesting a beneficial – if not exactly democratic and even with these caveats – politics of these philosophical practices, one could accuse me of failing to address the confrontation of politics and philosophy that Socrates so often emblematizes, and which seems to follow these negative reactions to Socrates. Echoing the concerns of Hannah Arendt, Sheldon Wolin, and Bruno Latour from the Introduction, Jacques Rancière, in one of this chapter’s two epigraphs, underscores how philosophy came into being weighed by anti-political baggage.³ Socrates’ associations with oligarchs, his seeming orientation toward

---

³ I should note that this constitutes the exact opposite of J.P Vernant’s argument in *The Origins of Greek Thought*. 
expertise and criticisms of democratically-legitimated knowledge, and his aspersions toward
democratic participation while not making him a bad citizen, would seem to indict his
democratic credentials. Just as in the case with Plato, for as much as we can show
entanglements with Athenian culture around him, Socrates would appear, at the core, to
remain fundamentally anti-democratic. And Socrates taught Plato.

Engaging this side of Socrates would seem crucial to confronting his character in all
its complexity. Ignoring this threatening and agonistic Socrates further risks domesticating
Socrates and the practice of his philosophy, making the politics of this philosophy appear
benign and even accommodating, as mere vexations in an otherwise hegemonic democratic
culture. But we cannot forget that Athens executed Socrates in part because of his
dangerous challenge to Athenian hegemony. As I.F. Stone reminds us, the differences
between Socrates and Athens “were not mere distant abstractions . . . but challenged the
very foundations of the self-government they [the Athenians] enjoyed.” Moreover, Socrates
today often represents the perfect image of the philosopher-tyrant, the breeder of
totalitarians that led Karl Popper to pronounce Plato – on whose Socrates we have relied – a

---

4 On Socrates not as a bad citizen, see Matthew Christ, *The Bad Citizen in Classical Athens*. On Socrates qua
democrat, for and against, see Gregory Vlastos, “The Historical Socrates and Athenian Democracy” (pro) and

5 See Danielle Allen, “Platonic Quandaries.”

6 Josiah Ober has often advancing precisely this argument, and I deeply admire his monumental efforts in
describing the incredible power of democratic ideology, culture, and institutions (most notably in *Mass and Elite,
Political Dissent*, and *Democracy and Knowledge*). But attending only to these arguments of the period risks
overlooking the influence that critics of democracy have exerted in the subsequent tradition of political
thought, as, for example, Sheldon Wolin has shown in Wolin, *Politics and Vision*. In this chapter I want to take
the anti-political (as well as anti-democratic) legacy attributed to Socrates seriously, while also showing how
reading the *Gorgias* in light of my argument thus far in order shows the challenge of Socrates as well as strength
of Ober’s argument – and that we should view Socrates’ criticisms and the democratic culture around him as
profoundly in tension.

“social engineer” dedicated to “totalitarian justice.”\(^8\) If we wish to ascribe some gainful politics to Socrates, we must face the pronouncements against the politics of his philosophy. As we saw earlier, Bruno Latour has argued that Socrates began a fearful dilemma that remains urgent in the imagination of many today, the pitting of Reason against Force. This began, for Latour, in Plato’s *Gorgias*. Socrates in the *Gorgias* embodies the “true scientist,” telling Callicles: “You’ve failed to notice *how much power geometrical equality has among gods and men*, and this neglect of geometry has led you to believe that one should try to gain a *disproportionate* share of things” (508a).\(^9\) For Latour, Socrates’ pursuit of a politics of philosophy in the *Gorgias*, a politics tied exclusively to reason’s mast, defines itself against a politics without philosophy – the pure power politics Socrates associates with the tyrant, the philosopher’s opponent and negative simulacrum, in the *Republic*.\(^10\) According to Latour, this opposition still persists today: “If Reason cannot prevail, then Might will take over!” Latour repeats an oft-heard cry of despair.\(^11\) Socrates’ Reason faces Callicles’ Force. Callicles, “an expert at disproportion,” in Latour’s words, declares in contrast to Socrates: “we only have to look at nature to find evidence that it is right for better to have a greater share than worse. . . . The superior person shall dominate the inferior person and have more than him [*sic*]” (483c-d). Might makes right for Callicles. On the one hand stands Callicles and politics, on the other Socrates and philosophy. This opposition culminates with Socrates’ declaration of

---

\(^8\) Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1: *The Spell of Plato*, 22 and 86.


\(^10\) See *Republic* IX.

\(^11\) As Latour quotes Steven Weinberg: “Our civilization has been powerfully affected by the discovery that nature is strictly governed by impersonal laws. . . . We will need to confirm and strengthen the vision of a rationally understandable world if we are to protect ourselves from the irrational tendencies that still beset humanity.” Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, 216.
himself as the true *politikos* and of being “the only real statesman of Athens.” Only Socrates will win true glory in the final judgment – not famous Athenian politicians, Pericles and Themistocles included. Socrates’ claims echo, then, the arguments he advanced in the *Meno* undermining Athenian statesmen, Alcibiades’ own comparisons of Socrates to Pericles and other Athenian *rētors* in the *Symposium*, and the questions Socrates posed about democratic knowledge in the *Theaetetus*. Radicalizing the *sunousia* and Socrates’ associations in this sense could have distinctly antidemocratic consequences not all that different from Callicles’ will to power.

But serious though Latour’s accusations may sound, Wittgenstein’s derisive description of the Socratic dialogues reminds us of the nagging doubt that Socrates might have any relevance – one might walk away unchanged and unconvinced, just as Meno did and perhaps also Euclides and Terpsion.12 As with Alexander Nehamas’s Socrates, Wittgenstein’s Socrates has little concern with persuasion or illumination – and for Wittenstein, unlike Nehamas, this provides damning evidence against him. Socrates as potential citizen or political educator, the Socrates of Dana Villa or that of Martha Nussbaum, has little traction here. Moreover, Wittgenstein reminds us of an argument that we will hear from Callicles in the *Gorgias*, namely that Socrates plays children’s games unworthy of any intelligent adult and that this makes Socrates ridiculous. This Socrates does not so much threaten the political realm as fail to contribute in any way by virtue of his own quietude.13

---

12 The reference to Socrates from *Culture and Value* does not appear to form any element in a systematic discussion by Wittgenstein. Indeed, I have found little evidence that Wittgenstein much concerned himself with Socrates, which perhaps supports the point here that we may not need to bother with Socrates or his practice of philosophy.

13 On Socrates as a “quiet Athenian,” see L.B. Carter, *The Quiet Athenian*. 
Latour uses his reading of the *Gorgias* to deconstruct the conceptual legacies troubling science studies in the twentieth century, but they can also apply to dilemmas about authority in democratic politics today. If Socrates’ practice of philosophy exists within democratic political culture (one of my suggestions thus far), does it not threaten democratic authority? Do its claims to the desires of citizens undermine patriotism? Do its claims to knowledge about the world threaten democratic epistemology? On the other hand, can we even claim such significance for Socrates? The *Gorgias* allows for a renewal of questions about Socrates’ political effects while also raising the spectre of his irrelevance. Looking at the *Gorgias*, good reasons appear to doubt the compatibility of philosophy and politics – let alone philosophy and democracy – but so too does the *Gorgias*'s enactment of Socrates’ challenge to the governing political order raise questions about that challenge’s potency.

II.

From its beginning, the *Gorgias* presents itself as a struggle, an agon, between Socrates and his interlocutors. As Arlene Saxonhouse notes, war remains an “unspoken” but omnipresent theme in the dialogue. The dialogue’s namesake, Gorgias, had distinguished himself as a teacher of rhetoric, and thus one involved in political conflict at one remove, just like his student Polus, also a rhetorician. Callicles, a wealthy young Athenian gentleman, appears as one under the influence of Gorgias, echoing Meno in this sense but much more strident in his beliefs. All three, then, come associated with the conflicts of political life as well as formally educated for such pursuits, both in contradistinction to Socrates. If *Theaetetus* presented a friendly inquiry from its beginning vignette of fond recollections and the leisure

---

14 These three concerns appear in Benjamin Barber’s critique of J. Peter Euben’s democracy-oriented reading of the *Gorgias*: Barber, “Misreading Democracy.”
for philosophy, the Gorgias begins ominously, picking up where the Theaetetus ended by foreshadowing the death of Socrates and his conflict with most Athenians.

The thematic conflict between Socrates and his three conversants in the Gorgias also resembles that between Socrates and Athens as depicted in the Apology. Chaerephon’s presence at the beginning of the Gorgias – he speaks before Socrates does – recalls his asking the Delphic Oracle if anyone surpassed Socrates in wisdom. Socrates and Chaerephon have just come from the agora, the Athenian marketplace where Socrates passed many of his hours according to his testimony in the Apology and as we saw at the end of the Symposium. Following his description of this incident in the Apology, Socrates raises an objection very similar to one Callicles will raise in the course of the Gorgias: “Perhaps someone would say,” says Socrates: “Aren’t you ashamed of engaging in a pursuit from which you now run the risk of dying?” Moreover, Socrates argues in both dialogues that considerations of justice must trump concerns for reputation or safety. Finally, in the heat of his argument with Socrates, Callicles also alludes to Socrates’ subsequent trial, warning him much as Anytus did

15 As Christopher Rocco puts it: “Socrates’ conversations with Gorgias and Polus reveal a fundamental antagonism between Athenian political practice and Socratic dialectic, an antagonism that culminates in Callicles’ prediction of Socrates’ death and Socrates’ assumption of the mantle of Athenian statesmanship” (Rocco, The Tragedy of Enlightenment, 78). Rocco’s reading of the Gorgias has influenced my own.

16 Saxonhouse, “An Unspoken Theme in Plato’s Gorgias: War,” 139. Indeed, the theme speaks from the dialogue’s first words: polemon kai machis, meaning “of war and conflict.” See Gorgias, 447a1 and Liddell and Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, 1085 and 1432-3.

17 As E.R. Dodds notes, “Gorgias’s teaching is the seed of which the Calliclean way of life is the poisonous fruit” (Dodds, Gorgias, 15).

18 Apology 21a.

19 Apology 30e and Symposium 223d.

20 Apology 17a1 – 18c8. This and the following example come from Devin Stauffer, The Unity of Plato’s Gorgias, 11. As in the previous chapters, I will give the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text and the corresponding page of the Cooper, ed. English translation in the text.

21 Apology 28b5 – 30c1 and Gorgias 508c4 – 513d1 and 521b4 – 522c6.
in the *Meno* that he should remain careful lest he offend the wrong people and find himself on the rack.\(^{22}\) Socrates’ declared innocence about rhetoric echoes his confession of plain-speaking at the beginning of the *Apology* as well as in the *Symposium*. The dialogue thus pits Socrates and another version of the adversaries that will lead to his trial and execution: fluent and educated would-be politicos against the simple Socrates, a contrast we also observed in the *Theaetetus*.

The connection to the *Apology* also calls attention to the contrast between Socrates’ plain spoken ways and the rhētors of the *Gorgias*. In a political culture where rhetoric filled a crucial function, providing expertise to the sovereign assembly and inhabiting the fraught space between mass and elite,\(^{23}\) Socrates’ lack of rhetoric – a rhetoric in itself, as we will see – appears immediately notable. Socrates’ claim to act as a true *politikos* accentuates this even more, calling attention to rhetoric’s political function and Socrates’ quite different manner of speaking. While Socrates adopts different tones and registers for his different interlocutors,\(^{24}\) he still insists on his difference from the practices of the rhētors, whom he does not even claim to know or recognize.

The oppositional character of the *Gorgias* structures the dialogue in terms of an agon, a formalized conflict, in a way much different from the dialogues of previous chapters. In this adversarial context, much like in the *Apology*, Socrates does not fare so well. While Socrates appears to refute their arguments, neither Gorgias nor Polus nor Callicles seems convinced.\(^{25}\) Socrates must at one point talk to himself when Callicles refuses to answer him,

\(^{22}\) *Gorgias* 486b.

\(^{23}\) On the place of rhetoric, see Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy*, and Josiah Ober, *Political Disent*.  

\(^{24}\) On Socrates’ irony, sarcasm, and playfulness in the *Gorgias*, see Elizabeth Markovits, *The Politics of Sincerity*.  

\(^{25}\) In his useful essay, “Drama and Dialectic in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” Charles Kahn parses the arguments and how Socrates refutes them in detail. I follow his organization in what follows.
after a sequence of dialogue marked by increasing hostility during their discussion of different lives of one who loves the dēmos, the people of Athens, and one who loves philosophy. By the end of the dialogue, when Socrates gives an account of final judgment in the afterlife, he admits that his interlocutors will probably not believe him, thinking the story a mere myth while he regards it as a logos (523a). Socrates seems to admit his failure.

The dialogue’s disputatious atmosphere begins from the start. The conversation opens with Socrates’ having Chaerephon ask Gorgias “what he is” (hostis estin, 447d) – what it means to be a rhetorician and practice the art of rhetoric (449d), and this question immediately contrasts Socrates’ endeavors to theirs while also limning the disadvantages he will face: all three of these men not only know how to speak and argue well, but they also stake their lives on this knowledge. (Callicles tells Socrates that he has ‘turned the world upside down’ when Socrates suggests rhetoric’s useless or at least subservient role.) Socrates suffers not from lack of persuasiveness but from these men’s impenetrable self-confidence – and the degree to which they have staked their lives on their occupations. Even shaming these men does not seem to produce the fruitful affirmation Socrates received from Meno, Apollodorus, or Theaetetus.

Yet despite their immutable positions, Socrates does appear to successfully refute Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles in their attempts to explain the meaning and function of

---

26 Gorgias 486d, 497b, 501d, and 506b.

27 In the Cooper edition, rhetorike and rhetor appear as “oratory” and “orator” but I will substitute “rhetoric” and “rhetorician” instead in order to keep the sound of the Greek as well as the important distinction between teachers of rhetoric such as Gorgias and Polus and practitioners – sometimes also called “rhetors” – such as Callicles. On “rhetor” as a general term, see Harvey Yunis, Taming Democracy, 9. On the differences as well as their roles in democratic Athens, see Josiah Ober, Mass and Elite.

28 Christina Tarnopolsky, “Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants.”
rhetoric.\textsuperscript{29} As Socrates questions him, it becomes clear that Gorgias cannot explain exactly what rhetoric produces; the subsequent conversation structures the opposition between Socrates and Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles. Each interlocutor wishes to claim the greatest power and influence for rhetoric, but none can explain the purposes behind this force.

Gorgias first declares that rhetoric concerns the greatest and best of human affairs (\textit{ta megista tön anthrôpeión pragmatón}, 451d7), but this remains “disputable,” as Socrates responds (\textit{amphisbêtèsimon}, d9).\textsuperscript{30} Gorgias later attempts to clarify by saying that these matters concern the just and unjust (454b), but subsequent questioning soon reveals that rhetoric only produces the appearance of knowledge about these matters, and thus that it cannot claim to produce just human beings at all. While Gorgias asserts that his students will learn just and unjust things from him, this contradicts the concern Gorgias himself expresses that his students might act unjustly (460d). Socrates shows Gorgias that he (Gorgias) does not know what he thinks he knows, but Gorgias does not admit being at a loss or even seem to wish continuing the conversation. No interlocutor in the \textit{Gorgias} confesses perplexity (\textit{aporia}).\textsuperscript{31}

But the contest does not subside – Polus then interrupts to articulate a new set of arguments for rhetoric’s potency. Polus admits that the rhetorician “need not know what is just and honorable and good” (\textit{mé ouchi kai ta kakaia eidenai kai ta kala kai ta agatha}, 461b5-6, 810), but Polus nonetheless attempts to defend rhetoric’s status as a forceful and important

\textsuperscript{29} As Charles Kahn puts it, “The three elenchi of the \textit{Gorgias}, the refutations of Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, constitute Plato’s fullest portrayal of the way in which the dialectical encounter with Socrates turns into a critical examination of the interlocutor’s way of life” (“Drama and Dialectic,” 75). While I agree with this characterization, as I explain in Sections III and IV below, I do not find this description sufficient for everything that occurs in the \textit{Gorgias}.

\textsuperscript{30} This word echoes Socrates’ “disputable dreams” in the \textit{Symposium} (175c3-4), thus indicating some continuity within Socrates’ style of questioning, even if the \textit{Gorgias} and \textit{Symposium} offer vastly different situations and interlocutors.

\textsuperscript{31} Only Socrates uses \textit{aporia} and its variants in the dialogue, with one exception, when Polus accuses Socrates of wrongly thinking Socrates has put Gorgias at a loss: \textit{Gorgias} 462b2.
craft (technē). Yet Polus cannot defend the moral status of the pursuit of political power for which he finds rhetoric a necessary tool. When Socrates challenges Polus to advance an argument for rhetoric that presents it as more than a mere image of politics – i.e. as more than politics poorly practice in the form of flattery (kolakeian, 463b1) not improvement – Polus cannot do so (466c): he insists that rhetoricians, like tyrants, can execute whomever they wish, confiscating property and banishing those they disfavor. Polus asserts great power for rhetoric but he cannot explain how this actually constitutes power if they lack knowledge and purpose in its use (480b).

At this point, Callicles roars into the dialogue. His behavior and argument seem to display the starkest contrast with Socrates, culminating in their antithetical arts of politics: Callicles enlists rhetoric in his pursuit of a tyrant’s life of constant pleasure facilitated by the insatiable pursuit of power (491e) whereas Socrates suggests himself as one of few true practitioners of politics because of his concern to improve his fellow citizens (521d-e).

Moreover, Callicles illustrates a character that directly opposes Socrates’. Callicles loves the dēmos whereas Socrates loves philosophy, Socrates declares (481d). While philosophy may offer a “delightful thing” (charien, 484c6, a telling expression for a self-proclaimed hedonist), Callicles views it as childish and corrupting for human beings (diaphtora tòn anthrōpòn, 484c6-8) if pursued into adulthood. Philosophy then makes one a laughingstock (katagelastoi, 484e3). Yet Socrates declares that “there can be no finer subject for discussion [pantôn de kallistē estin hē skepsis, 487c7-8] than the question what a man should be like and what

---

32 Polus accuses Socrates of “great rudeness” (pollē agnikia, 461c4), using the same language as Socrates in the Theaetetus when he expressed fear of being rude only for Theaetetus and Theorodus to assure him otherwise and join the conversation on friendly terms.

33 Callicles uses this word – katagelastos – three times in quick succession, emphasizing his opinion about the absolute ridiculousness of philosophy: 484c3, 485a7, and 485c1-2. His comparison of philosophy to a childish things echoes Socrates’ comments while impersonating Protagoras in the Theaetetus.
occupation he should engage in and how far he should pursue it, both in earlier and later life” – the activity of philosophy (488a). 34

In the ensuing conversation, rhetoric takes second place to the purposes rhetoric might serve. For Callicles, rhetoric can help one lead a hedonistic life; for Socrates, the concern with justice must trump all others. This leads to opposing ways of life: on the one hand, the hedonist devoted to pleasure and thus power for the sake of attaining pleasure; and on the other, the philosopher, who seeks to do the good. In an argument that recalls Thrasymachus’s in the first book of the Republic, Callicles argues that the better – understood as the stronger and superior – must rule and pursue their good by nature. This takes Polus’s argument one step farther. Whereas Polus could not explain why rhetoric would seek great power, Callicles makes power an end for pleasure and denies any conventions (ta nomima, 488d9) that would contravene it. In contrast, Socrates describes the true statesman, one who aims for the good in all matters and to improve his fellow citizens. Even venerated leaders of Athens – Pericles, Cimon, Miltiades, and Themistocles – do not meet this standard, but Socrates still declares it just (515d). “So it looks as though our earlier statements were true,” Socrates says, “that we don’t know any man who has proved to be good at politics” (boti oudeis bimeis ismen andra agathon gegoveta ta politika en teide tei polei, 517a, 860). Callicles, however, will not hear it.

This argument eventually leads to Socrates’ declaring himself as one of few Athenians who practice the true political craft, an assertion that, as we have seen, has

---

34 Here I use the translation by Chris Emyl-Jones and Walter Hamilton: Hamilton and Emyl-Jones, Plato: Gorgias, 72-73.
provoked many subsequent condemnations of his philosophic politics. The language of the passage is worth quoting:

Socrates: But I know this well: that if I do come into court involved in one of those perils which you mention, the man who brings me in will be a wicked man – for no good man would bring in a man who is not a wrongdoer – and it wouldn’t be at all strange [atopon, 521d3] if I were to be put to death. Would you like me to tell you my reason for expecting this?

Callicles: Yes, I would.

Socrates: I believe that I’m one of a few Athenians – so as not to say I’m the only one, but the only one among our contemporaries – to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics [epicheirein téi bós alethóis politikéi technéi kai pratttein ta politika monon ton nun, d6-8]. This is because the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what’s best. They don’t aim at what’s most pleasant. And because I’m not willing to do those clever things you recommend, I won’t know what to say in court. (521d-e, 864)

“Perhaps so” (panu ge, 521d5), Callicles responds. Socrates has practically reduced him to monosyllables already (505e, 850). This exchange follows Socrates’ criticisms of previous Athenian politicians – “on this reasoning Pericles wasn’t good at politics” (ouk ar’ agathos ta politika Periklês én ek toutou tou logou, 516d2-3) Socrates tells Callicles at one point – and his contrast between politicians who serve the people’s appetites and his own political craft that attempts to make the people better. Thus Socrates views himself as fated for death, because the people will judge him “the way a doctor would be judged by a jury of children if a pastry chef were to bring accusations against him (521c): no child would fail to condemn the abstemious, sweets-denying doctor. This political craft could easily lead to accusations of confusing younger people and abusing older ones (522b), Socrates adds, presaging the Apology. Socrates would prove guilty as charged.

35 Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, returns to this language repeatedly. Rancière also cites this passage in a footnote as part of the quotation that forms one of the epigraphs for this chapter: Rancière, *Disagreement*, 141.
The announcement of the practice of the true political craft, of Socrates as *politikos*, seems to culminate the contrast between philosophy and politics in the *Gorgias*. Socrates’ proclamation also gives a frame with which to review the previous arguments about Socrates’ practice of philosophy, casting them in much different light. The stingray, the master of erotics, and even the midwife can fit this “adversative” understanding of Socrates’ activity – all apparently combine to oppose the dominant paradigm of satisfaction that governs Athenian political life according to Socrates. Socrates’ practice of philosophy thus gives birth to a philosophic politics, one that, to paraphrase Wolin, represents itself as superior to all other forms of political life – most notably Athenian statesman such as Pericles and Themistocles.

In casting himself as the true *politikos*, Socrates contests a crucial understanding in democratic Athens – that political life consisted most in public collective work in the Assembly or other public institutions. Moreover, this political work entailed the pursuit of glory and recognition in public. As Hannah Arendt puts it, perhaps a bit hyperbolically:

*The polis* – if we trust the famous words of Pericles in the Funeral Oration – gives a guaranty that those who forced every sea and land to become the scene of their daring will not remain without witness and will need neither Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn words to praise them; without assistance from others, those who acted will be able to establish together the everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds, to inspire admiration in the present and in the future ages. As a “quiet Athenian,” Socrates actively excluded himself from this agonistic public realm and from the pursuit of memorable glory that it embodied. While Callicles pursues the fine reputation, or *doxa*, that comes from political success, Socrates appears unconcerned with his reputation – until it lands him in court in the *Apology*. And yet by claiming the title of *politikos*

---


Socrates disturbs the accepted conventions of what it means to be political and win political glory.

Not only would Socrates’ epithet of _politikos_ have sounded strange to his interlocutors’ ears, but the implications of his being such would entail a radical revision of Athenian political life. As we have seen in previous chapters, Socrates challenges the “erotics of democracy” and reinvents the _sunousia_. But the claim of himself as _politikos_ goes one step farther, as Christopher Rocco puts it:

> Implicit in Socrates’ transfer of political authority to himself and dialectical examination is the claim that if the Athenians were to follow this Socratic practice in their political deliberations, the city would be healthy rather than bloated. . . . As partners in a dialogue share a mutual commitment to the argument (_logos_), so too would deliberating citizens be united by a commitment to the good of the city.\(^{38}\)

In other words, Socrates implies a political sea change – a world turned upside-down, as Callicles puts it. This puts him not merely at odds with regnant democratic traditions, but diametrically opposed to them.

> Yet as the _Gorgias_ ends with Socrates’ recounting “a very fine account” (_kalou logou_, 523a) about the need for goodness in life when one faces final judgment, his vaunted political art also appears to fail in its quest to instill rule by philosophy (if we can assume this as Socrates’ question).\(^{39}\) Socrates admits the unlikelihood of this story meaning much, saying that Callicles will think it merely a myth (_muthon_, 523a2), but Socrates reiterates his belief in its power. The story depicts naked souls inspected in the afterlife, their deeds and misdeeds judged, and their punishments allotted. Souls out of order receive disciplining that will

---

\(^{38}\) Rocco, _Tragedy and Enlightenment_, 84. Rocco does not see this as the end of the _Gorgias_ and, much as I do in the follow section, suggests that the _Gorgias_ “leaves us with an ambivalent message” (85) than this passage seems to indicate.

\(^{39}\) As Catherine Zuckert notes: Zuckert, _Plato’s Philosophers_, 560.
rehabilitate them; those souls that shine with justice ascend to heaven. After recounting the story, Socrates again addresses Callicles directly:

For my part, Callicles, I’m convinced by these accounts \([\text{hypo te toutôn tôn logôn pebeismai}, 526d4-5]\), and I think about how I’ll reveal to the judge a soul that’s as healthy as it can be. So I disregard the things held in honor by the majority of the people, and by practicing truth \([\text{tên alithieian askôn}, d7-8]\) I really try, to the best of my ability, to be and to live as a very good man, and when I die, to die like that. And I call on all other people as well, as far as I can — and you especially I call on in response to your call — to this way of life, this contest, that I hold to be worth all the other contests in this life \([\text{epi touton ton bion kai ton agôna touton, hon egó phêmi anti pantôn tôn enthade agonôn einaí, c3-4}]. (526d-e, 868)\)

Socrates may face a trial in this life, but he insists that Callicles will meet these judges later — and that Callicles will have no defense. Callicles’ mouth will hang open and he will feel dizzy, Socrates says (527a), recalling the description in the Theaetetus of the practical man who sees the inadequacies of his life. Callicles may view this myth as “an old wife’s tale” and contemn it \([\text{bôsper graos kai kata phroneis autón, 527a5-6}],\) but neither Gorgias nor Polus nor Callicles, Socrates asserts, can prove “there’s any other life one should live than the one which will clearly turn out to be advantageous in that world too” \([\text{bôsper kai ekeise phainetai sumperón, 527b2}].\) One must guard most against doing injustice, Socrates continues, and not merely to seem just but to be just both in private and public life \([\text{kai idiai kai démosiai, b6}]\) — one ought to use “rhetoric and every other activity” \([\text{kai têî rhêtorikes… kai têî allei passêî, 527c3-4}].\) on behalf of this cause.

Socrates’ peroration strikes an even more personal note, seeming to emphasize the utter divergence between Socrates and Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles — and thus the complete diremption between philosophy and politics. “Listen to me,” Socrates tells his interlocutors, “and follow me to where I am, and when you’ve come here you’ll be happy both during life and at its end, as the account indicates” \([\text{bôs bo logos sêmainei, 527c6, 869}].\) They may win only the spite of others, but nothing terrible will befall one who shows himself “admirable and
good” (*kalos kagoghos*, d2), one who “practices excellence” (*askon areten*, d2). As Socrates finishes the dialogue, he exhorts his listeners:

And then, after we’ve practiced it together, then at last, if we think we should, we’ll turn to politics, or then we’ll deliberate about whatever subject we please, when we’re better at deliberating than we are now. For it’s a shameful thing for us, being in the condition we appear to be in at present – when we never think the same about the same subjects, the most important ones at that – to sound off as though we’re somebodies. That’s how far behind in education we’ve fallen. So let’s use the account that has now been disclosed to us as our guide, one that indicates to us that this way of life is the best, to practice justice and the rest of excellence both in life and in death. Let us follow, then, and call on others to do so, too, and let’s not follow the one that you believe in and call on me to follow. For that one is worthless, Callicles. (527d2 – e7, 869)

These final words would seem to further emphasize the differences between Socrates and his interlocutors: the conventional practice of politics, if it comes at all, must follow the practice of excellence. Socrates’ practice of philosophy must become the true art of politics in Athens. Deliberation and education must precede political activity – practicing justice and the rest of excellence (e4). Anything else, according to the account (e1), will prove worthless (*oudenos axios*, e6-7).

Socrates’ closing speech seems to make the conflict of the *Gorgias* into a kind of morality play, promising glory in the end to the life lived as Socrates declares one must. But while Socrates has distinguished himself and his practice of philosophy from these rhetoricians and their progeny, he has left them unpersuaded; Callicles may remain “a historical enigma,” and we cannot tell with any certainty whether he undergoes any conversion, but Socrates’ repetition of Callicles’ earlier condemnation of philosophy in his own final words – Socrates says anything but a life filled by the practice of justice is worthless (527e) – echoes in a different key: Socrates presents himself as exemplar of a pure
life of justice and good works; Callicles has depicted himself as antithetical to this.\textsuperscript{40} Callicles’ conversion to philosophy seems highly unlikely, and thus Socrates appears doomed to fail.

By its end, then, the \textit{Gorgias} appears to present the lamentable spectacle of philosophy’s (and also Socrates’) going under: Socrates cannot convince these influential advocates, he cannot unseat their commitment to an unmoored and insidious practice of rhetoric, and the dialogue ends with a story he tells more to himself than to anyone else. Thus, as George Klosko has suggested it, the \textit{Gorgias} depicts “the tragedy of philosophy”\textsuperscript{41} – philosophy’s highest aspirations appear in the true political art, to make one’s fellow citizens good, but this task proves impossible even in the semi-private conversation of which the \textit{Gorgias} consists. We may condemn Socrates’ philosophical politics (and their influence on the history of political philosophy), but the \textit{Gorgias} seems to demonstrate their impotence; Socrates may aspire to a philosophic tyranny, but he cannot do so with any hope of attaining it.

\textbf{III.}

Yet persuasive as it appears, the reading I have just advanced makes the \textit{Gorgias}’s many provocative voices too monotonous and its dark corners – where Callicles says philosophers cower (485e) – too tidy. This does not mean that we should discard the foregoing: the \textit{Gorgias} does present a “tragedy of philosophy,” and its many connections to the \textit{Apology} as well as the darker sides of other dialogues only serve to heighten the bleakness within which the \textit{Gorgias} concludes. But I also want to argue that the \textit{Gorgias} suggests both in its details

\textsuperscript{40} Ann Michelini notes this echo and “historical enigma” comes from her description: Michelini, “Pollē Agroikia: Rudeness and Irony in Plato’s \textit{Gorgias},” 59.

\textsuperscript{41} Here is Klosko: “The \textit{Gorgias} could be called the tragedy of philosophy. . . . Socrates is unable to convince Callicles of anything. Having gone to enormous pains to outline the procedures for discussion and construct dialectical relationship after dialectical relationship, he is forced to see the discussion collapse, and has to finish it alone” (Klosko, “The Insufficiency of Reason in Plato’s \textit{Gorgias},” 593).
and in its dialogic architecture that the gap between Socrates and his interlocutors may not extend as far as it appears. Such a reading entails not assimilating Callicles’ arguments to Socrates’ or philosophy to rhetoric, but rather seeing some commonalities emerge between these positions. Perhaps most important for my argument thus far, the *Gorgias* gives good reason to view the challenges of Socrates and Callicles as both taking place within a political culture of democratic hegemony, and thus not as oppositional to politics but as always already understood in political – and democratic – terms; to extrapolate an antithesis between philosophy and politics from Socrates and Callicles misses the conditions of such a dialogue’s possibility: democratic Athens.42

While in one register the *Gorgias* depicts the irreconcilable differences between philosophy and politics, or, in Latour’s words, between Reason and Force, in another register I want to suggest that we can discern all the participants in the *Gorgias* as situated in very similar terms. Socrates, Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles all work from within the institutions and language of democratic Athens; all wish to engage democracy for its (and perhaps also their own) benefit; and all admit – or at least show – their own powerlessness vis-à-vis an Athenian democratic hegemony. The situation requires them to utilize language, and the dialogue dramatizes the working through of one particularly troublesome facet of Athenian democracy, the precarious balancing act played by rhētors and for any users of speech, aware that their arguments can appear “vital and threatening,” both for the participants and, perhaps more importantly, for the polis around them.43 The dialogue’s own fragility testifies to the fragility of its place and context.

42 I do not mean to go so far to suggest, along with Roslyn Weiss, that the *Gorgias* “opens up the possibility of a ‘fraternal’ relationship between rhetoric and philosophy” (Weiss, “Oh Brother! The Fraternity of Rhetoric and Philosophy in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” 205). Rather, I deem maintaining these tensions important.

43 The language comes from James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, 96.
Reviewing the dialogue between Socrates and Gorgias helps illuminate their similar positions and traits. Gorgias, the dialogue’s namesake and one of Socrates’ most famous collocutors, and Socrates may appear distant from one another, but their antithetical appearances do not exhaust comparisons. At the most basic level, Socrates and Gorgias both deal with argument and refutation. Socrates and Gorgias recognize this commonality as they investigate rhetoric together. They begin by agreeing on particular terms that will facilitate their inquiry (454e) and then in one telling passage, they recognize that they share a way of life. They have both explored many discussions, Socrates says, and they both know the difficulty of concluding sessions of discussion: the eagerness to win, irritation, and other causes can detail a developing conversation. Socrates suggests that he and Gorgias ought not have this problem:

For my part, I’d be pleased to continue questioning you if you’re the same kind of man I am, otherwise I would drop it. And what kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue; one who, however, wouldn’t be any less pleased to be refuted than to refute. . . . So if you say you’re this kind of man, too, let’s continue the discussion; but if you think we should drop it, let’s be done with it and break it off.  (458a-b, 802)

Gorgias responses: “Oh yes, Socrates, I say that I myself, too, am the sort of person you describe” (458b, 803). Gorgias and Socrates, more than anyone else in the dialogue, share a common commitment to inquiry, a trait that unites them at the most basic level.

In more specific ways, both Socrates and Gorgias proclaim a concern with justice and, if not teaching justice, at least eliciting just action from those around them; they both wish, in other words, to improve collective life. Gorgias declares rhetoric’s concern “the greatest of human concerns . . . and the best” (ta megistón tôn anthropoipen pragmatón . . . kai arista, 451d7), language that Socrates echoes at the end of the Gorgias when he declares the

---

44 Protagoras and Parmenides probably count as the other most famous conversants with Socrates, as well as, perhaps Aspasia in the Menexenus.
way of life suggested by the myth as the best (*ho tropos aristas tou bios, 527e3*). Gorgias also calls rhetoric “the source of freedom for humankind itself” (*aition hama men eleutherias autois tois anthrōpois, 452d5-6*) whereas Socrates contrasts his concerns with pursuing excellence to Callicles’ enslavement to appetite (493c). Similarly, Gorgias views rhetoric’s persuasion as concerned with matters just and unjust (*peri touton ba esti dikaia te kai adika, 454b*) in a way that also anticipates Socrates’ concern for “practicing justice and the rest of excellence (527e4, Greek above). In other words, Socrates and Gorgias view their work in terms of contest and conflict on behalf of these values. Gorgias compares the use of rhetoric to the skills of competition, saying: “it’s necessary to use rhetoric as with any other competitive skill” (*dei mentoi . . . hēi rhetorike chresthai hois per tei alli passi agōniai, 456c7-8; translation modified*). Socrates calls life a “contest” (*ton agonon, 526e4*) in which one must persevere despite “demeaning blow[s]” (*atimon tantēn plēgen, 527d1*). Socrates and Gorgias thus both conceive of their occupations, and the rest of their lives, as helping to improve their fellow citizens, a resemblance similar to what we saw between Socrates and “Protagoras” in the *Theaetetus*.

The concern for justice in those around them might seem insignificant if not for another shared trait – Socrates and Gorgias also attract young men, the ambitious and talented youth of Athens. Socrates reminds us of this when he describes Callicles’ love for the people of Athens – a love that presumably brought him to Gorgias in order to learn how to rule – and Socrates’ love for Alcibiades. These attractions, as mention of Alcibiades must remind us, prove troublesome. While Callicles and Gorgias do not hint at any erotic relation (or frustration), we might see Gorgias’s interventions late in the dialogue as coming out of a solicitousness for his student. For example, when Callicles becomes intransigent and refuses
to answer what he calls Socrates’ “nonsense,” saying that he does not know what Socrates means, Gorgias interrupts, provoking a telling exchange:

Gorgias: Don’t do that, Callicles! Answer him for our benefit, so that the discussion may carry through [médamós, ὁ Καλλικλέας, ἀλ’ ἀποκρίνοντας ἐκ ἑμῶν βενηκά, βίνα περανθοῦς ὅιο λόγοι, 497b4-5].

Callicles: But Socrates is always like this, Gorgias. He keeps questioning people on matters that are trivial, hardly worthwhile, and refutes them [ἀλ’ αἰ τοιούτωι εστίν Σοκράτης, ὁ Γοργίας. σιμκρα καὶ ὀλιγοὶ αξία ἀνερῶται καὶ ἐξελεγχαί, b6-7].

G: What difference does that make to you? It’s none of your business to appraise them, Callicles. You promise Socrates that he could try to refute you in any way he liked.

C: [To Socrates] Go ahead, then, and ask these trivial, petty questions, since that’s what pleases Gorgias. (497b4-c1, 840-1)

Socrates deems Callicles a “happy man” as they continue. Perhaps we can imagine Socrates sharing a clandestine smile with Gorgias? But this détente does not last long, because soon Callicles threatens to derail the conversation again and Gorgias must interject to prevent Socrates from leaving (506b). Socrates and Callicles continue, but Callicles hardly contributes. He appears as lost as Alcibiades at the end of the Symposium.

Another similarity unites Gorgias and Socrates: while having ardent students, they do not claim to teach in any conventional sense. Gorgias suggests that rhetoric “produces persuasion” (πειθοῦς δημιουργὸς εστίν ἐκεῖ ρήτορική, 453a2), but it produces persuasion that results in conviction, not knowledge (ἐκ ἕκτο πιστευέται 454e8-9). The rhêtor does not teach but persuades (455a): “the rhêtores are the ones who give advice and whose views on these matters prevail” (ὅιο ρήτορες εἰσίν ὅιο συμβουλουμένες καὶ ὅιο νικόντες τὰς γνώμας περὶ τούτων, 456a2-3). Like a physical trainer, Gorgias prepares others for these things, stepping in when a doctor needs to convince a patient about a certain procedure or when craftsmen wish to build dockyards and the walls of Athens.
One might argue that this praise of persuasion unattached to knowledge does not sound like Socrates. But the power of rhetoric poses a problem akin to one Socrates will later face with the accusations against him in the *Apology* – Gorgias’s responsibility for those who practice the craft he teaches. Gorgias claims that one should not blame the teacher but rather the misuser (*ton own ouk orthos chrömenon misein dikaion kai ekballein kai apokteinunai all ou ton didaxanta*, 457c1-3), but how could a rētor act unjustly if he has knowledge of what is just and unjust? Socrates asks (460a). Gorgias has no answer and Socrates will simply claim ignorance. Neither Socrates nor Gorgias can promise knowledge and thus they cannot ensure benefits will follow from associating with them. As we saw in the *Meno*, Gorgias does not presume to say what excellence is and neither does Socrates in the *Symposium*, where we saw Socrates’ claims to wisdom as open-ended – as a longing toward wisdom. Even when their conversation comes to naught, Socrates claims Theaetetus has changed for the better. Both Gorgias and Socrates, in other words, “educate” without education: associating with others, challenging then, but resisting the form (and the responsibility) of anything else. And this comes with dangers.45

Just as one could say that the *Symposium* showed the collapse of Socrates’ “education” with the character of Alcibiades, one could say that the *Gorgias* demonstrates the failure of a teacher like Gorgias to “educate” Alcibiades’ equivalent, Callicles. Whereas Gorgias will not pursue the potential ill effects of rhetoric in his conversation with Socrates, Polus and Callicles exemplify these: Polus represents the consummate word-monger and sophisticated

45 I perhaps risk exaggerating the similarity, since Gorgias more explicitly claims to benefit his students and Socrates abjures the language of student entirely. Gorgias’s charging a fee compounds this. But both face the same issue of responsibility for the effects of association, whether paid or unpaid, acknowledged or denied.
teacher of nonsense;\textsuperscript{46} Callicles shows the unmooring of rhetorical skill from any moral
mainland – a kind of will to power unshadowed by any memory of just or unjust action.\textsuperscript{47}
Gorgias’s late interjections in the dialogue, trying to compel Socrates to finish the discussion
(506b), could then appear as attempts to keep Callicles involved so that Socrates could
persuade him as well. Gorgias has witnessed the horrific consequences of his craft, and he
hopes that Socrates might help him to rehabilitate its misanthropic creations.\textsuperscript{48}

***

Just as Socrates and Gorgias share a concern for persuasion and the media of politics in
Athens – namely language and rhetoric – so too do Polus and Socrates share a commitment
to these things. At first Polus and Socrates seem utterly at odds: When Polus interrupts
Socrates’ and Gorgias’s conversation, Polus advances bold claims that would seem to pique
Socrates’ characteristic humility. Of course the rhētor knows what is just, admirable, and
good, Polus asserts: “who do you think would deny that he himself knows what just and
would teach others? To lead your arguments to such an outcome is a sign of great rudeness”
[epei ita oiei aparneōesthai mé onchi kai auton epitasthai ta dikaiā kai allous didaxein; all’ eis ta toiauta
agein pollē agroikia estin tous logous, 461c2-4]. Socrates responds charitably to Polus – “most
admirable Polus” (ο kalliste Pōle, c5) he begins – and their subsequent conversation reveals
some commonalities between them. As in the case of Gorgias and Socrates, Polus and
Socrates agree to terms of discussion that will follow (461e). At the most obvious level, then,
we see Polus and Socrates share a concern for the conditions that make their conversation

\textsuperscript{46} Hence Socrates comments to Phaedrus in the \textit{Phaedrus}: “And what shall we say of the whole gallery of terms
Polus set up – speaking with Reduplication, Speaking in Maxims, Speaking in Images . . .” (267b, 544).

\textsuperscript{47} See Dodds, \textit{Gorgias}, 387 – 391, for a compelling comparison of Callicles and Nietzsche.

\textsuperscript{48} J. Peter Euben makes suggestions along these lines in “Reading Democracy.”
possible – they can agree who will ask (Polus) and who will answer (Socrates) and this common ground allows for the dialogue to proceed.

The shared conversation, however, does not prevent disagreement. Polus asks Socrates what he thinks rhetoric is, and Socrates compares rhetoric to flattery (463c) and calls it a knack akin to pastry baking (465e). As a result, Socrates does not see rhētors as worthy of any regard, since they merely pander to the sweet-toothed masses. Polus cannot believe this and, failing to understand well enough to continue questioning Socrates, Polus allows Socrates to question him instead. Yet for as much as Socrates and Polus differ in their esteem for rhetoric, they implicitly demonstrate in this first set of exchanges, a willingness to proceed in discussion. We might say Polus and Socrates both like to talk.

In the second part of their conversation, Polus and Socrates disagree on the usefulness of rhetoric’s power – what Polus thinks should win it high regard – when it appears to lack any knowledge of just and unjust things. Polus again cannot believe Socrates would not welcome being in the position “to do what [he] might see fit in the city rather than not” (468e6-7). But Socrates insists that doing injustice would only make the doer miserable, so that great power without knowledge of how to rightly use it would lead to a pitiable, not an enviable (as Polus would have it) state (469a):

Socrates: Doing what’s unjust is actually the worst thing there is [boutrōi, hos megistōn tōn kakōn tugebain ei on to adikein, 469b8-9].

Polus: Really? Is that the worst? Isn’t suffering what’s unjust still worse?

S: No, not in the least.

P: So you’d rather want to suffer what’s unjust than do it.

S: For my part, I wouldn’t want either, but if it had to be one or the other, I would choose suffering over doing what’s unjust.

P: You wouldn’t welcome being a tyrant, then?
S: No, if by being a tyrant you mean what I do. (469b8 – c4, 813)

The differences between Polus and Socrates seem vast: Polus defends power for its own sake, unbridled by any limiting knowledge; Socrates, for his part, would rather suffer than do the wrong – if he knew the wrong itself. But Socrates’ final remark also illuminates a space of agreement. As the conversation continues, we can see that Polus and Socrates indeed want the same thing – to do the good and benefit from it. Polus imagines that being a tyrant would achieve this; Socrates, however, understands the tyrant as by definition the farthest from such a state. The disagreement lies, partly at least, in the meaning of words.

This commonality does not mean that Polus and Socrates agree. One could argue that their differences exceed those between Socrates and each of the other interlocutors. Twice Polus calls Socrates’ arguments absurd and strange (atopa: 473a1 and 480e1), indicating how bizarre Socrates appears to him. Polus resists any suggestions that might undermine his adopted positions; while he agrees to converse, Polus does not practice the openness to the argument that would seem necessary. Socrates in fact comments that Polus has “neglected the practice of discussion” (tou de dialegesthai êmelêkenai, 471d4) and that Polus tries to refute Socrates in the manner of a rhêtor, the way people in the law courts might do (rhetorikês gar me epicheireis elegchein, hôsper boi en tois dikastêriois hêgonmenoi elegchein, e2-4).

Ultimately Polus proves too intransigent for the commitment to discussion that he and Socrates profess to share.

***

Despite appearing to create the starkest contrast of the Gorgias, Socrates and Callicles both understand themselves in terms of democratic Athens. Their conversation presents a diptych of two thoroughly opposed ways of life, one set in relief by the two long speeches, first by
Callicles and then by Socrates, with which this section of the dialogue begins. Callicles defends a standard of justice based on nature according to which superior men can dominate and exploit their inferiors, commits himself to a pursuit of practical power and rejects philosophy, and asserts a conception of excellence (aretē) defined by manliness and courage where the “quiet virtues” receive only scorn. On the basis of the Gorgias alone, Socrates would seem to fit none of these positions.

Moreover, Socrates rises to Callicles’ challenge in many ways. His arguments depart from the friendly banter with Gorgias or even the slightly condescending patience he adopted for Polus. While Callicles accuses Socrates of spouting nonsense (phluaria) and adopting a pretense (eironenei, 489e1), Socrates generates extraordinary images such as the human sieve and the leaking jar (493a – 494a) that culminate in his elaborate myth of final judgment. Socrates heightens his own rhetoric in a way that intensifies the contrasts between himself and Callicles.

And yet, Callicles and Socrates also do not differ as greatly as they appear. Each opposes an understanding of Athenian democracy that rests in part on caricature, but they also seek to influence a democracy they view as having run amok. For Callicles, the Athenian democracy fails to privilege the greatness that he embodies by preferring the weak and the many (483b, 827). For Socrates, the Athenian democracy risks doing injustice by not moderating its own demands. Both Callicles and Socrates’ arguments find echoes in

49 Callicles’ speech: 482c4 – 486d1 (the longest in the dialogue); Socrates’ speech: 486e5 – 488b6 (the second longest). As Charles Kahn comments on Callicles and Socrates: “The focus of the entire dialogue [between Socrates and Callicles] is on . . . the choice between a Calliclean pursuit of power and success and the Socratic devotion to philosophy as soul-tendance, the pursuit of moral and intellectual excellence” (Kahn, “Drama and Dialectic,” 98).

50 This description comes from Charles Kahn, “Drama and Dialectic,” 97 – 8.

51 On Socrates’ irony, sarcasm, and playfulness in the Gorgias, see Elizabeth Markovits, The Politics of Sincerity.
historical Athens: Callicles articulates a familiar aristocratic refrain, one heard in the speeches of Alcibiades as recounted by Thucydides. Socrates’ arguments even find place in critiques of Athenian pleonexia or greed that exhibited itself in imperial ambitions. While Callicles and Socrates often seem to exaggerate democracy’s fallenness in order to distinguish their activities by contrast, they also see themselves as working from within democracy through their criticisms.

While both Socrates and Callicles oppose their occupations to the status quo of Athenian democracy, both also depend upon democratic institutions in order to pursue their ends. We see this, for instance, in their use of parrēsia. In the Gorgias, Socrates repeatedly comments on Callicles’ parrēsia, even noting this as a much-needed virtue in Socrates’ favored form of conversation: “I realize that person who is going to put a soul to an adequate test to see whether it lives rightly or not must have three qualities, all of which you have: knowledge, good will, and frankness” (epistēmēn te kai eunoian kai parrēsian, 487a3). Socrates later emphasizes the importance of frankness (parrēsia) in particular, when he contrasts Gorgias and Polus’s lack of frankness although they appear wise and fond of Socrates (487b1) whereas Callicles “can speak frankly without being ashamed” (parrēsiasēthai kai mé aischunesthai, 487d5). Callicles seems to affirm this assessment when he responds directly to Socrates’ challenge about a moderate soul, declaring that “the man

52 See Ryan K. Balot, Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens, 1 – 21.

53 On the contrasts and similarities between Callicles and Socrates, Josiah Ober’s work on Plato’s Gorgias has influenced my approach: Ober, Political Dissent, 190 – 213.

54 Besides the Laws, parrēsia and its variants appear by far the most frequently in the Gorgias of all Plato’s dialogues. S. Sara Monoson notes that “apart from some short passages in the Laws, nowhere else in the dialogues does Plato directly address the institutions and achievements of his native city” (Monoson, Plato’s Democratic Entanglements, 161). As Arlene Saxonhouse has noted, Socrates exemplifies Athenian parrēsia in many dialogues: Saxonhouse, Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens, 85 – 128.

55 Socrates reiterates his characterization of Callicles’ speech as parrēsia later in the dialogue at 521a6. Socrates had, in fact, limited Polus’s parrēsia earlier, perhaps because of Polus’s aggressiveness: 461e.
who'll live correctly ought to allow his own appetites to get as large as possible and not restrain them” – a striking formulation that Callicles declares that he speaks “with all frankness” (*parrhēsiazomenos*, 491e7). Both Socrates and Callicles require the democratic conditions of free and frank speech, *parrhēsia*, in order to prosecute their arguments.56

Another connection among Socrates and Callicles that also includes Gorgias in the *Gorgias* appears around the question of associations. As we saw in the *Symposium* and in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates explained his associations with others in terms of the *sunousia*, continuing in this way the oral and conversational element of traditional Athenian education. Yet while using the *sunousia*, Socrates also changes it, reworks its predominantly patriarchal and traditional basis by placing questioning as a mode of inquiry at its center. This language surfaces in two crucial instances in the *Gorgias*, one regarding Gorgias and the other Callicles. In the first, Socrates has just shown Gorgias the contradiction of asserting that rhetoric would never act unjustly since it always makes its speeches about justice when Gorgias also admits rhetoric could serve unjust ends. Socrates tells Gorgias:

> By the Dog, Gorgias, it'll take more than a short session [ουκ ολιγής *sunousias*] to go through an adequate examination of how these matters stand! (461b, 805)

Polus interrupts before Gorgias can answer, but the reference illuminates a connection to Socrates’ previous encounters; this conversation with Gorgias counts as a *sunousia*.57 This also raises the same question raised in the previous three chapters of the present work: what do people gain from associating with Socrates? Gorgias cannot answer, although Polus’s and

---

56 This provokes a paradox because if Athens prided itself on *parrhēsia* and Socrates embodied *parrhēsia*, it would appear contradictory that Socrates’ frankness would provoke his trial, conviction, and execution. I.F. Stone admits this, but argues that Socrates refused to make a “free speech defense” because he wished to die. See Stone, “How Socrates Might Easily Have Won Acquittal” and “What Socrates Should Have Said,” in *The Trial of Socrates*, 197-214.

57 A little less pointedly, Socrates had also referred to the *sunousia* when talking about the difficulty of discussions: 457d1. In addition to the two instances I discuss in the text, these form the only three instances of *sunousia* and its variants in the text.
Callicles’ interruptions may serve as dramatizing responses to this question: they have associated with Gorgias, and we see the results.

The underlying connection among Socrates, Gorgias, and Callicles around the *sunousia* appears even more strikingly in an exchange with Callicles. Whereas Socrates described his conversation with Gorgias in terms of a *sunousia*, now Socrates asks Callicles to defend Callicles’ own *sunousia*:

Tell me, Callicles, what will you say if somebody asks you these scrutinizing questions [*eun tis te tauta exetazei, o Kallikleis, ti ereis;* 515a1]? Who will you say you’ve made a better person through your association with him [*tei sunousiai tei sei, b2-3*]? Do you shrink back from answering – if there even is anything you produced while still in private practice before attempting a public career [*eiper estin ti ergon son eti idioteuontos, prin demosiein epikeirein;* b3-4]? (515a7 – b4, 858)

To describe his “scrutinizing questions,” Socrates uses the verb *exetazein* from the same root as the word for examination (*exetasis*) that appears at the end of the *Theaetetus* as well as in the *Apology*; these questions, moreover, focus on Callicles’ own *sunousia*. Socrates implies that he (Socrates) has improved others through association (as Socrates claimed in the *Theaetetus*), but has Callicles? Now that Callicles eagerly anticipates his own political career, has he done anything in private (*idioteuontos*) to improve others first? Callicles will not hear this. “You love to win,” he tells Socrates (*philonikos ei*, 515b5). But Socrates has already contrasted Callicles’ *sunousia* to his own: Socrates pursues associations in private (*idioteuontos*, 515b3) whereas Callicles seeks public activities (*demosiein epikeirein*, b4); Socrates attempts to make those with whom he associates better, whereas Callicles refuses to address this as a possibility it. Yet both associate with others, and these associations have consequences.

---

58 Socrates’ word *epikeirein* also anticipates his own claim to practice the political art, where he uses the same word: 521d.
IV.

As we have seen, in terms of their common commitments to criticizing the demos and working through the institutions and practices of democracy in terms of parrhēsia and the sunousia, Socrates’ practice of philosophy and Gorgias’s, Polus’s, and Callicles practice of rhetoric do not appear as different as they did at first blush. While these commonalities appear alongside abiding differences about the nature of justice and power, the conditions of human flourishing, and the usefulness of philosophy, the opposition between Socrates and his interlocutors do not exhaust comparisons. Indeed, the very possibility of their conversation presupposes some level of agreement, some minimal “ethics of talk” that we must place beside the divisive agon that first captures our attention when approaching the dialogue.59

Moreover, the commonalities marked thus far, in particular the shared practice of parrhēsia and the sunousia, also point to a deeper connection that puts Socrates, Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles’s common relationship to Athenian democracy in relief. All four interlocutors depend on a political culture and system of governance where words matter.60 Only in a democracy such as Athens might language possess the power for parrhēsia to function and the sunousia to have significance. As scholars have shown, parrhēsia did not equate to a “right to free speech,” as we might imagine it today. Rather, parrhēsia described an active practice, an ongoing activity – what Athenian citizens regarded as a great virtue without which Athenian democracy would not have merited the name. When the people of Athens, the dēmos, took power in the fifth century, parrhēsia marked a crucial institution for

59 On the “ethics of talk,” see Ruth W. Grant, “The Ethics of Talk.”

60 As Elizabeth Markovits puts it, Athenian democracy is “logocentric”: Markovits, The Politics of Sincerity, 61.
channeling power for the benefit of all citizens.61 Assembly meetings opened with the proclamation, “Who wishes to speak” – thereby affirming the right of all citizens to address the Assembly.62 Along with iségoria, the right of every citizen to offer advice, parrhésia, the right of every citizen to voice frank criticism formed the backbone of Athenian democracy. As Jeffrey Henderson puts it: “Parrhésia was both ideologically and procedurally essential in maintaining the integrity of the democratic system, so much so that it could be considered not merely a citizen’s right but his moral obligation.”63 Parrhésia both exemplified the meaning of Athenian freedom, eleutheria, and also idealized the conditions of the Athenian assembly, forming a significant component in the democratic way of life endemic to Athens.

While less directly tied to the institutions of Athenian democracy than parrhésia, the sunousia, as we saw in the previous chapter, also persisted as an essential educational institution for democratic Athens. Like the symposium, it formed part of the fabric of political culture in which Athenian democracy occurred, providing a space for informal education and the free exchange of opinions. Yet both parrhésia and the sunousia in turn depended on the basic condition of a political regime where speech and debate had consequences because participating citizens spoke and acted under conditions of mutual responsibility and accountability.64

61 On the development of parrhésia, see Jeffrey Henderson, “Attic Old Comedy, Frank Speech, and Democracy.” I follow him and Monoson in much of what follows.

62 Here and in the rest of the paragraph, I draw on S. Sara Monoson, “Citizen as Parrheistēs,” in Monoson, Plato’s Democratic Entanglements, 52 – 63.

63 Henderson, “Attic Old Comedy,” 256.

64 This took place in a broadly participative democratic culture that served to reinforce parrhésia through its practice. As Henderson puts it: “Citizenship and its exercise had become central to every Athenian’s identity and, for ordinary citizens, crucial to their sense of personal dignity and safety. Fifth-century Athenian democracy was both a political system for the demos and a way of life for everyone. A member of the demos took his democratic freedoms with him when he stepped out of the public spheres, and much the same ideals of personal freedom, though not of political equality, were shared by the members of his private world of household and family, including the freedom of frank speech” (Henderson, “Attic Old Comedy,” 257).
Turning back to the *Gorgias*, we can view the dialogue as representing as a contest over the meaning and use of words and the practices these words describe, one whose urgency we may miss if we forget the importance of language in Athenian democracy.\(^{65}\) The democratic regime gave language its importance; language, in turn, constitutes the public identity of its users. Hence in the *Gorgias* when Socrates asks “what is he?” about Gorgias, this becomes a question of what word might describe him and what this word might mean. The conversation thus begins with a question about the meaning of words: what it means to call oneself a *rhētor*, as Gorgias does. Gorgias first defines rhetoric as concerned with speeches – with words (*peri logous*, 449e). The dispute with Polus hinges on the meaning of craft (*technē*) as opposed to knack (*empeiría*), as well as understandings of justice and injustice. The argument with Callicles focuses on the meaning of the good (*to agathon*), which Callicles claims aligns with the pleasant (*to bēdus*). Through all its disagreement, the dialogue of the *Gorgias* still depends on language – it literally occurs through words (*dia – logos*). Socrates emphasizes this in an offhand remark during his discussion with Gorgias: Both Gorgias and he, Socrates comments, have experienced many discussions (*pollon logon*, 457c4-5), and coming to any agreement always presents a difficulty.

Working within the language of democracy also gives an intense self-consciousness to the use of language in *Gorgias*. Every word matters intensely, and this becomes especially true among a group of interlocutors all of whom stake their ways of life on using language – Socrates, Polus, Callicles, and Socrates all share a concern *peri tous logous*, about words and

---

\(^{65}\) As James Boyd White points out, “many of the questions raised in this text [the *Gorgias*] are . . . really questions about the proper use of particular Greek words” (White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, 96).
arguments. In the Gorgias, speeches can change lives: they can build walls and shipyards, as Gorgias declares; they can give one the power to murder at whim, as Polus asserts; they can allow one to satisfy one’s every appetite, as Callicles argues; or they can convince one to lead a just and pious life to the end, as Socrates intones at the dialogue’s close. From this perspective, we can read the dialogue that follows as constituting a “working through” of precisely the difficulties involved in sharing a language among different people. While at times the conversation threatens to dissolve, it sustains itself through the efforts of the interlocutors.

While parrhésia and the sunousia build on existing Athenian practices and institutions and thus touch on democratic political culture, the need for language as well as its power and its contestability reveals the undeniable presence of democratic life as an underlying condition for the battle of the Gorgias. In democratic Athens language not only made politics possible, but democracy created language, endowing it with significance as the structure of Athenian democracy’s “knowledge in action” – the medium through which democratic politics became possible. Democratic discourse structured by a symbolic

---

66 As Amelie Rorty comments on Socrates in the Meno, “Socrates is painfully aware of the fact that in speaking of areté and of didaskein, he is evoking the very conceptions he thinks need to be examined critically, and perhaps need to be redefined (Rorty, “The Limits of Socratic Intellectualism,” 317).

67 So J. Peter Euben explains: “What we see in the Gorgias (or Protagoras or Republic) is that to know about power, justice, friendship, happiness, freedom, or courage entails knowing about one’s character, outlook, social position, interests, ambitious and concerns; that beliefs and experiences are deeply yet unobviously [sic] connected; that arguments emerge out of and remain more or less embedded in one’s way of life; and that philosophy is tied to interest. What we see is, again, the politicization of philosophy” (Euben, “Reading Democracy,” 346). See also Euben, “Democracy and Political Theory” and Euben, “The Gorgias, Socratic Dialectic, and the Education of Democratic Citizens,” in Corrupting Youth, 202 – 228.

68 I am not sure I would go so far as to suggest, as James Boyd White has, that the dialogue makes a new language. Here is White: “The object of the dialogue is the making of a new language” (ibid., 103).

69 As Ober puts it: “the dialogue [the Gorgias] . . . exposes the reality that lies at the heart of the democracy: that in Athens, the dēmos really does rule” (Political Dissent, 190).

70 On knowledge and action, see Ober: Democracy and Knowledge.
ideology made possible the negotiation of differences among constituencies and thus successful democratic governance. Simply put, democratic language made democracy work.

As Josiah Ober explains:

Democracy did . . . have its own language, created by the invention of new words (e.g. demokratia, isonomia), transvaluation of existing terms (isegoria, plethos), subversion and appropriation of the terminology and ideals of the aristocrats (kalokagathia, arete), but above all by the elaboration of the vocabulary of rhetorical topoi and images.71

The power to assign meanings to symbols belonged to the people, and thus Gorgias and Socrates, Callicles and Polus, had to work through the language of democracy in order to persuade the people. Just as Socrates suggests rhetoric as a “producer of persuasion” (πειθόμενος δημιουργός εστίν ἡ ῥητορική, 453a2), so too Socrates attempts to produce persuasion, as we saw in his demonstration with the slave boy in the Meno or his conversation with Theaetetus. In the same way, Socrates transforms the vocabulary of political life by claiming himself as ἐρωτικός, founder of the philosophical συνὸς, and a true πολιτικός. Socrates and his interlocutors in the Gorgias all struggle to articulate a different approach to the political world through a language firmly in the grasp of the regnant political culture, but Socrates pushes this ever further.

Because of the high importance of words and language in democratic Athens, the political edge of the Gorgias’s disputes about and through language serves to sharpen the poignancy of the dialogue’s tragic comment on words – that words will fail Socrates if (and when) he comes before the judges. We can remember Socrates in the Theaetetus when he describes the nonplussed philosopher in court or Callicles’ foreboding threats in the Gorgias. “I am not of the political men,” Socrates tells Polus in a foreboding moment (οὐκ εἰμί τῶν πολιτικῶν, 473e6). Philosophy and politics, rhetoric and dialectic, education and maieusis: all

71 Ober, Mass and Elite, 339.
must occur through language. And yet Socrates’ inability to convince three interlocutors who make their living (or aspire to do so) through persuasion, whether teaching or utilizing it, again evidences Socrates’ own deficiencies, the inability to persuade the jury that would lead to his sentencing and execution.\(^7\) Moreover, Socrates’ strange reputation, which we heard in the refrain of “atopes” throughout the Gorgias, stems in part from his failure to bring his interlocutors to see the logic of his actions. While the dialogue itself may evoke a dialectical relationship with its readers, this will not help Socrates; if anything, it further articulates the indictment against him.

V.

Returning to the concerns of Wolin, Rancière, and Latour with a different understanding of the politics of Socrates’ practice of philosophy, we can in part recognize their prescience – on the first reading of the dialogue, Socrates’ “true political art” does seem to dramatically oppose the political positions of Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles. Yet taken along with the second reading I offered, the first reading becomes less compelling, or at least less completely so. Can we ignore the parallels the dialogue suggests between Socrates and Gorgias, Socrates and Polus, and even Socrates and Callicles? Can we elide Athenian democratic culture as a precondition for all of their participants and their very conversation? While the dialogue seems to promise a radical break between “politics” and “philosophy,” I want to further suggest that the imbrication of Socrates’ practice of philosophy as well as its political orientation does allow us to imagine a politics for Socrates.\(^7\) And yet, remembering

---

\(^7\) This assumes Socrates would have convinced the jury if he could have, an assumption that Xenophon and I.F. Stone contest, among others. For my opinion, see Chapter 6.

\(^7\) By saying that Socrates has a politics I commit somewhat of an anachronism given the conditions of political action in democratic Athens and Socrates’ participation in them. At the empirical level, Socrates’ politics were democratic. Yet at the theoretical level, Socrates’ discussions of politics pulled in different directions; by “politics” here I mean to explore these possibilities.
Wittgenstein and the seeming fecklessness of Socrates’ radical suggestions, these politics remain ironic ones.74

Socrates’ politics appears ironic in the first place because his readers know he fails. As Wittgenstein had it, Socrates’ dialogue in the Gorgias “proves nothing and clarifies nothing.” In this sense, irony functions as dramatic: we know that Socrates will not exert significant political change, and when he declares himself as practitioner of the true political art, we can imagine contemporary readers would have guffawed. We perceive what Socrates apparently does not – that he will imminently meets his end and that the urgency of his final prophecy (remember his haunting words to Callicles to attend to “this way of life, this contest, that I hold to be worth all the other contests in this life,” 526e) will come to naught. Socrates will have his Socratic followers, but their withdrawal from political life will become marked whereas Socrates’ political engagement remained ambiguous.75

Not only will Socrates’ political art have little effect on Athenian political life, but his prediction about an impending Athenian downfall will prove unfounded. After Socrates’ execution, Athenian politics will proceed “business as usual,” and not until the battle of Chaeronea in 338 will Athens’ fortune visibly fall.76 Thus despite Socrates’ concerns, democracy flourished without the knowledge or the attention to individual souls and

---

74 Here I do not intend to comment on what has often been called “Socratic irony,” i.e. the irony of Socrates’ character himself that commentators often locate in instances of the Greek word εἰρνε. Instead, I use irony here to describe his political activity as ironic and I mean ironic in the modern senses I explain below. I discuss “Socratic irony” more in Chapter 7.

75 Again, this implies that we might judge the character Socrates by the legacies of the historical figure of Socrates. Given our position as interpreters influenced by both, it seems fair to take them into consideration, but I should also emphasize that I advance arguments only about the character of Socrates in Plato’s dialogues, not about the historical figure. On the historical Socrates and their politics, see the essays in Paul Van der Waerdt, ed. The Socratic Movement as well as J. Peter Euben, “The Polis, Globalization and the Citizenship of Place” in Platonic Noise, 112 – 140.

76 The loss to Macedonia in 338 required Athens to join the Macedonian-led League of Corinth in its battles against Persia. Decisive defeat at the hands of the Macedonians occurred in 322. On Athens’ flourishing until this point in the fourth century, see Ober, Democracy and Knowledge, 67 – 8.
improvement that Socrates deemed essential. Rather than succumbing to an excess of appetite, Athens maintained a balance between mass and elite, not capitulating to manipulation by rhetoricians like Gorgias or Callicles – or philosophers like Socrates. Athens did fine in the absence of any “true political art,” deprived of “Socrates politikos.”

Socrates’ politics appears ironic in this dramatic sense, finally, because the failure of the dialogue of the Gorgias – that is, Socrates’ apparent failure to convince anyone or even have a simple conversation by the dialogue’s end – seems to have no consequence on the interlocutors themselves. Gorgias’s pomposity – he reportedly had a golden statue of himself dedicated at Delphi – seems untouched during his conversation with Socrates, and his subsequent life shows no sign of being affected: shortly after the dialogue’s dramatic date Gorgias left Athens and retired to Leontini, where he lived until at least the age of one hundred and five. Polus, the professional teacher of rhetoric from Sicily, whose “unteachable stupidity” in the dialogue would seem to make any legacy doubtful, left none. Callicles presents the biggest mystery, for we know nothing of him outside the Gorgias. Perhaps this should indicate his subsequent becoming so forgettable? Regardless, Callicles can offer no positive evidence of Socrates’ important effects.

But although Socrates’ politics appear as ironic in a dramatic sense, they also appear ironic in a second sense – as incongruously ironic. In this sense, we can call Socrates’ politics

---

77 Although one could add that the dialogue may not fail with its readers. In other words, witnessing Socrates’ “ironic politics” may have an effect different from failure.

78 On Gorgias, see Dodds, Plato’s Gorgias, 6 – 10 and Nails, People of Plato, 156 – 158.

79 The quotation comes from Dodds, Plato’s Gorgias, 11: “He [Polus] is as innocent of dialectical method as Gorgias himself, but displays an unteachable stupidity beside which Gorgias looks quite intelligent. When graved for an argument, he falls back on an appeal to popular opinion, on bursts of rhetorical derision, or on ill-bred laughter. He is intellectually and morally vulgar, and he measures Socrates’ moral stature by his own.”

80 Jill Gordon advances this reading of Socrates’ irony, and I generally follow her in this section: Gordon, “Against Vlastos on Complex Irony.” I should emphasize here that I am calling Socrates’ politics ironic and not Socrates “himself.”
ironic because they do not correspond to politics understood in the conventional terms of his day. His ironic politics discord with the norm – they do not congrue. Political life in Athens pervaded every level of society, but above all else direct participation and the power of decision on public matters made politics politics. Public decisions by ordinary citizens occurred in any number of institutions but, most importantly, these decisions mattered – they wove the fabric of a political culture where widespread political participation supported by a robust democratic ideology reigned.

Taken in terms of such a regime, Socrates’ political art appears radically incongruous. It consists not in decisions about public matters; rather, as we saw, Socrates points to the importance of the sunousia as an area distinct from political affairs, asking Callicles what he had done idiótenontos, occupying a private station (515b4). Reading this back on Socrates’ activities in the Gorgias, we can infer the limited purview of Socrates’ ironic politics: a concern for citizens taken individually, a desire to associate with them, an intent to better them. While Socrates builds on Athenian practices of reciprocity and accountability, he nevertheless shifts the terrain of political activity in an incongruous way. While Socrates neither exhibits “bad citizen[ship]” nor actively denies the importance of existing political institutions, he does rework Athenian institutions and practices, as we have seen: challenging the “erotics of democracy,” transfiguring the sunousia, and unsettling democratic ideology with his paradoxical description of himself as the true politikos.

But the motives behind this second sense of Socrates’ ironic politics also point us to a third sense in which we could call his politics “ironic.” Here I return to Jonathan Lear’s

---

81 As observed by M.I. Finley, Politics in the Ancient World, 73.

82 As detailed by Elizabeth Markovits in The Politics of Sincerity.
description of irony as “actively living with the question”: Socrates’ aspirations to a “true political art” appear as ironic because they raise the question of how politics and the political might realize itself, that is, how politics could fully meet its aspirations to make every citizen good and just, while also recognizing both the vast distance between such aspirations and Socrates’ own position (and polis) as well as the impossibility of ever fully completing such a task. Here is Lear:

For Socrates, *human being* is a subjective category: I should ever be in the process of becoming human by shaping myself into a person who lives a distinctively human life. There is no fixed answer as to what this means. And while alive, there is no end to the task.83

Translating this to the terms of Socrates’ political art, we could say that politics is a kind of “subjective category,” as Lear puts it: Socrates proposes an understanding of political life always in the process of shaping itself and making a distinctive regime (*politeia*). Perhaps knowledge of this kind constitutes Socrates’ “human knowledge” that we will see in the *Apology*. No fixed answer to what our politics should look like exists, and the work of “going on together” constitutes an endless task.

In this third sense of irony, then, we can say that Socrates' ironic politics offers a politics not of a blueprint but as a project. To employ a term from psychoanalysis (Lear’s example), political life might then consist of a ‘working through’ without a discernible, even an imaginable end. This process would seek to bring the aspiring parts into conversation with the pretending parts, acknowledging pretences while articulating aspirations.84 Thus in political life, we could say that the political art aspires to doing what Socrates commends: improving the lives of its citizens in whatever way possible.

83 Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, 71.

84 Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, 154.
I have intended these three elaborations of Socrates’ ironic politics more as suggestive excurses than self-contained arguments. I do so for two reasons: first, within the bounds of the dialogue, Socrates does not give us any reason to imagine that his arguments should extend beyond the particular purpose of moving his interlocutors to see the shortcomings of their positions. Never does Socrates assert that a particular position holds under all conditions nor does he universalize claims about the human soul. Everything remains within the dialogue and the dialogue remains shadowed by Wittgenstein’s vituperation.

For this first reason, then, talk of Socrates’ “politics” attempts to generalize what resists generalizing. The dialogues occur as specific events tailored to their interlocutors. As we have seen over the course of the last five chapters, Socrates acts in different ways with different companions. While terms such as the *sunousia* or philosophy recur, they assume different guises and Socrates uses them in varied ways. The *Gorgias*’ Socrates with his aggressiveness and dogged contrarianism vis-à-vis the power hungry Callicles provides a case in point.

The second reason for refraining from talking about Socrates’ politics as anything more than suggestive stems from reasons elaborated more fully in the Introduction. By attributing to Socrates a “politics,” I believe that we hazard solving him – tidily domesticating the edge of Socrates’ critique by incorporating it within our paradigms of understanding. By talking about his politics as ironic, I especially risk such nearly inevitable

---

85 Roslyn Weiss advances this kind of argument in her treatment of the *Gorgias* in *The Socratic Paradox and Its Enemies*, 69 – 119.

86 As noted by John Wallach in *The Platonic Political Art* as well as Roslyn Weiss, who writes as follows: “What Socrates says to Polus is, in fact, not what he says to Protagoras; what he says to Hippias is not what he says to Gorgias; what he says to Meno is not what he says to Callicles – and with good reason: though afflicted with a common malady, each of these interlocutors exhibits unique symptoms and requires custom-tailored treatment” (Weiss, *The Socratic Paradox*, 10).
closure, and I have tried to counteract this by suggesting three different sense of how these “politics” might appear ironic. But if Socrates’ greatest value for political life and political theory today lies, as I think it does, in always confronting our settled knowingness about the categories and purposes of politics, giving Socrates a “politics” threatens to obscure the whole reason for engaging Socrates in the first place.
6: THE HEROIC GADFLY: Socrates’ Strange Heroism in the *Apology*

What runs through the whole cycle concerning Socrates’ death is the establishment, the foundation, in its specifically non-political nature, of a form of discourse which is primarily occupied with, which cares for, care – whose care is the care of the self.

– Michel Foucault

Socrates lived the engaged life. As a young man, he put on the armor of a hoplite and went to war in defense of Athens. Later, in the role of teacher, he explored the question of what a person ought to do . . . he was above all a political man . . . who held human beings responsible for human thoughts and actions, which as we know may have been part of the reason or rationalization for his death sentence.

– Earl Shorris

I.

The *Apology* presents Socrates’ public face. In no other dialogue does Socrates address the assembled people of Athens; in no other dialogue does he explain the origins of his practice of philosophy; in no other dialogue does he defend his way of life so extensively. More so than in any of the dialogues from my previous chapters, the *Apology* offers a portrait of a Socrates embattled and yet resilient, beset and torn by the very polarities – between aspiration and pretense, between opinion and knowledge, between friend and enemy, between philosophy and politics – that have structured my argument until this point. The *Apology* offers a powerful portrait of Socrates near the end of his life, one that both echoes aspects of the figure of Socrates discussed thus far and introduces another distinctive element to his character – the heroic yet strange gadfly.

---


2 Earl Shorris, *Riches for the Poor*, 5.
Yet in many ways the *Apology* also builds on the facets of Socrates we have seen in the previous chapters. In its depiction of a Socrates conversing with and among his fellow Athenians, the *Apology* echoes the *Meno*: Socrates describes his activity using the language of the elenchus and refers to the leisured youth who follow him. Yet Socrates also incites jeers from the crowd during his speech, echoing the accusations of outrage leveled at him by Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. From another angle, however, the Socrates of the *Apology* identifies specific friends and associates – men like Plato and Crito – that have supported him, thus reminding us of his friendlier encounters such as in the *Theaetetus*. Finally, the *Apology* shows Socrates distancing himself and his activity from the Sophists, recalling his disputes with Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles in the *Gorgias*. In many senses, then, the Socrates of the *Apology* overlaps and criss-crosses with the different aspects of Socrates discussed hitherto.

But the *Apology* also departs from these family resemblances in some important respects. As I mentioned earlier, the dialogue depicts Socrates speaking publicly, both addressing a microcosm of the Athenian dēmos and working within the strict conventions of Athenian dicastic rhetoric, the language used at Athenian trials. In this dialogue Socrates talks much less about collaborating with his associates in trying to discover truth but rather describes his occupation in agonistic terms: as implicitly competitive; as animated by struggle; and as entailing difficult choices. This leads Socrates to speak with apparent candor about his own occupation, the political commitments he perceives, and the effects and consequences of his pursuits, viewed from the perspective of the Athenian dēmos as a whole. A strange portrait of Socrates as a hero emerges, I would argue, from this new situation and way of speaking: Socrates takes up the tropes of heroism in the Athenian democracy while also critically employing them. In other words, he describes himself in
heroic terms while also disturbing the conventions of heroism as he uses them. This ambiguity begins with the image of himself as a gadfly, as I detail below.

Socrates’ strange heroism also reprises many of the questions that have animated this project thus far. By depicting Socrates’ relationship to Athenian democracy ambiguously but through explicit contrasts, the *Apology* provokes questions about the compatibility of Socrates’ practice of philosophy and Athenian political life: does Socrates’ activity benefit Athens as he claims? Does he have the beneficial effects he purports? Does this claim undermine his denial of teaching? Moreover, as I maintain below, the *Apology* situates these questions in terms of the topos of the hero. The dialogue thus raises the question of whether (or not) Socrates offers an imitable example and to what ends. The heroism of the gadfly, I will suggest, provokes its readers with strangeness and ambiguity and thus elicits a different response than the imitation of heroes Socrates criticizes in the *Republic* or the “mimetic pedagogy” that scholars have often attributed to Socrates in other dialogues.

Finally, the *Apology* speaks to the apparent tension between “philosophy” and “politics” that I have criticized throughout this work. Michel Foucault and Earl Shorris draw on this distinction in their contrasting appropriations of Socrates and call our attention to the political stakes of engaging Socrates in the *Apology*. In his late lectures at the Collège de France and elsewhere, Foucault returned to Socrates to begin his genealogy of a “technology

---

3 Here I differ from Joseph Cropsey, who sees Socrates as depicting the philosopher in opposition to everyone else: “What emerges in the *Apology* is the contumely reciprocated between the almost helpless though still caring philosopher and the generality of mankind” (Cropsey, *Plato’s World*, 145). “Contumely” seems to me to exaggerate the distance between Socrates and his fellow citizens – we witness such insolence more in the biased account reported by Hermogenes in Xenophon’s *Apology of Socrates* than in Plato’s version, but there too we must remember, as Thomas Pangle reminds us, “this aspect of the *Apology* must also be balanced against what we learn from the other Socratic writings” (Pangle, “On the Apology of Socrates to the Jury,” 38). Plato’s *Apology*, in contrast, proves much more ambiguous, as I will show in what follows.

4 “Mimetic pedagogy” comes from Ruby Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato’s Dialogues*. As will become clearer in the following chapter, I agree with Blondell’s account in many respects.
of the self” or “care of the self” that might help inspire new spaces of freedom today. Although Foucault never precisely described it as such, subsequent commentators have often interpreted the care of the self in terms of activities separate from (although often preparatory for) political life. Yet Earl Shorris suggests a reading of Socrates in a completely different direction, reading Socrates’ questions about “what one ought to do” – an allusion, I take it, as in Foucault’s statement, to Socrates’ demand for an examined life in the *Apology* – as confirming Socrates as “a political man” who served Athens both by fighting in her wars and by demanding responsibility from his fellow citizens. Shorris thus seems to offer a reading of Socrates in the *Apology* completely at odds with Foucault’s, echoing the difference we witnessed earlier between Dana Villa and Martha Nussbaum on the one hand and Alexander Nehamas on the other. The Socrates of the *Apology*, I will suggest, culminates many of the questions that first arose around Nussbaum’s, Villa’s, and Nehamas’s accounts.

While I will background the important political questions raised by the distance between Shorris and Foucault, I return to these in the conclusion below. But the stakes of these questions also existed at the time of the trial. The public face of Socrates both allured and repulsed its viewers, and the *Apology* appropriates these ambivalent responses to elaborate a strange portrait of a heroic gadfly, a biting insect that also brings a great gift to Athens. The question becomes whether Athens can sustain such a gift and why Socrates insists on giving it nonetheless.

---

5 Thus Alexander Nehamas places Foucault’s Socrates outside of politics, as we saw in the Introduction.

6 By concentrating in what follows on how Socrates appears in the *Apology*, I follow Catherine Zuckert, in part, and her emphasis on the *Apology* as providing “the externally observable effects of Socratic philosophy” (Zuckert, *Plato’s Philosophers*, 203). I differ from her in locating Socrates in the Athenian political context. This also distinguishes my approach from a more analytic one concentrating on the arguments abstracted from any context, and approach exemplified by C.D.C. Reeve in *Socrates in the Apology*. 
II.

Near the middle of the *Apology*, Socrates employs what I will argue proves a telling image for Socrates’ service to the city and for articulating the questions of the dialogue as a whole:

I was attached to this city by the god – though it seems a ridiculous thing [geloioteron, 30e3] to say – as upon a great and noble horse [hippōi megaliōi men kai gennaiōi, e4] which was somewhat sluggish [nothestei, e5] because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly [demonēi egeiresthai bupo mnōpos tinos, e5-6]. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find yourself in your company [bos humas egeirōn kai peithōn kain oneidizōn hena hekaston, e7-8]. (30e-31a, 28)

Like in the cases of the stingray and the midwife, Socrates chooses a strange and striking analogy to describe himself and his activities. Similar to the stingray but unlike the midwife, the gadfly (mnōpos, e6) did not possess a place in Athenian political culture. Nor did the gadfly accrue any honors or recognition; while the comparison of the Athenian dēmos to a horse evinced noble associations, the gadfly, as a “useless” animal, did not. At first blush, then, this analogy seems even stranger than the stingray or the midwife: Socrates neither resembles a noisome fly nor does the animal represent some craft or skill. The image appears ridiculous.

But the gadfly also echoes a particularly memorable episode from Greek tragedy in a way that contrasts with its apparent vulgarity. In Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, Io appears as a cow chased by a gadfly, punished by Hera for her infidelities with Zeus. While the specific date of the *Prometheus Bound* remains ambiguous, Athenians probably first saw it sometime in the middle of the fifth century, only decades before Socrates’ trial. Moreover, as Mark Griffith notes, the

---

As in the previous chapters, I will give the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text and the corresponding page of the Cooper, ed. English translation in the text.

8 As Stryker and Slings put it: “What is ludicrous is not that the city should be compared with a horse, which is a noble animal, never used as a draught animal or a beast of burden, but Socrates comparing himself with a gadfly, a loathsome insect, which does not seem to be of any use at all” (*Plato’s Apology of Socrates*, 337). Stryker and Slings also note, referring to Socrates’ description of the horse as “great” (hippōi megaliōi, e4) that “size was considered as an essential element of beauty” (ibid.).

9 While the specific date of the *Prometheus Bound* remains ambiguous, Athenians probably first saw it sometime in the middle of the fifth century, only decades before Socrates’ trial. Moreover, as Mark Griffith notes, the
Prometheus her sufferings in a way that illuminates another possible sense for the gadfly in the *Apology*:

My form and mind were changed
and all distorted; horned, as you see,
pricked on by the sharp biting gadfly, leaping
in frenzied jumps I ran beside the river
Kerchneia, good to drink, and Lerna’s spring.
The earth-born herdsman Argos followed me
whose anger knew no limits, and he spied
after my tracks with all his hundred eyes.
Then an unlooked-for doom, descending suddenly,
took him from life: I, driven by the gadfly,
that god-sent scourge, was driven always onward
from one land to another: this is my story.10

The gadfly here represents a kind of human frenzy on two levels: Io as a cow tortured by the gadfly’s very literal stings; and Io as a woman tormented by hallucinations of touch, sight, and hearing.11 Moreover, both come from the god, from Hera’s revenge. Thus the gadfly appears here as provoking human madness but also as divine, a “scourge” yet nonetheless the work of the gods, signifying inexplicable divine justice (*dike*) to which all human beings remain always subject – a theme of the *Prometheus Bound* as a whole. The gadfly connotes such a tragic situation and the powerlessness of all human beings, even the demigod Prometheus, to avoid fate and chance.

For Socrates to compare himself to a gadfly, then, indicates at a literal level his own humility as a mere insect in comparison with the noble horse of Athens but also alludes to

---

10 Aeschylus, “Prometheus Bound,” 675-685, in Grene and Lattimore, ed. *Aeschylus II*, 164. I should note that Aeschylus uses *muôps*, the word used in the *Apology*, and the word *oîstrôn* interchangeably for “gadfly,” although Aristotle later distinguishes the two. In this excerpt, the first word translated as “gadfly” is *muôps* and the second comes from *oîstrôn* (the actual word being *oîstreplexi*, meaning “stung or bitten by the gadfly”). See Griffith, *Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound*, 195.

the myth of Io and the divine gadfly tormenting her in Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*. Socrates more explicitly refers to the first, rather comic sense, by commenting that his analogy might sound ridiculous (*geloioteron*, 30e4) but his subsequent explanation echoes the tragic sense from Aeschylus:

> Another such man will not easily come to be among you, gentlemen, and if you believe me you will spare me. You might easily be annoyed with me as people are when they are aroused from a doze [*hósper boi nustazontes egeiromenoi*, 31a4-5], and strike out at me; if convinced by Anytus you could easily kill me, and then you could sleep on for the rest of your days [*eita ton loipon bion kathendontes diateloite an*, a6-7], unless the god, in his care for you, sent you someone else. (31a, 28)

Echoing his earlier description of the gadfly, here Socrates describes the loss that the people of Athens risk if they kill him, convinced by Anytus: they may sleep the rest of their days, but they will never have another Socrates. As Socrates had asserted just before the image of the gadfly, “there is no greater blessing for the city than [his] service to the god” (30a6-7, 28). The Athenians may feel compelled to rid themselves of this nuisance, but in doing so they set a tragic plot in motion.

Following the god’s demand, Socrates does not act in any conventional way. As Socrates declares, it does not appear normal for a human being to neglect his affairs as Socrates does (*on gar anthropinòi eike*, 31a9-b1) while always concerned with others. Socrates approaches his fellow citizens as if they were fathers or brothers, trying to persuade them to concern themselves with excellence (*pethonta epimeleisthai aretês*, b4-5). Socrates does not profit from this – his poverty (*tèn penian*, c3), Socrates says, should provide convincing witness – Socrates simply follows the god’s command. We might name this his calling.

How could we explain Socrates’ confounding behavior? Socrates gives us a word: *atopon*, or strange.¹² It may seem *atopon*, Socrates says, that he goes around, giving advice

---

¹² This word has many different meanings, all of which, I will argue in Chapter 7, say something about Socrates and his practice of philosophy.
privately and interfering in private affairs while not venturing to the assembly or attempting
to advise the city (31c, 29). This reputation for strangeness (dōxeiēn atopoi einai, 31c4) Socrates
neither confirms nor denies. Yet the description appears in a crucial elaboration of Socrates’
gadfly behavior: acting as a gadfly, Socrates pursues his occupation among individual
citizens, although not in the Assembly or in the lawcourts – hence his unfamiliarity with the
latter’s ways of speaking, as Socrates notes at the beginning of his speech (17a-c).13 While his
daemon has prevented him as well, Socrates thinks it right – no man who opposes the crowd
can survive, he says. “A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public,
life [ideōteinein alla mé démosieuein, 32a3], if he is to survive for even a short time” (32a, 30).

Socrates’ choice to act not in public but in private seems strange because, like the
image of the gadfly itself, it reverse the Athenians’ expectations. Pericles had declared in
Thucydides’ version of his Funeral Oration that the Athenians’ distinctiveness lies in
refraining from meddling with others in private life (idiai apragmōsunein) and taking an active
part in democratic life in public (dēmosiai polupragmōsunein). Socrates’ language inverts Pericles’:
in private life (idiai, 31c4) Socrates goes around meddling in people’s business (perioon kai
polupragmôn, c5) – echoing the gadfly’s work as “going around” to his fellow Athenians
(perioon, 23b5). In public life (demosiai, 31c5), in contrast, Socrates does not dare to visit the
Assembly and address the city. Whereas in Athenian political life justice existed in the
process of democratic politics, Socrates here suggests that one cannot escape injustice in
political life. As Socrates puts it earlier in his speech, he has no leisure for political activities
or even his own affairs (hypo tēs ascholias ousi tōn tēs poleis praxai moi scholē . . . ousi tōn oikeiōn,

13 Socrates makes similar comments about being unfamiliar in the lawcourts in the Theaetetus and the Gorgias, as
we have seen earlier.
23b7-9), yet neither does Socrates lead a quiet life (en tōi bīoi ouch bēsuβhian ēgon, 36b6). This would seem to lead, inevitably, to Socrates’ tragic demise.

In what follows I want to suggest that the ambiguity within the image of the gadfly created by its contrasting comic and tragic resonances gives a lens on the ambiguities throughout the Apology surrounding Socrates’ “occupation” (pragma, 20c5) – the practice of philosophy and Socrates’ relationship to Athens and his fellow Athenian citizens. In other words, the strangeness evoked by this image (and named as such by Socrates) acts as a leitmotif running through the entire dialogue: on the one hand Socrates gives a ridiculous defense of his life, one that elicits jeers and catcalls and that seems to mock the conventions of Athens; yet on the other, Socrates delivers a powerful argument for the usefulness of his activity, and the importance of the “politics of an unpolitical man.”14

III.

When the Athenian jury votes on Socrates’ guilt or innocence in the Apology, they find him guilty by the narrow margin of 280 to 220.15 Socrates wonders at the miniscule difference. A mere thirty votes would have changed the verdict from guilty to innocent, and Socrates comments that if Meletus alone had accused him, and not also Anytus and Lycon, he would have escaped unharmed. In other words, and as the vote indicated, the case against Socrates did not appear definitive – this alone gives reason to pause before condemning the jurors or acquitting Socrates.

Yet in the eagerness to find a solution to this “problem of Socrates,” one can easily miss what the divided jury seems to indicate: the deep ambiguity of Socrates’ position vis-à-

---

14 The quotation comes from James Colaiaco, Socrates Against Athens, 151.

15 While some dispute about this number exists, it seems generally accepted. See Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, Socrates on Trial.
vis Athenian citizens, politics, and ideology. Just as the image of the gadfly connotes two contrasting ways of understanding Socrates and his activity – the one ridiculous and irritating, the other serious and tragic – I will argue that we can view the speech as a whole in similar terms. Socrates appears to simultaneously affirm Athenians, Athens, and Athenian ideology while also calling these things into question. Socrates appears both sincere and sarcastic, committed and radically critical, supporting democratic knowledge construction at one moment and wholly undermining them at another. We cannot easily trap the gadfly.

***

The scene of the *Apology* would have been familiar to nearly all Athenian citizens. The people’s courts or *dikastēria* played an extremely important public role, providing one of the most common institutions of democracy. Its composition generally represented the average Athenian assembly or counsel and, like in the case of these institutions, any citizen over thirty could participate in the jury. Usually about 6000 jurors formed a pool from which a jury was selected. Typical juries ranged from roughly 200 for private trials to roughly 500 for public ones. After both sides offered their arguments, the jurors voted by secret ballot to convict or acquit the defendant. Without formal consultation among themselves, a simply majority determined the verdict of the court.

Athenian jurors knew what to expect once they entered the courtroom. Because of its important function in resolving conflicts between mass and elite in democratic Athens, courtroom oratory served had created a highly formalized legal rhetoric, a vocabulary of social mediation, which eased tensions between the people as a whole, the dēmos, and its most outstanding (and thus often most threatening) citizens, the elites. Juries thus expected

---

16 This paragraph draws on Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens.*

17 Ober, *Mass and Elite,* 141-144.
litigants in their speeches to submit to the people’s judgment and respect the proper forms of defense. This included emphasizing a community of interests, demonstrating one’s service or benefit to the state at large, and arguing to include oneself in the democracy as a whole. This also meant that citizens approached trials with standard expectations as well as codes of behavior. As Danielle Allen has put it: “In order to engage the attention of his fellows, the male Athenian citizen had to understand what would generally be recognized as a social disruptions and which forms of response would be seen as legitimate by most of the citizens most of the time.”18 In other words, not only decorum but also success depended upon democratic norms of conduct, in particular for speech.

In the case of Socrates, one can reasonably assume that the conditions of his trial resembled those described. The jury knew what to expect: Socrates would simply demonstrate the falsity of the accusations against him while also showing his role as a citizen beneficial to the démos and respecting the democracy’s institutions. While perhaps Socrates’ bad reputation preceded him more than in the cases of other average citizens,19 such rumors hardly determined an outcome. Given its pervasive force in Athenian mass politics, negotiating and judging rumor occupied an important part of everyday democratic life.20

We can imagine the series of speeches themselves passed quickly. After the jury and observing public had assembled, a man appointed specially for the task would read the indictment. The prosecution would present their case followed by equal time for the defense.21 In the case of Socrates’ trial, Plato gives us only his version of Socrates’ defense.

18 Danielle Allen, *The World of Prometheus*, 44.
19 As Brickhouse and Smith suggest in *Socrates on Trial*, 18 – 24.
21 Brickhouse and Smith, *Socrates on Trial*, 25.
In outline, his speech conforms to the model of what a juror might expect. First, he addresses the informal charges against him. Then, he deals with the formal charges. Finally, Socrates addresses the jury more directly and argues why he benefits the state and has been useful to Athens. At this point the jury votes to acquit or convict.

***

Perhaps most on the jurors’ minds as they prepared to judge Socrates’ defense was what Socrates had just said. In the peroration (34b6–35d8) of his first speech before the jury votes to convict or acquit, Socrates refuses to beg and supplicate the jury with tears or to bring forward his wife and sons to plead his case further. Such acts are shameful (aischunēn, 35a8) asserts Socrates. It would make the city a laughingstock (katagelaston, b8) if he did so, so Socrates remains quiet (hēsuchian apontos, b9). Moreover, Socrates argues, judges should not give away just things out of courtesy (katacharizesthai, 35c3) but must rather judge them according to the laws (kata tous nomous, c5). Socrates continues by declaring that the piety of such actions further substantiates his defense against charges of impiety and not believing in the gods. He concludes: “And I turn [it] over both to you and to the god to judge concerning me in whatever way it is going to be best both for me and for you” (35d7).

How did the jurors take Socrates’ closing lines? Socrates’ refusal to supplicate would seem to violate an important trope of Athenian courts. Sarcasm appears to fill his description of those who have pled in such a manner: Socrates describes that even in trials much smaller than his some defendant might have begged and supplicated the judges with tears, bringing forward his own children and many others of his family and friends in order to gain as much pity as possible (34c1–5). Socrates implies that such tactics show weakness and are shameful. As Josiah Ober points out, rather than simply stating that he will not bring out his three sons, Socrates “pointedly reminds the members of the jury that they themselves
might have used the tableau tactic. . . . Here Socrates overtly sets himself up as morally superior to *hoi polloi*, the ordinary men who made up the jury.”

Socrates even seems to admit this when he allows that some people think him superior (34c).

Yet we can also discover a deep vein of sincerity in these closing arguments alongside Socrates’ apparent sarcasm. While refusing the standard trope, Socrates also recognizes the power and prudence of the jury itself. Arguing that justice lies not in flattering the jury but in positioning it to judge, Socrates reinforces the jury’s high position. By claiming that one ought to “teach and persuade” (*dikaion . . . didaskein kai peithein*, 35c1-2) the jury rather than ingratiate it, Socrates further demonstrates this respect. Socrates wants to teach the jury to judge properly and according to the law (*dikasein kata tous nomous*, 35c5). He describes his family and still refuses to use them, thus illustrating his Athenianness – quoting Homer, Socrates says he was “not born from oak or rock” (*oud’ egō ‘apo druos oud’ apo pephuka*, 34d) – while also rejecting pandering argument. Socrates’ final lines of the entire *Apology*, when he turns the judgment to the jury, encapsulate an argument that relies upon and upholds this fundamental institution of democracy. A tension between sarcasm and sincerity thus imbues Socrates’ closing arguments before the verdict; on these lines alone, we cannot judge with certainty whether Socrates respects the Athenian citizens he addresses or not.

This uncertainty about Socrates’ intentions toward his audience – his sincerity or sarcasm – presents itself from the beginning of his defense, framing the entire first speech. In the opening scene, Socrates claims that he cannot know the effects of the accusers’ arguments on the jury (*hōti men humeis ἄνδρες Ἀθηναίοι, πέπονθατε ἅπο τὸν εμὸν κατεγρόν, οὐκ οἶδα*, 17a1 – 2). This claim could appear either sincere or sarcastic. Socrates does not presume

22 Ober, *Political Dissent*, 176.
to know the jurors’ reactions and the emphasis on his own ignorance, redoubled by the resonant *ouk oida* – “I do not know” – at the end of his first sentence, would seem to admit his low position vis-à-vis the jurors. Yet as Socrates proceeds, it also seems possible that he does in fact think that he knows the impression the accusers have left on the jury. In fact, nearly his entire speech directly addresses how the jury as ordinary citizens suffer a false consciousness of sorts because of the rumors around them. While Socrates does not specify Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon as chief architects of the rumor, the implication seems clear: Socrates assumes knowledge of the jurors’ opinions of him and seeks to disabuse them of their false impressions. In this sense, perhaps the rumor of Socrates’ superiority has some truth.

After this uncertain introduction, the ambiguity continues to build. Socrates begins his defense with the familiar tactic of claiming to be a private citizen and thus being ignorant of judicial rhetoric.23 Forewarning the Athenians that they may hear him speak like those in the marketplace (*en agora*17a9), Socrates aligns himself with the humdrum of the dēmos: “Simply, I am foreign to the manner of speech here” (*atechnōs oum xenōs echō ōs enthade lexēōr*, 17d3), he tells the jurors. Yet as scholars have often argued, the speech that follows is a “rhetorical masterpiece.”24 Socrates delivers a speech that follows the ordained style both artfully and comprehensively.25 Yet this mastery also allows for masterful manipulation – while Socrates argues well, he also “both parodies and violates the conditions of forensic rhetoric.”26 Socrates addresses and subverts nearly all of the spectrum of rhetorical tropes for

---


26 Diskin Clay, *Platonic Questions*, 44.
Athenian trials, and while claiming himself as an ordinary citizen, Socrates also delivers an extraordinary defense. At the same time, his defense does not entirely belie the sincerity of his initial claims: his embrace of the tropes of Athenian trials, while not pure in any sense, nevertheless affirms these tropes. Socrates appears both forthright and disingenuous.

***

In addition to Socrates’ ambiguous intentions in the speech, a second theme emerges if we imagine ourselves as jurors reconsidering Socrates’ addressal of the informal and formal charges – Socrates’ ambivalent relation to the legitimacy of democratic knowledge. As we have seen already (especially in Chapters 4 and 5), for fifth-century Athenians, not only did the dēmos control and propagate a powerful democratic ideology in the realm of culture practices, but this control also extended to a uniquely democratic epistemology. In other words, Athenian democratic ideology contained within it a form of democratic knowing, knowing that existed as knowledge held in common and collectively-determined. As Josiah Ober has written:

> For most Athenians, the shocking “postmodern” conclusion that “all knowledge is political” (i.e., implicated in relations of power) was simply a truism; neither the possibility nor the normative desirability of genuinely apolitical forms of knowledge about society or its members ever entered the ordinary Athenian’s head.27

Not based on any formal constitution or on a set of philosophical certainties, instead a socially- and politically-constructed “regime of truth” – an “integrated set of assumptions about what the dēmos regards as right, proper, and true” –undergirded Athenian democracy.28 Democratic institutions collected and legitimated democratic knowledge; the courts formed an essential part of these institutions.

---

27 Ober, *Political Dissent*, 34.

28 Ober, *Political Dissent*, 34.
In the context of this democratic epistemology, Socrates both acknowledges democratic ways of knowing while also radically undermining them. Again and again, Socrates ignores or disparages mass-based ways of establishing the truth; simultaneously, however, he proposes ways of strengthening collective knowledge through individual investigation and inquiry. Imagining ourselves as Athenian jurors, Socrates both upsets our democratic sensibilities about what is true and how we might know something as true while also promising improved democratic knowledge in the future. One always seems to complement the other.

This tension begins as Socrates addresses the unofficial charges against him, responding to rumors that might bias jurors. Instead of appealing to generally known facts that could contradict and thus modify such rumors, Socrates appeals to a small group of jurors in contradistinction to the mass (hoi polloi):

I call upon the majority of you as witnesses. I think it right that all those of you who have heard me conversing, and many of you have, should tell each other if anyone of you has ever heard me discussing such subjects to any extent at all. From this you will learn that the other things said about me by the majority are of the same kind. (19d1 – 7)

Rather than referring to collective knowledge, Socrates sets each juror’s own investigations against it. In language that echoes later descriptions of his activities, Socrates asks those who have experience of him to educate and show others (didaskein te kai phrazein, d2). Socrates thus contrasts the small group he addresses to the mass, the knowledge gained through examination to the democratically-legitimated rumor of hoi polloi. This also casts the usually positive meaning of hoi polloi, a synonym for dēmos, in a negative light and as contrary to democratic ways of knowing.29

---

29 Ober, Political Dissent, 170.
Yet Socrates also repeatedly addresses the jury as a metonym for the entirety of Athens – “men of Athens” – and seems to speak to them directly for the sake of persuasion. After Socrates describes the difficulty of addressing the rumors against him – they are “most difficult to deal with” (aporō tatoi eisin, 18d4) like fighting and trying to refute shadows (skiamachein apologoumenon te kai elegchein mēdenos apokrinomenon, d6) – Socrates explains how he has two sets of accusers, the formal and the informal, and he trusts the jury to follow him as he addresses each in turn. His later assertion that more time would have allowed him to convince the jury (38c) would seem to imply that the jury could decide well – and thus that democratic knowledge could prove valid.

Socrates’ ambiguous relationship to democratic ways of knowing also appears in the contrast between his exchanges with Callias and with Meletus. First, the conversation with Callias that Socrates recounts in his defense appears critical of expertise that would stand against the ways of Athenian democracy. Callias had paid money to two sophists in order to educate his sons. Socrates recounts his questioning of Callias’s reasons for doing so. If his sons had been born colts or calves, Socrates asks Callias, whom would he have selected to train them to excellence? Clearly, one would do best selecting someone skillful in horses and farming. Whom then, Socrates continues, does Callias have in mind as an overseer for his sons, someone knowledgeable in the excellence of human being and citizen (tis tēs toiantēs aretēs tēs anthrōpinēs te kai politikēs, 20b4 – 5)? Callias answers with the name of his sophist, Evenus, and his price. Socrates appears facetious in his response, anticipating the rejection of expertise to come:

And I regarded Evenus as blessed if he should truly have this art and so decorously teach it. As for myself, I would pride and plume myself if I knew these things. But I do not know [these things], men of Athens. (20b9 – c3)

---

30 The exchange with Callias occurs from 19d8 to 20c3.
By rejecting Callias’s belief in the sophists’ expertise, Socrates would seem to side with
democratic knowledge. Rather than hiring sophists, the people of Athens and their laws
teach the young.

Yet while implicitly advancing the more democratic argument against Callias, in his
later exchange with Meletus, Socrates moves the opposite direction. When Socrates takes up
the official charges, he immediately turns them on Meletus. Socrates accuses Meletus of
jesting about serious matters (hoti spoudēi charientizetai, 24c5-6), anticipating, in reverse, the
apparent ridiculousness of Socrates’ serious image of the gadfly. Socrates then begins to
cross-examine Meletus in a way which rehearses the claims about knowledge and expertise
we first saw in the discussion of Callias and what followed – but inverted. While questioning
Meletus’s knowledge of who improves the young, Socrates also replays an exchange that we
witnessed between Socrates and Anytus in the *Meno*, and just like in the *Meno*, while Socrates
pushes Meletus until he refuses to answer, Socrates does not directly extend this critique to
the Athenians at large. Nor does Socrates promise knowledge of how Athenians might
become either fine or corrupted – of what might create a Callicles or an Alcibiades. Like in
the *Meno*, Socrates’ own position remains ambiguous.

Socrates begins by asking Meletus whether he regards it as important that the youth
become the best possible.31 Meletus avers, and Socrates continues, asking who makes them
better. When pressed, Meletus answers the laws (boi nomoi, 24d11) and then the judges (boi
dikastai, 24e2). As Socrates continues to question, Meletus adds the listeners present (boi
akroatai, 24e10), the members of the Bouli, the Athenian council (boi boulietai, 25a3), and the
members of the Ekklesia, the Athenian assembly (boi ekklesiastai, 25a5-6). Essentially, then, *all

31 The exchange between Socrates and Meletus that I discuss in the following paragraphs occurs between 24c9
and 26b2.
Athenians make the young good and noble. How could Meletus ensure, Socrates asks, that Socrates alone corrupts the young? If indeed someone does corrupt them, Meletus could as likely bear responsibility as Socrates.

One might argue that Socrates shows Meletus that nobody but he Socrates actually improves the young. Socrates’ antagonistic stance toward Meletus – accusing him of not caring for the young at all (26b), mocking him for confusing Socrates and Anaxagoras (26d), and insulting him by calling Meletus “highly insolent and uncontrolled” (hubristēs kai akolastos, 26d8, 25) – would seem grounds enough for calling Socrates a critic of the democratic education Meletus propounds. The agon between the two seems heightened by the appearance of the language of the sunousia: Socrates asks Meletus whether people prefer being harmed or benefited by their associates (sunontōn, 25d1) and then asks, rhetorically, whether one would act so ignorantly as to harm his associates (sunontōn, 25e3) and not realize that in doing so one also harms oneself. Yet Meletus will not answer this argument – he remains silent – and the presence of the language of associations on both sides, Socrates’ and Meletus’s, intensifies the dispute without resolving it.

At the same time, by implying that someone might willfully corrupt the young, Socrates does open the door for criticism of democratic political ideology. Most Athenian jurors would likely agree that all members of the dēmos educate youth through their decisions, as we saw in Anytus’s assertions in the Meno, and by turning Meletus’s charge against him, Socrates points out a possible imperfection in this civic ideal: if Meletus does not care for improving others and instead occupies himself with advancing frivolous lawsuits, Socrates implies, then not every Athenian citizen educates the young – or at least

---

32 So suggests Eric Havelock in Preface to Plato, which Kevin Robb (“Asebeia and Sunousia”) follows in part.

33 Ober, Political Dissent, p. 170.
not well. Yet in so doing Socrates also shows his respect and care toward the polis and the dēmos. Socrates seems to wish that one could know exactly how to educate youth properly and avoid corruption; taken in the context of the previous discussion, however, Socrates does not appear to view himself as possessing such knowledge, nor anyone else.

***

Socrates had earlier raised the question of his own reputation for “some kind of wisdom” that possessed the same ambiguity we just saw in the exchanges with Callias and Meletus. While Socrates acquired a name for some kind of wisdom (dia sophian tina touto to onoma, 20d6 – 7), he asserts repeatedly that this knowledge neither amounts to much nor ought to trump existing ways of knowing.34 The Delphic oracle’s pronouncement that “no one is wiser” (mēdena sophōteron einai, 21a7) than Socrates did not declare Socrates the wisest. Rather, no one exceeds Socrates in wisdom, Socrates reports. It would seem that everyone could equal Socrates in their individual wisdom or ignorance, and in Socrates’ conversations with politicians, poets, and craftsmen, Socrates reinforces such an interpretation. While implying that each person does not know, Socrates also shows the possibility of everyone’s knowing – and the concomitant improvement of democracy that would follow.

In other words, while challenging democratic knowledge with the possibility of its ultimate fallibility, Socrates simultaneously retreats from claiming the expertise that would undo democratic knowledge as his or as even existing in Athens. Addressing his reputation for wisdom, Socrates clarifies that whatever he knows, he remains agnostic about its particular content and power:

For I, men of Athens, have gotten this name [to onoma, 20d7] through nothing but a certain wisdom. Just what sort of wisdom? Perhaps human wisdom [hēper estin isōs anthropinē sophia, d8]; for by being this I hazard such a thing, to be wise. But those of

34 Moreover, the language of acquiring a “name” (to onoma) returns in pejorative contexts later in the dialogue, associated with slander: 23a3 and 34e4.
whom I just spoke might perhaps be wise in some wisdom greater than human, or else I cannot say what it is. For I, at least, do not know it [ou gar di egoge auten epistamai], but whoever asserts that I do lies and speaks to slander me. (20d6 – e3, 21)35

Not only does Socrates qualify his wisdom as only a “name” for wisdom, but he also denies knowing whether this counts as wisdom at all. “Perhaps” this counts as human wisdom – cautious language imbues Socrates’ admission.36 Socrates carefully continues to characterize his reputation for wisdom in this way, thus placing it both at odds with democratic ways of knowing in its possibility, that is its orientation toward individual knowledge, but also not yet instantiated, and thus not destructive to these ways – simultaneously subversive and affirmative.

To illustrate the argument about his own lack of knowledge, Socrates retells what began his questioning – what he later calls the practice of his philosophy. Socrates explains that when his well-known friend Chaerephon presumed to ask the oracle of Delphi whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates, it responded that “no one was wiser” (mēdena sophōteron einai, 21a6-7). After hearing the oracle’s response, Socrates asked himself what the god could mean: “what riddle does he pose?” (ti pote ainittetai, 21b4). The riddle put Socrates at a loss, an aporia, for a long time (kai polun men chronon ēporaun ti pote legei, 21b7).37 Only “reluctantly” – with toil and pain38 – did Socrates begin to seek something (epeita mogis panu epi zētesin auton toiautēn tina etrapomēn, b8). Socrates decided to investigate those reputed to be wise to see if

35 Translation modified.

36 In his commentary, Stryker and Slings note the Greek in this passage as indicating Socrates’ tentativeness: Stryker and Slings, Plato’s Apology of Socrates, 270.

37 Stryker and Slings note that Socrates’ short, abbreviated sentences here indicate this perplexity and Socrates’ genuine struggle with the meaning of the oracle: Stryker and Slings, Plato’s Apology of Socrates, 274.

38 The word Socrates uses here, mogis, has these alternative meanings. See Liddell and Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, 1140.
they were wiser than he. If he could find someone who was wiser than himself, Socrates
assumed, he might contradict the oracle, telling it: “This man is wiser than I, whereas you
said me.”39 As Socrates explains telling himself:

So I withdrew and thought to myself: “I am wiser than this man; it is likely that
neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when
he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely
to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not
know.” (21d, 21)

Socrates’ response to the oracle, rather than establishing his superiority, instead indicates his
inferiority – and the inferiority of all human beings with respect to knowledge. And yet
Socrates also does not categorically disclaim all knowledge.40

Yet the consequences of Socrates’ wandering endanger him.41 In his proceeding
investigations, Socrates offends the politicians and poets by finding that they are no wiser
than he. The craftsmen, while having knowledge of things that Socrates does not, also
deemed themselves wise in things they were not. Admitting ignorance, Socrates concludes,
proves wiser than falsely claiming wisdom. Yet he only goes that far in claiming wisdom:

As a result of this investigation [exetaseos, 22e7], men of Athens, I acquired much
unpopularity, of a kind that is hard to deal with and is a heavy burden; many slanders
came from these people and a reputation for wisdom, for in each case the bystanders
thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I proved [exelegcho, 23a5] I did not
have. What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular
response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing. (22e-23b, 22)

39 Thomas G. West’s translation deceives its readers in this instance. Transliterating the Greek, what Socrates
says addressing the oracle reads as follows: “houtosi emou sophōteros esti, su d’ eme ephētha.” West translates this:
“This man is wiser than I, but you declared that I was wisest” (in West and West, Four Texts on Socrates, 69).
While the Greek is not perfectly lucid, West disingenuously adds a superlative where none exists. G.M.A.
Grube’s translation proves more literal in this instance and retains a degree of ambiguity: “This man is wiser
than I, but you said I was” (in Grube, Plato: Five Dialogues). Socrates does not call himself the wisest, as West’s
translation claims.

40 As noted by Stryker and Slings: Stryker and Slings, Plato’s Apology of Socrates, 276.

41 Socrates describes this wandering as planē (22a7), a word with fascinating and ambiguous meanings by itself
and one that also points to the outsider status of Socrates. See Silvia Montiglio, Wandering in Ancient Greek
Culture.
Socrates continues by explaining that youth follow Socrates not because he possesses some unique knowledge but because they enjoy the spectacle of refutation. Unfortunately, Socrates admits, he vexes others with questions and has thereby incurred his accusers’ ire. People fear being at a loss (mē dokōsin aporein, 23d4) and instead accuse Socrates of the same slanders hurled at all philosophers: about things in the sky and things below the earth, about not believing in the gods, and about making the worse argument the stronger (23d, 23). But Socrates’ activities do not merit such slanders.

***

As we continue to review Socrates’ speech prior to the jury’s verdict, another theme emerges as Socrates develops and works through one of the primary tropes of Athenian judicial rhetoric – the argument for one’s benefit to the polis. Jurors expected any litigant accused of a crime against the city to demonstrate his record of public service and role as a public benefactor.42 This included appealing to one’s military record, underscoring selfless acts that benefited the city, and showing how one filled unique and important political roles. Socrates’ defense in these areas shows itself as just as ambiguous as we saw in the previous two sections. Socrates embeds his actions as a good citizen in a context of disobedience toward democratic authority. He shows that he has exhausted his private resources for the public good – an important aspect of this trope – but in a strange, potentially anti-democratic way. Socrates’ moral actions and political involvement also both bespeak an ambiguous relationship to democracy. In each area Socrates claims to act on the behalf of the polis, but his actions also contradict aspects of regnant democratic ideology.

---

Socrates begins by claiming that he concerns himself solely with whether or not his actions are right or wrong.43 Shame does not bother him. Like Achilles, Socrates has refused to give way to death and danger. Socrates thus compares his intransigence in the face of rumors about him to that of the mythic heroes, acting as ordered and not fearing death or anything else. So Socrates has acted when stationed at Potidaea and Amphipolis and Delium, serving with his fellow citizens and risking death alongside them. No one can impeach Socrates’ military record.

Yet as Socrates continues, he also puts his exemplary military service in tension with another service, service to the god and to the practice of philosophy. While these commitments have not prevented him from admirable fighting in battle, his refusal to cease philosophizing undercuts the commitment to democratic citizenship he has just established through the account of his service. If asked no longer to spend time in his continually talking and philosophizing (mekēt diatribein méde philosophein, 29c7 – 8), Socrates absolutely refuses. Instead of obeying the dēmos, says Socrates, he will obey the god. Just as he refused to leave his post in battle, Socrates refuses to disobey the order of the god:

It would have been a dreadful way to behave [eggō oum deina an eīn eirgasmenos, 28d9], men of Athens, if, at Potidaea, Amphipolis and Delium, I had, at the risk of death, like anyone else, remained at my post where those you had elected to command had ordered me, and then, when the god ordered me, as I thought and believed [hōs eggō oieithēn te kai bupelaben, e5], to live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others [philosophounta me dein zēn kain exetazonta emauton kai tous allous, e5-6], I had abandoned my post for fear of death or anything else. (28e, 27)

But while Socrates introduces an authority higher than the polis, Socrates also couches this in terms of his love of the polis and his concern for his fellow citizens. Recall Socrates’ description of his concern for fellow Athenians as like fathers and brothers as well as his belief that he benefits Athens by serving the god. Here Socrates continues this motif: “I,

---

43 This third part of Socrates’ speech before the verdict occurs between 28b2 and 34b5.
men of Athens, salute you and love you, but I will obey the god rather than you; and as long as I breathe and can, I will not cease philosophizing” (29d2 – 5). In this way Socrates addresses how he benefits the dēmos while simultaneously modifying the terms of that benefit, benefiting in a way inconsistent with democratic ideology, as we earlier saw Socrates reversing Pericles’ characterization of Athenian citizenship. In this context Socrates asserts that “no greater good for you [the citizens of Athens]” has arisen in the city (ouden pō humin meizōn agathon, 20a5 – 6) than his service to the god, in the form of his practice of philosophy. By orienting the city away from money and honor and toward his idea of excellence, Socrates can claim a role as perhaps the greatest of public benefactors. Whereas the standard litigant would base his rhetorical claim on material benefits given to the city, Socrates inverts this. His later claims of poverty in the service of philosophy, as we saw, further substantiates such a view.45

Here we reencounter the image of the gadfly. From what we have seen thus far, the image appears in even starker relief, framed by Socrates’ simultaneous challenge to democratic knowledge and rhetorical tropes but also his claims to benefit Athenians both as a city and taken citizen by citizen (kai idiai kai dēmosiai, 30b4). His awakening, persuading, and reproaching (egeirōn kai peithōn kai oneidizōn, 30c7), then, may provoke ire but they also promise to enliven and improve the great city of Athens.

As Socrates continues to detail his own political involvement, this contrast between accepted modes of democratic participation and Socrates’ own claims to benefit Athens intensifies. As we saw, Socrates admits that it may seem strange that he busies himself in


45 *Apology* 31c2 – 3.
private but that in public he dares not counsel the city, and Socrates also claims that his daemon, his divine sign, has opposed political activity in order to prevent him from doing unjust things. Socrates further argues that had he involved himself in politics, he would not have preserved his own life. For someone who fights for the just to stay alive, Socrates asserts, such a person must lead a private rather than a public life. But while this rejection of political activity may seem to undermine Athens’ democratic way of life, Socrates juxtaposes this inversion with two examples of his praiseworthy political actions. Thus although he has just claimed to abstain from politics, he relates stories of political involvement that testify both to his differences from Athenian norms and his respect for democracy nevertheless. In both examples, Socrates implies that he acts as an ideal democratic citizen would have acted: respecting justice and the laws of Athens. Moreover, as he begins this part of his argument, Socrates takes up a conventional trope of dicastic rhetoric by arguing for his good behavior as a citizen, admitting that what he says smacks of the lawcourts while also introducing the caveat that he will still speak the truth (32a).

In the first example, Socrates describes his involvement in the Athenian Council, the Boulé, after the battle of Arginusae. A storm prevented the Athenian generals from rescuing survivors. For this malfeasance the assemblies tried and sentenced the generals to death. Socrates objected to the generals’ being tried as a body, and spoke alone in opposition: “This was illegal,” Socrates comments, addressing the jurors, “as you all recognized later” (32b,

---

46 Socrates addresses the role of his political activity from 31c4 to 33b8.

47 On the historical issues arising from Socrates’ two stories, see Stryker and Slings, Plato’s Apology of Socrates, 160 – 166.

48 See Grube, Plato Five Dialogues, 36 n. 9 for an account of this battle as well as A. Andrewes, “The Arginousai Trial.”

49 Or perhaps from recovering bodies. Socrates uses the word anairesthai, which could mean picking up dead bodies for burial. See West, Four Texts on Socrates, 84 n. 58.
29); this argument anticipates Socrates’ insistence later that the jurors judge according to the laws (κατὰ τοὺς νόμους). Despite threats from the opposition, Socrates maintained his position to the end. Nevertheless, his protest proved ineffectual and the Athenians executed the six generals.

In the second example, Socrates describes refusing to carry out orders by the Thirty tyrants to arrest Leon of Salamis and execute him. Refusing to commit what he viewed as unjust and impious acts, Socrates went home while others went to Salamis. Although he might have died, Socrates disobeyed the orders of the Thirty in order to avoid injustice. Not only does Socrates demonstrate his lack of sympathy for the Thirty, but he also shows the risks he took opposing them. Against the Thirty’s undeliberated edict, Socrates stands firm.

Commenting on these two examples, Socrates asks whether or not the jurors suppose that he would have survived so many years had he been publicly active while also maintaining his overarching commitment to come to the aid of the just things. He immediately answers his own question in the negative. While one might take this as conclusive evidence of Socrates’ lack of commitment to the δῆμος, if we take this in the context of the preceding examples, such a conclusion loses much of its strength. In each example, Socrates opposes tyrannical leadership, leadership that opposes the laws, regardless of its being democratic or otherwise. Democracies and oligarchies alike may act like tyrants, Socrates implies. He concerns himself rather with the character of their actions. This would not, then, preclude Socrates from full commitment to a just democracy. In denying the possibility of a life of involvement with public things (τὰ δημοσία, 32e3), Socrates simply

50 As Stryker and Slings comment: “Plato was honest enough not to conceal Socrates’ misgivings about radical democracy (31e-32a3), but he thought it more necessary to show, ‘not by words, but by deeds’ (32a4-5), not only that Socrates had not sympathized with the crimes of the Thirty, but that he had risked his life resisting them, even when fear induced many others to collaborate” (Stryker and Slings, Plato’s Apology of Socrates, 165-6).
points to the fallibility of the démos – and of political power in general. Nonetheless, his implication that justice and piety must prevail at all times distances him from a full commitment to the results of democratic authority. Socrates remains heaven-sent while still embodying an irritating gadfly.

In the final section of this argument about his service to the Athenian democracy, Socrates denies being a teacher and therewith being responsible for any corruption. Socrates reiterates that he remains the same in public (demosias, 33c2) as in private (idai, 33a2) and that in neither does he do anything unjust (para to dikaios, a3-4). Being nobody’s teacher (didaskalos men oudenos, 33a5-6) and never collecting a fee like the sophists, one cannot blame Socrates for the conduct of those who enjoy his company – he has never taught anyone, Socrates says (mè te edidaxa, 33b6). Others simply enjoy hearing the ostensibly wise questioned (chairousin exetazomenois boise oionenoi men einais sophoi, 33c3). In any event, nobody present at the trial could testify to being corrupted or witnessing corruption. On the contrary, those in attendance – including Crito, Apollodorus, Adeimantus, and Plato – attest to Socrates’ lack of corrupting effects. While Socrates has admitted earlier that even without formal teaching one person could corrupt another, those attending his trial evidence that Socrates did no such thing.

Yet these final remarks’ being prefaced by the repeated contrast between Socrates’ private and public activity also underscores Socrates’ inversion of the Periclean norms of democratic citizenship that we saw earlier. Socrates’ accusers may have little direct evidence of his corrupting effects, but Socrates in effect admits his meddlesomeness in ta idai – the private affairs where Athenians conventionally kept to themselves. Socrates may not educate or corrupt, but he still fails to exemplify good Athenian citizenship.
IV.

As we have seen, Socrates’ arguments in his defense against charges both informal and formal produce questions about his sincerity, his relationship to democratic knowledge, and his commitment to Athenian citizenship. I have argued that the tensions within these arguments never fully resolve themselves and that the ambiguity that results might help explain the closeness of the jury’s vote. Yet despite the ambiguity of Socrates’ speech, the jury convicts him. The jury votes 280 for conviction and 220 for acquittal. Meletus proposes the death penalty. Socrates must offer a counterproposal.

In the short speech after his conviction and before his sentencing, Socrates presents an increasingly confounding character. Upon hearing the jury’s decision, Socrates responds ambiguously with an air of knowingness mixed with wonder.51 While he says that what has happened was not unexpected (οὐκ ἀνέπιστον, 36a2), Socrates also questions the number of votes on each side. Perhaps joking, Socrates suggests that had Anytus and Lycon not joined Meletus in the indictment, Meletus would have lost the suit and had to pay a fine of a thousand drachmae.52

Meletus has proposed Socrates’ penalty as death. What penalty does Socrates deserve (τι ἄξιον εἰμί παθεῖν, 36b5)? Socrates asks rhetorically. Rather than compromising by seeking some less definitive punishment than death, Socrates counters Meletus’s proposal with the proposal that he (Socrates) receive free meals in the Prytaneum for his punishment. Athens normally reserved this privilege for Olympic victors, extraordinary generals, and other public benefactors. Thus to an Athenian juror’s ear, Socrates’ proposal might have sounded almost

---

51 In what follows I treat the speech between conviction and sentencing, which spans from 35e1 to 38b9.

52 Stryker and Slings find this comment “playful”: Stryker and Slings: Plato’s Apology of Socrates, 185.
farcically hubristic. Yet Socrates’ suggestion also recollects the reasons he gave for his public service, perhaps the most impassioned section of his speech prior to conviction. The speech here again rehearses this passion:

> Going to each of you in private, I performed the greatest of deeds [ἐπὶ δὲ τοῖς ἑαυτοῖς ἑκαστοῖς ἐνεργεῖν τὴν μεγίστην ἐνέργειαν, 36c3-4], as I say, and I attempted to persuade each of you neither to care for any of his own things until he cares for himself – how he will be the best and the most intelligent possible [ὅς βέλτιστος καὶ προνομῶστατος εστίν, c7-8] – nor to care for the things of the city until he cares for the city itself, and so to care for the other things in this same way. What, then, am I worthy of suffering, being such as this? (36c3 – 36d2, 32. Italics mine.)

Socrates would seem to undermine his plea for the city by immediately proposing a ridiculous punishment, but as in the earlier instance when Socrates defended the benefits of his gadfly role, Socrates here again offends democratic sensibilities by proposing himself as worthy of honor despite not fitting the governing norms – while at the same time reiterating the benefits of his activity to democracy. But also as in the previous example, Socrates’ claims do not necessarily harm Athenian political culture but actually hold the potential to reinforce it by recognizing democratic honor as desirable honor, thus underscoring Socrates’ commitment to the dēmos while at the same time he nonetheless radically criticizing it.

Socrates’ suggestion that another day of argument might have won him his acquittal also further highlights his ambiguous relationship to Athenian democracy. Socrates laments that he has had such a short time to converse with the jury. Alluding to the Spartan custom of multi-day capital trials, Socrates conjectures that if he had more than a day, he would have persuaded the jurors. A short time, he suggests, does not offer enough to exorcise powerful slanders. At once backhandedly complementing the Spartans while also condemning Athenian jury policies, Socrates appears clearly antipathetic to any jury. But his ultimate trust

---

53 Stryker and Slings speculate that this would have left the jury “exasperated”: Stryker and Slings: Plato’s Apology of Socrates, 191.
in the jury – exemplified in his belief that not only are they capable of being persuaded, but that they are worth persuading – countervails this. Socrates denies commitment to democratic principles while also respecting and trusting the judgment of the dēmos, the source of all these principles.

Yet for the short trial at hand, Socrates can offer no other punishments but what he has already said – the free meals in the Prytaneum. Convinced that he wrongs no one, Socrates asserts that he has nothing to fear (37b). He will not propose imprisonment, for that only brings more evils. Socrates has no money to pay a fine. Exile would only repeat the present situation – who would tolerate him if the Athenians cannot? Socrates asks. Socrates implies that Athens provides the best possible place for his practice of philosophy; elsewhere would only prove worse.

Socrates will not cease philosophizing. To live silently without meddling (sigōn de kai bēsuchian agon, 37e3), even in Athens, would prove impossible. It would mean disobeying the god, and it would also entail abandoning what Socrates deems the “greatest good for a human being” (megiston agathon on anthrōpōi touto):

To discuss excellence every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others [bekestēi hémeras peri arêtēs tous logos poieithbai kai tôn allon peri hōn bumeis emou akonte diallogemenous kain emauton kai allous exetaçontos, 38a3-5, 33].

“The life without examination,” Socrates continues, “is not worth living” (ho de anēxetatos bios ou biōtós anthrōpōi, a5-6). Socrates’ words seem to encapsulate the strange heroism of the gadfly that I have argued permeates the entire Apology. Not living a life devoted to

54 Here I diverge from the conventional “the unexamined life . . .” for the reasons explained by Stryker and Slings: The traditional translation (‘unexamined life’) implies that the word should be taken only in its passive sense. It means rather ‘a life without examination,’ in which there is a place neither for examining nor for being examined. Adjectives formed with an [-a-] privative, the stem of the verb and the suffix [-tos] have in themselves both active as well as passive force.” See Stryker and Slings, Plato’s Apology of Socrates, 375.
examination \((exetasis)\) would mean not living for Socrates: in the first place, doing so would unjustly contradict what he has taken as the god’s command and thus make him unjust; but more generally, such a life would prove unlivable for any human being – without examining and being examined one could easily commit unjust actions unknowingly. One would condemn oneself to self-corruption and therewith the corruption of others. Here lies the benefit of the gadfly’s hectoring and questioning – the gadfly’s activity forces the noble but sluggish horse to examine itself and others and thus to pursue a livable life.

At the same time, Socrates regards the life without examination as so unlivable that Socrates stands willing to cease to live lest he lose the place where such examination has flourished – Athens. In other words, this epigram puts Socrates’ dependence on Athenian democracy in the starkest terms: rejecting exile, Socrates implies that the life without examination can only occur in Athens; yet Athens also needs Socrates’ practice of philosophy, according to Socrates. Socrates will not silence himself and live a quiet life; but as a result Athens will silence him.

But Socrates recognizes that the stimulating bites of the gadfly will also pain their victims. While he claims to speak truly, Socrates also admits that he cannot persuade his fellow Athenians easily (38b). Socrates offers, then, one mina – a “considerable sum”\(^{55}\) – as a penalty. Plato, Apollodorus, Crito, and others raise this to thirty minas as Socrates turns to face the jury once again.

V.

Rejecting Socrates’ proposed penalty, the jury sentences Socrates to die. While his final words cannot possibly change the jury’s verdict,\(^{56}\) they resonate with the previous two

\(^{55}\) As noted in the Cooper, ed., 33 n. 8.

\(^{56}\) I assume this is the case, although perhaps a Mytilene could happen again.
speeches, and with the tensions we have observed pervading the *Apology*. Socrates both condemns and praises the Athenians, prophesying vengeance to those who have convicted him but offering candid discussion of why his daemon has not interfered with his participation to others who might have interest. Moreover, this final speech with its elusive remarks on death gives a heroic shape to the strangeness of the gadfly, a lasting yet ambiguous legacy of the Socrates of the *Apology*.

First addressing those who convicted him, Socrates foretells future retribution, but not of the same kind he has suffered. Rather, he predicts future versions of himself, saying that more will come to test the dèmos who will prove even more difficult to exorcise. One cannot avoid giving an account of one’s life (*apallaexesthai tou didonai elegchon tou bion*, 37c7-8); to escape such tests will prove neither possible nor good (39d). Yet considering Socrates’ own view of his activity he does not so much threaten suffering as promise a better life. While couching it in terms of vengeance, viewed from Socrates’ angle we could see this as succor.

Similar questions present themselves as Socrates addresses those who voted for his acquittal. Calling on these men as friends, Socrates admits that his daemon’s lack of interference gives him reason to regard the fate of death as not necessarily an evil one. “What has happened to me may well be a good thing,” Socrates says (40b, 35). Death must either offer a nugatory nothingness, like a dreamless sleep, or it will take Socrates to the “true jurymen” of the underworld where he can enjoy conversing with heroes and demigods. The possibility of the latter excites Socrates immensely:

---

57 This final speech of the *Apology* spans from 38c1 to 42a5.

58 This is also another meaning of the word Socrates uses, *timērion*. Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1795.
What would one not give, gentlemen of the jury, for the opportunity to examine \textit{exetasai}, 41b8 the man who led the great expedition against Troy, or Odysseus or Sisyphus, and innumerable other men and women one could mention? It would be an extraordinary happiness to talk with them to keep company with them and examine them [\textit{baõ dialegethai ekei kai suineinai kai exetazein amébanon an eie endaimonias, c3-4}]. In any case, they would certainly not put one to death for doing so. They are happier there [\textit{endaimonsteroi eisin boi ekei tôn enthade, c6}] than we are here in other respects, and for the rest of time they are deathless, if indeed what we are told is true. (41b7-c7)

Socrates here imagines continuing his god-mandated work of examination (\textit{exetasai}, 41b8; \textit{exetazein}, 41c3) in association (the \textit{sunousia: suineinai}, 41c3) with the heroes of the past. The possibility of continuing his practice of philosophy gives Socrates “good hope” (\textit{enelpis . . agathon}, 40c5) and he encourages his new intimates, the jurors who voted in his favor, to have good hope as well (\textit{enelpidas einai}, 41c8); without any evidence to the contrary, one can hope for something better with death – at least one thus escapes the troubles of the living.

Yet Socrates still encourages those who would listen to continue causing trouble. When his sons come of age, Socrates requests that these favorable jurors continue what Socrates has begun, hectoring them as Socrates has hectored during his life and their fellow Athenians:

If you think they care for money or anything else more than they care for excellence [\textit{epimeleisthai é arête}, 41e5], or if they think they are somebody when they are nobody. Reproach them as I reproach you [\textit{oneidizete autois béstper ego humin, c6}], that they do not care for the right things and think they are worthy when they are not worthy of anything [\textit{bati onk épimelountai bóon deî, kai óiontai ti einai ontes ondenos axioi, c7-42a1}]. If you do this, I shall have been justly treated by you, and my sons also. (41e-42a, 36)

Socrates insists on the justice of his activity and on carrying his examination forward after his death, both in the afterlife and in life after Socrates. Yet despite his exhortations to those around him, Socrates still ends in mystery:

Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god. (42a)

---

59 Here is the Greek: \textit{Alla gap eîde híra apienai, enoi men apothanoumenoi, humin de biósomenois. Hapoteri de bémion erchontai epi ameiron pragma, adelón pantì plén è toi théli (42a2-5).}
But Socrates’ final speech casts his character and the *Apology* as a whole in new light with Socrates’ invocation of himself among the heroes – Socrates’ strange new heroism, the heroism of the gadfly. By ending with a prophecy, Socrates takes up another Athenian trope – that of the righteous poet brought to trial by a society that found him intolerable. Socrates anticipates this trope with his quasi prophecy in the image of the gadfly that the city might, in effect, swat him away, ending his work of awakening and rousing. Moreover, the gadfly’s occupations begin with an ambiguous message from Apollo through the Delphic oracle, another mark of this story. Socrates places himself, then, in a lineage of prophetic poets who have suffered as a result of their truth-telling, whose sting proved too irritating for surrounding political sensitivities.

Socrates’ final speech also connects his gadfly activity to heroism in another way through his allusions to Achilles and the heroes in the underworld. Here Socrates continues the martial tradition of the “heroic age” but resituates it in Athenian democracy. His implicit critique of Achilles also connects Socrates to a figure (Achilles) who “imaginatively disengage[d] from the web of relations to extend [his] sympathies and sensibilities” just as Socrates as gadfly incites his fellow Athenians to disengage from their lives, from what they assume they know, and take up the activities of examination as the only way of living well.

---

60 On this trope in Greek culture generally, see Todd Compton, “The Trial of the Satirist.” I draw on this article in the rest of the paragraph.

61 As J. Peter Euben puts it: “As Socrates’ critique of those institutions [Athens’ political institutions] suggests a direction (though not a program) for political regeneration, so does his amended quotation form Homer’s Achilles provide the basis for a critique and reconstitution of a dominant cultural narrative. One could even say that his quotation-misquotation of the greatest Greek hero (except perhaps for Heracles) is analogous to his perfectly imitating a law court speech after saying he is ignorant of legal procedures. Both illustrate how Socrates philosophizes” (Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 218-9).

In doing so, and in his self-connection to Achilles, Socrates also transposes the agon on the battlefield to the agon in the marketplace; his very language of examination, variations on the word *exestasin*, comes from descriptions of troop movements and battle.  

Yet the allusion to Achilles also illuminates a third sense of Socrates’ heroism, and an even stranger one. In his argument against the charge that Socrates did not believe in the gods, Meletus had declared that Socrates does not believe in any gods – that Socrates believes in no gods at all (*hōs to parapau on nomizeis theous*, 26c7). Socrates questions how he (Socrates) can believe in *daimonia* (“spiritual things”: 27d3, 26) and not in gods since Meletus has admitted that spirits are gods. “What man would believe children of the gods to exist, but not gods?” Socrates asks (27d9-10, 26). Socrates then introduces an intriguing analogy:

> That would be just as absurd [*atapon*, 27e2] as to believe the young of horses and asses, namely mules, to exist, but not to believe in the existence of horses and asses. You must have made this deposition, Meletus, either to test us or because you were at a loss [*aporōn*, e5] to find any true wrongdoing of which to accuse me. There is no way in which you could persuade anyone of even small intelligence that it is possible for one and the same man to believe in spiritual but not also in divine things, and then again for that same man to believe neither in spirits not in gods nor in heroes. (27e1-28a2, 26)

Socrates here creates a typology: mules are to horses and asses as heroes are to gods and men. This means that when Socrates compares himself to Achilles in the very next passage (28c2) he implicitly places both himself and Achilles in connection with the mules of the previous passage – as well as with the demigods and daimonia. Implicitly, then, Socrates seems to suggest that he not only resembles Achilles for his bravery and stubbornness in the

---

63 On the word *exestasin* Harvey S. Goldman comments: “Socrates’ use of the word draws its spirit, what can only be called its aggressiveness and intrusiveness, from the same source in military experience” (Goldman, “Reexaming the ‘Examined Life’ in Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*,” 33).

64 In this paragraph I draw extensively on Diskin Clay’s very suggestive article, “Socrates’ Mulishness and Heroism.” I also take some liberties with his argument that I hope would not offend.
face of death, but also that Socrates too acts as a kind of daimon or hero or demigod. What could this possibly mean?

I do not want to exaggerate the potential significance of this passage, but I think it reminds us of a residual ambiguity within our view of Socrates’ strange heroism, the heroism of the gadfly. Viewing Socrates in terms of his heroics can overemphasize the tragic and serious aspect of Socrates in the *Apology*. We become inclined to see the *Apology* as a kind of morality play with the lesson that we ought to tolerate these irritating philosophers. In other words, viewing Socrates as a hero can easily domesticate him, rendering the gadfly’s bite as innocuous as a gnat’s. And just as easily swatted away.

But the comic aspect, the ridiculousness of Socrates’ heroism, returns in Socrates’ comparison of himself and Achilles to asses. In its echo of Alcibiad’s description of Socrates in terms of the *daimonia* of *eros*, the comedy of the *Symposium* comes to mind. But more important, on my reading, Socrates’ remark to Meletus seems to anticipate one way of talking about Socrates’ heroism in general (as well as another connection to the *Symposium* and Alcibiad’s speech). It would be *atopon*, Socrates tells Meletus, if one did not believe this. Alcibiad used this word, we might recall, to describe Socrates: Socrates was most strange and absurd – *atopáteros* – out of place and outlandish. Socrates’ comparison reminds us of this ridiculous, bizarre aspect to the figure of Socrates, one that exceeds comparison. What can we say about an *atopic* Socrates?

---

65 Clay makes much clearer, more careful work of a point to which I have moved all too hastily. See Clay, “Socrates’ Mulishness and Heroism,” especially 55 – 60.
7: AN ATOPIC SOCRATES: Engaging Socrates’ Strangeness

The philosophy placed in books has ceased to challenge men. . . . In order to understand the total function of the philosopher, we must remember that even the philosophical writers whom we read and we are have never ceased to recognize as their patron a man who never wrote, who never taught, at least in any official chair, who talked with anyone he met on the street, and who had certain difficulties with public opinion and with the public powers. We must remember Socrates.

– Maurice Merleau-Ponty¹

If the problem of Socrates has caused so much ink to flow, in the final analysis, is it not because behind the ‘case’ of this atopical and atypical monster, each interpreter is trying as best he can to ‘settle’ his own ‘case,’ to carry out his reading in such a way that all his own certitudes will not collapse with Socrates, that his own equilibrium and that of his ‘system’ – even if there is nothing systematic about it – will not be too seriously threatened?

– Sarah Kofman²

I.

By reminding us of the originary power of Socrates, Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the epigraph above returns us to the many images of Socrates, all of which have in some way contributed to his diverse legacies. Across the dialogues we can observe these different facets of Socrates in the action of Plato’s dialogues: Socrates as a stingray in the Meno, as ἐρώτικος in the Symposium, as a midwife in the Theaetetus, as πολιτικός in the Gorgias, and as a gadfly in the Apology. Socrates appears in radically different ways – aggressive and then friendly, dogmatic and then skeptical, comic and then tragic – but common elements also appear in Socrates’ insistence on inquiry as well as with the use of stories, pretence, and even exaggeration in pursuing the practice of philosophy.³ The precise political consequences of each of the facets

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, In Praise of Philosophy, 34.
² Sarah Kofman, Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher, 245.
of Socrates would seem to remain ambiguous as they held the promise of improving the Athenian democracy while also threatening to radically undermine it.

While Merleau-Ponty recalls us to Socrates’ status as unifying figure for the practice of philosophy in the world, Sarah Kofman reminds us of the need to resist simply finding ourselves in Socrates, returning us to the questions of the Introduction. As Kofman suggests, while pretending to engage Socrates we may well rather engage in writing our own fiction of Socrates. This dovetails with a concern about domesticating Socrates by conforming his character to our categories – rounding Socrates’ edges either through an insistence on his teachings as we saw in Martha Nusbaum or on his relevance as we saw in Dana Villa or on his exemplarity as we saw in Alexander Nehamas.4 All of these ways of appropriating Socrates risk taking up his character with our conceptual tools and thus protecting our certitudes and systems with a pseudo-Socratic guise. For as much as we might wish to engage Socrates with questions about his teachings, his relevance, or his exemplarity, we can take Kofman as warning against doing so, lest we lose the unsettling and disturbing effects of Socrates’ strangeness.

And yet Kofman’s admonition also underscores the inevitability of finding ourselves in Socrates. Just as Oswyn Murray describes how national traditions influenced the interpretations of animal behavior – with American animals rushing frenetically, Germans pondering their different options, and so forth – so we too tend to create a Socrates in our own images.5 We cannot help domesticating Socrates to some degree when we conform his

---

3 See the recent work of Elizabeth Markovits, *The Politics of Sincerity*, for an elaboration of some of these different modes of Socrates’ activity.

4 See J. Peter Euben, “The Uses of Classical History for Contemporary Themes.”

figure to our categories of understanding. Any claim to the contrary maintains a
disingenuous belief in the purity of interpretation and translation, a false security that not
every encounter with a text need change both the subject and the author. As Kofman insists,
we all write fictions of Socrates, whether knowingly or not.

I cannot exempt myself from these accusations. But in an attempt to negotiate the
competing demands framed by Merleau-Ponty and Kofman – the claim of Socrates to our
attention and the need to resist imposing ourselves onto Socrates – I want to recall a theme
that has remained latent across the past six chapters – the theme of Socrates’ strangeness.
Socrates’ strangeness, I will suggest, both illuminates the connections among the different
facets of his character while also resisting attempts to appropriate Socrates by insisting on
the mystery and outlandishness of “this atopical and atypical monster,” as Kofman puts it. I
will argue that strangeness itself, understood in terms of atopia, unites Socrates’ many voices,
and that engaging Socrates must mean engaging the strangeness of Socrates, his atopia.6

Engaging Socrates’ atopia also allows for a way of answering the questions of the
possible coherence and meaning of Socrates that I raised earlier. As will become clearer in
what follows, Socrates’ atopia, I will argue, provides as much coherence as we can get while
also resisting a writing of our own case onto Socrates, as Sarah Kofman warns. In other
words, atopia can hold these disparate aspects of Socrates together, but without definitively
placing one over the other or solving the ambiguities that arise within and among them.
Given the multiple voices and the ambiguous political consequences of his character, atopia
offers the most meaning we can ask from the figure of Socrates. Atopia gives us a way to

6 I will keep atopia in italics from here forward in order to emphasize the Greek strangeness of the term.
“Atopy,” an English word with the adjectival form “atopic” also refers to “a form of hypersensitivity in which
acute reactions occur, on exposure to the antigen, in some special organ or tissue” (Oxford English Dictionary,
Second Edition). I do not mean “atopia” or “atopic” in this sense.
describe Socrates’ different facets, but this becomes possible in part because of the residual ambiguity of the term itself. Socrates remains shrouded in strangeness.

*Atopia* also suggests a way of engaging Socrates that speaks our desire to “make something” of Socrates for contemporary political life. Whereas Arendt, Wolin, and Latour would expel Socrates from politics, the sheer number of “Socrateses” militates against this – Socrates remains present (and seductive) in our political imaginaries. And yet uses of Socrates by Nussbaum, Villa, Nehamas, while insisting on Socrates’ usefulness also conform Socrates in paradigms of liberal education, citizenship, and the philosophic care of the self that obscure Socrates’ edginess, reduce his radicalism, and ignore his often radical politics. By emphasizing the *atopic* Socrates, I want to suggest that we can resist the domesticating tendencies of those latter appropriations even while insisting on a particular vision of Socrates. Instead of giving us authority for preexisting theories, then, the *atopic* Socrates suggests a kind of political activity and political theorizing committed to disturbance and displacement while also working across, with, and against conventional boundaries and languages. The *atopic* Socrates challenges women and men not only to “think what they are doing” – as Hannah Arendt would have it – but to do so radically, collectively, and even bizarrely.

II.

Socrates’ strangeness appears most markedly around instances of the Greek word *atopos* or *atopia*, meaning, very roughly, “strange” and “strangeness.” This word thus offers a starting point for investigating the meanings of Socrates’ strangeness, and the word’s multiple senses

---

7 This emerges from Arendt’s treatment of Socrates in “Philosophy and Politics.”

8 Gregory Vlastos calls Socrates’ “strangeness . . . the key to his philosophy” (Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 2 n.3). Yet I will suggest below that by insisting on Socrates as an “ironist and moral philosopher,” Vlastos risks effacing Socrates’ strangeness, much as Alexander Nehamas and Dana Villa do (see below).
give a sense of the different dimensions of this strangeness as well as its political valences.9

Atopia in its literal sense denotes being out of place or out of the way, but its meaning also
extends to unwantedness, extraordinariness, and absurdity.10 As I will show in what follows,
we can trace Socrates’ disruptiveness in Athenian political culture along the lines of his being
out of place, his unwantedness, the absurdity of his images and arguments, and the
extraordinariness of his figure. Thus atopia allows us to map Socrates’ effects on his
surrounding political world.

First of all, at the literal level, we can observe Socrates displacing the space and time
of Athenian democracy. This begins in the Apology, where Socrates publicly admits his
reputation for atopia:

It may seem strange [doceien atopen einai, 31c4] that while I go around and give this
advice privately and interfere in private affairs, I do not venture to go to the
assembly and there advise the city. (31c4-5, 29)11

While this invocation of atopia may seem innocuously similar to many Athenian observations
that “such and such may seem to you,” two elements about Socrates’ atopia appear here that
will prove important as my argument develops: first, Socrates describes this as an appearance

---

9 Tormod Eide notes that the “atopia is the quality of being atopos, a favourite adjective in Plato, around 230
instances (including the verb atopio) being found in his works. It is not too much to say that Plato established
the use of atopos in Greek literature, and it may seem strange that this important term has received so little
attention” (Eide, “On Socrates’ Atopia,” 59 – 60). In terms of Socrates in particular, Ruby Blondell comments
that atopia “is closely associated with Socrates throughout Plato, especially with the peculiar mode of discourse
and the aporia or bewilderment it engenders” (The Play of Character, 73). I focus here on atopia in the dialogues I
discuss at length in Engaging Socrates – Republic, Meno, Symposium, Theaetetus, Gorgias, and Apology – but atopia plays
an important role in at least two other dialogues: the Phaedrus and the Phaedo. On the Phaedrus, see François
Makowski, “Où est Socrate? L’aporie de l’atopicité chez Platon.” On the Phaedo, see Paul Plass, “Philosophic
Anonymity and Irony,” for specific references.

10 As Gregory Vlastos describes translating atopia as “strangeness”: “The Greek is stronger; ‘strangeness’ picks it
up at the lower end of its intensity-range. At the higher end ‘outrageousness’ or even ‘absurdity’ would be
required to match its force” (Vlastos, Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher, 1 n1).

11 All citations to Plato’s dialogue refer to the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text (Duke,
ed. for Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Cratylus, Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman or Slings, ed. for Republic or
Burnet, ed. for the remaining dialogues) and the page number of the translations in Cooper, ed. Plato Complete
Works unless otherwise indicated.
or an opinion about his *atopia*. He continues to explain that his divine sign has warned him from political involvement while he has already described his interpretation of the Delphic Oracle’s order for him to philosophize – a command he perceives as coming from the god, i.e. Apollo. Socrates recognizes that his presence in these private spaces upsets the conventional spatial arrangements of Athenian democracy. By admitting as much, Socrates seeks to reassure his fellow citizens. Similarly, Socrates confides to Theaetetus that his reputation for *atopia* comes from “people talking”:

. . . They do say that I am a very odd sort of person, always causing people to get into difficulties [*hoti de atopòtatas eimi kai poiō tous anthrōpous aporein*]. You must have heard that, surely? (149a – b, 166)

“Yes, I have,” Theaetetus responds. Socrates has just described his work as an intellectual midwife, and after Theaetetus sees that Socrates means well, the dialogue can continue. As we saw in Chapter 4, while we know very little about the midwife in ancient Athens, it clearly differed from doctoring and any “professionalized” expertise in medicine in being traditionally a woman’s role, not systematized in texts, and not a source of social status.12 By calling himself a midwife, then, Socrates implicates himself in a lower status occupation than would conventionally benefit an Athenian male citizen –a startling connection of the private, female world with the public, masculine one.13 We can take these two instances of *atopia*, then, as trying to disabuse his audience of the discomfort his *atopia* and the strangeness of his activity might cause them, akin to telling a child that the frightening tumult of thunder will not in fact hurt her.

---

12 See John Younger, *Sex in the Ancient World*, 81 on midwives during this general period and Ann Ellis Hanson, “The Medical Writers’ Woman,” on the role of women. I put “professional” in quotes because of the lack of such a vocabulary at this time in Athens.

13 One could also compare this to the different reactions of Meno to Socrates as a stingray or Alcibiades to Socrates as a master of erotics.
Yet, second, the disturbing quality of *atopia* remains, which the passage from the *Apology* also underscores. Socrates’ transformation of the spaces of Athenian political life upset the status quo.\(^{14}\) Socrates tries to explain his innocence by pointing to his own poverty and to the lack of evidence that he has corrupted the youth of Athens. And yet the direct connection he draws in the passage where *atopia* appears reveals what might have disrupted Athens and its citizenry the most: Socrates’ meddlesome interference in private affairs. In a similar sense we see this exhibited in the *Theaetetus* where Socrates demonstrates his concern for Athens by interrogating its promising young, reinventing the *sunousia*, a key Athenian educational institution, in the process.\(^{15}\) These combine to oppose Athenian norms of citizenship by displacing politics from public spaces such as the Assembly and the Theater to the agora, private homes, and even Megarians outside of Athens.\(^{16}\) Socrates does not limit his discussions to matters or spaces deemed political but meddles beyond these bounds; Socrates’ *atopia* thus threatens the conventional architecture of Athenian democracy.\(^{17}\)

This spatial aspect of Socrates’ *atopia* – that is, Socrates’ inflecting the spaces of Athenian politics in strange ways – also has a temporal dimension that appears in the *Apology*. When Socrates’ describes why he cannot participate in public affairs nor even maintain his own, he declares that he has no leisure, *scholē*, to do so:

> Because of this occupation [*tēs ascholias, b8, viz. continuing the investigation as the god bade him*] I do not have the leisure to engage in public affairs to any extent [*oute

\(^{14}\) To be clear, the character of Socrates in the dialogues purports to do this. I do not mean to imply that this actually occurred.

\(^{15}\) On the *sunousia*, see Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* and Kevin Robb, “Asebeia and Sunousia.”

\(^{16}\) As Socrates describes in the *Apology* and as we see in the *Meno* (the home of Anytus) or *Symposium* (the home of Agathon) and the *Theaetetus* (somewhere in Megara).

\(^{17}\) As Marcel Detienne argues, the agora also provided a space for political life, writing that “the agora, in fact, is a place of words and of debate on the communal affairs of the assembled group” (Detienne, “Public Space and Political Autonomy,” 45). But for Detienne the agora signifies the ‘clash of discourse, debates that take place in the assembly’ whereas Socrates appears to orient the agora toward a different signification.
Here Socrates denies having any leisure, and yet a little later in the *Apology*, after the jury has convicted Socrates, he implies the opposite and rhetorically asks what punishment he might deserve:

> What is suitable for a poor benefactor who needs leisure to exhort you? Nothing is more suitable, gentlemen, than for such a man to be fed in the Prytaeneum, much more suitable for him than any one of you who has won a victory at Olympia with a pair or a team of horses. (36d, 32)

We can now see how Socrates redefines *scholē*: he does not have the leisure for conventional activities in democratic Athens such as participating politically and supporting his family. Yet he does have leisure for the activities left ungoverned by the water clock: digressive discussions (as in the *Theaetetus*) or standing off to the side before Agathon’s party (in the *Symposium*) or even continuing to discourse while the hemlock enters his body (as he does in the *Phaedo*). As if to reiterate this shift and challenge of Athenian time, in the *Apology* Socrates even suggests that another day of his trial would have allowed him to convince the jurors.

Socrates’ temporal disruptiveness may seem minor, but the regulation of time played an important role in the Athenian democracy. As it became a democracy, Athens created temporal orders and a primary temporal vocabulary; the development of these gave political shape to the way of life of all Athenians.\(^{18}\) The political allotment of time allowed for the Athenian democracy to assert its power of self-formation. Thus as Danielle Allen has put it, Athenian time measurements appeared “tightly involved with the political.” Socrates disturbs

---

\(^{18}\) Danielle Allen, “Athenian Time,” 162
this; his *atopia* thus displaces the conventions of Athenian democratic life in terms of both time and space.\(^19\)

The *Gorgias* offers a stark depiction of Socrates’ *atopia* in ways that extend the spatial and temporal dislocation that appear in the *Apology* and have echoes in the *Theaetetus*. Socrates tips us off, in a sense, to the *atopic* quality of the “true political art” he proposes in the *Gorgias* by remarking to Callicles that it would not be strange (*atopon*, 521d3) if he were put to death because of this political art. Rather than making speeches that gratify his listeners, Socrates tells Callicles, Socrates aims at the best. But this does not have pretty results: Socrates likens his speech-making to a doctor telling children that they can’t have their candy; if the children were to judge the doctor later, he would surely not escape execution (521e). Socrates’ own strangeness, Socrates suggests, stems from a desire to improve the health of his fellow citizens – but they resist this in upholding their temporal and spatial boundaries. As in the *Apology*, Socrates’ “politics” upset the status quo; Socrates’ suggestion that his fellow Athenians reevaluate their values would seem to lead to the hemlock.\(^20\)

But in addition to being out of place and thus displacing Athenian spatial and temporal arrangements, Socrates’ *atopia* also had particular effects on his interlocutors. Here Socrates’ *atopia* possesses the sense of unwantedness in that Socrates provokes unwanted

---

\(^{19}\) Danielle Allen, “Athenian Time,” 160. Allen also writes that “the democratic nature of the Athenian distribution of time and judgment did not lie primarily in the equality of the portions of water but rather in the acceptance of fallibility” (Ibid., 159). In his comment that the jury would have reached the right decision if he had had another day, Socrates questions this democratic commitment to accepting the costs of fallibility.

\(^{20}\) Monique Canto connects this specific element to Socrates’ *atopia*. Commenting on a slightly earlier passage in the *Gorgias*, Canto writes: “D'où la double position de Socrate. Être à la fois au centre de l'espace politique et tout à fait en dehors, telles est la loi de l'atopie socratique. Cette atopie est la condition logique destinée à montrer le décalage entre les valeurs fondatrices de la Cité et celles qui guident l'action politique concrete des citoyens d'Athènes. L'atopie sert donc à démontrer le mécanisme général de l'hypocrisie sociale” (Canto, “Introduction to Platon Gorgias,” 45-6).
reflection and response that often proves painfully discomfiting. This disturbing quality of Socrates’ atopia comes most frequently with the experience of aпоріа, often translated as “perplexity.” 21 As the Theaetetus passage quoted above shows, Socrates’ reputation for atopia stemmed in part from troubling others with perplexities (апоріаі). In the Symposium, Alcibiades’ experience of aпоріа “runs parallel” to Socrates’ atopia in his entire speech; Socrates’ strangeness (atopia) provokes Alcibiades’ perplexity (апoria) throughout it. 22 To take another example, while the word atopia and its variants do not appear in the Meno, the description there of Socrates as a stingray who perplexes all whom he touches (80a-b) connects this startling image and the consequences that normally follow from encountering atopia. After Meno calls Socrates a stingray for befuddling him with perplexities, Socrates reiterates Meno’s image later in the dialogue to describe the beneficial effects on Meno’s slave boy from being numbed and led to aпоріа (84b7-9). Neither Meno nor Socrates say this directly, but Meno’s bizarre image of the stingray, which marks the only appearance of this image in Plato, appears as strange regardless. 23

Part of what makes Socrates atopic also lies in the strange examples and arguments Socrates makes, arguments that strike his interlocutors as bizarre and out of place given the conventional expectations in the political culture of democratic Athens. In the Gorgias, Socrates calls attention to how his arguments might appear strange in a telling context during

---

21 This experience of dislocation, of being at a loss, or of perplexity – all potential translations of the Greek – often results from conversations with Socrates. See Liddell and Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, 215. Tormod Eide has also highlighted how the connection between atopia and aпоріа appeared in Greek mathematics as well as in Plato’s dialogues: Eide, “On Socrates’ Atopia,” 63.

22 The language comes from Tormod Eide, who continues: “This causal connection between atopia and aпоріа shows that atopia is something more and different than that which strikes us as extraordinary or astonishing; it cases bewilderment and perplexity” (“On Socrates’ Atopia,” 64).

23 Sarah Kofman connects the image of the stingray (which she translates as “torpedo fish”) to Socrates’ atopia, suggesting, as I have, that its effects mimic those that follow atopia in its other manifestations: Kofman, Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher, 26.
the argument with Polus when he suggests that rhetoric forms the counterpart in the soul to pastry baking, its counterpart in the body. “Perhaps I’ve done an absurd thing [atopon, 465e],” Socrates confesses, having given such a long speech. Socrates’ strangeness lies both in the bizarre metaphor – to liken rhetoric to pastry baking – as well as Socrates’ apparent hypocrisy in doing so at such length when he had just warned against longwindedness. As if to emphasize that the strangeness lies more in Socrates’ examples and arguments Polus calls Socrates’ arguments atopon twice during their short conversation: first objecting to the idea that a man who acts unjustly becomes more miserable if he does not receive just punishment (473a1) and second when Socrates suggests that they should enlist rhetoric in order to ensure just punishment rather than escape it (480e1). Socrates later confesses the strangeness of his examples more directly when he describes his image of the leaky jar (describing the soul dedicated to consumption) as “on the whole a bit strange” (taut’ epieikós men estin hupo ti atopa, 493c3-4), which Callicles shortly thereafter confirms, saying: “How strange you are, Socrates! And simply a crowd-pleaser” (hós atopos ei, ō Sókrates, kai atechnós dēmēgoros, 494d1).24

These direct associations of atopia with both Socrates’ person and his arguments connect with the particular imagery that Socrates uses to describe his activity and person across Plato’s dialogues. In the Apology, as we saw, Socrates describes his reputation for atopia as resulting from his meddling in private affairs while abstaining from public ones – this constitutes Socrates’ practice of philosophy, given by the god. Socrates depicted this activity with the image of the gadfly, describing the metaphor itself as ridiculous or laughable

24 My translation. The Cooper edition translation reads as follows: “What nonsense, Socrates. You’re a regular crowd pleaser” (837). Socrates had earlier accused Callicles of being atopic for not being able to oppose what his lovers propose (481e7), so perhaps Callicles means to echo this insult here.
(geloioteron, 30e3), which would seem to carry the strange and bizarre connotations of atopia.  

Similarly, Socrates mentions his reputation for atopia in the Theaetetus on the heels of describing himself as a midwife. Socrates begins this description by reminding Theaetetus that people call Socrates “a very odd sort of person, always causing people to get into difficulties” (honi de atopotatos eimi kai poiou tous anthropous aporein, 149a8-9, 166). As we saw earlier, Socrates explains this reputation by describing the origins and practice of his maieusis.

The atopic images of Socrates reach their climax in the Symposium. While the word and its variants occur only three times, each time it directly refers to particular aspects of Socrates’ character while also connecting to the spatial and temporal disruptions that Socrates creates. First, Agathon declares Socrates’ behavior atopic when Socrates does not show up for dinner with Aristodemus but instead stands under Agathon’s neighbor’s porch lost in thought. Agathon exclaims: “How strange [atopen g’]” (175a10). This connects to the aspect of atopia describing how Socrates displaces space and time, which Alcibiades later echoes with his own descriptions of Socrates’ strange behavior while on military campaigns. Rather than fulfilling his fellow Athenians’ expectations, Socrates stretches time and displaces himself, arriving late and disrupting the logistics of the symposium. Again, Socrates appears out of place to his fellow citizens.

25 In fact, geloioa (the adjective here) offers a sub-theme of the atopic Socrates and frequently appears as a kind of stand-in for atopia. One could say the same for Socrates’ association with “nonsense,” phluaria, which comes more often in the Gorgias.

26 For this reason, despite atopia’s only appearing three times in the dialogue, the Symposium has elicited the most comment on the atopic Socrates. As Diskin Clay put it in his discussion of the Symposium: “[Socrates] is – literally – out of place (atopo) and therefore difficult to place in the game of comparisons fashionable at the time” (Platonic Questions, 53). For other discussions of Socrates’ atopia in the Symposium, see Pierre Hadot, “The Figure of Socrates” in Philosophy as a Way of Life and Sarah Kofman, Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher.
Alcibiades’ speech on Socrates in the Symposium not only directly calls Socrates atopic, but it also shows how Socrates’ atopia links with the use of images to describe him, thus connecting atopia as a description for Socrates’ character to its aptness in characterizing Socrates’ practice of philosophy and the responses it provokes. Here is Alcibiades’ first use of the term, at the very beginning of his speech, addressing Socrates:

It is no easy task for one in my condition to give a smooth and orderly account of your bizarreness [tēn sēn atopian, 215a3]. I’ll try to praise Socrates, my friends, but I’ll have to use an image [di’ eikon, a5-6]. And though he may think I’m trying to make fun of him, I assure you my image is no joke. Look at him! Isn’t he just like a statue of Silenus? (215a3-8, 497)

Here Alcibiades calls Socrates atopic out of sheer frustration for lack of an appropriate vocabulary – one cannot pin Socrates down with any other words. Hence rather than attempt to describe him in prose, Alcibiades uses multiple images: an image of the Silenus here, but also one of the satyr Marsyas (215b4) and one of Chinese doll-like statuettes of excellence (algamata, 222a4). Alcibiades can attempt to compare Socrates to Achilles or Brasidas, Pericles or Nestor or Antenor or other great rhētors, but these all fail:

There is a parallel for everyone – everyone else, that is. But this man here is so bizarre [boois de boutosi ggege tēn atopian banthripos, 221d2-3], his ways and his ideas are so unusual, that, search as you might, you’ll never find anyone else, alive or dead, who’s even remotely like him. The best you can do is not to compare him to anything human, but to liken him, as I do, to Silenus and the satyrs, and the same goes for his ideas and arguments. (221d1-6, 503)

---

27 Gregory Vlastos remarks that Socrates’ atopia is “the keynote of Alcibiades’ speech”: Vlastos, Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher, 1.

28 Tormod Eide usefully surveys translations of atopia in Alcibiades’ speech as follows: “This is a selection of translations and interpretations: ‘your oddities’ (Lamb); ‘nature deroutante’ (Robin); ‘deine Wunderlichkeiten’ (Schleiermacher); ‘Originalität, Eigenart’ (Schmelzer); ‘your extraordinary nature’ (Waterfield); ‘out-of-the-way character, a walking conundrum’ (Bury).” As Eide concludes: “This variety is in itself an indicate that a closer look at the term might be of some use” (Eide, “On Socrates’ Atopia,” 59).

29 The translation by Christopher Rowe captures the literal meaning of this passage a little better than the Cooper edition: “But as for the sort of man this one is, so strange is he, both in himself and in the things he says, one wouldn’t come even close to finding anyone like him if one looked, whether among people now or among those in the past, unless perhaps if one were to compare him to the figures I’m talking about, not to anyone human, but to silenuses and satyrs – both him and what he says” (Rowe, Plato: Symposium, 121).
Socrates’ *atopia* completely enshrouds his figure for Alcibiades – one cannot even find a proper comparison. But this passage also again underscores how the *atopic* Socrates both generates and requires images: first because he leaves his fellows at a loss to describe him (another sign of *aporia*, we could say); and second because no words or comparisons will suffice to describe the *atopic* Socrates. Socrates’ strangeness frenzies Alcibiades as a result – he does not know what to do with this man.

Alcibiades’ characterizations of Socrates as *atopon* collect many of the previous uses and cast them in new light. Part of Alcibiades’ disoriented reaction to Socrates comes from Socrates’ rejection of the conventional erotic relationship Alcibiades seeks. Socrates, Alcibiades explains, makes Alcibiades into the lover (*erastē*) instead of the beloved (*erōnomos*), reversing Alcibiades’ expectations. Moreover, Socrates attempts to displace Alcibiades’ political ambitions by turning them toward the practice of philosophy; Alcibiades’ comparison of Socrates to other political founders and rhētors contrasts Socrates’ activities that occur in private to their public deeds. Socrates challenges Alcibiades to attend private spaces in caring for himself rather than pursue his desires for honor and glory.\(^{30}\) Thus as in the *Gorgias* and *Apology*, we can see that Alcibiades too views Socrates’ *atopia* in terms of its spatial and temporal disturbances and the political consequences of both.

By invoking strange imagery for Socrates, Alcibiades’ description of the *atopic* Socrates also resonates with Socrates’ bizarre descriptions of himself and his activity in the *Meno*, *Theaetetus*, and *Apology*. Because no words suffice for Socrates, one requires images, but these images must always appear strange and peculiar. Not only, then, does Socrates provoke and disrupt those around him – always rousing and persuading and reproaching, as he

---

\(^{30}\) A dialogue whose authenticity has come under question, *Alcibiades I*, intimates this theme.
describes it in the *Apology* (31a-b) – but the images themselves function in the same way: associating Socrates with beasts and occupations that would have appeared strange and disreputable in democratic Athens. Socrates’ unwanted *atopia* connects him to these unwanted and lowly images, separating him from normal political life. Alcibiades adds to this by calling Socrates a silenus, a satyr, and a statuette of excellence.

Yet at the core of Alcibiades’ reaction to Socrates lies one man’s response to another man’s body. This again highlights the disturbing quality of Socrates’ *atopia* but in its importantly physical aspect. As we saw in the *Apology*, Socrates intrudes into the private affairs of his fellow citizens, meddling (*polupragmōn*) where Athenians preferred to let things lie. In the *Meno*, Meno compares Socrates’ provocations to the physical touch of the stingray while also evoking Socrates’ snub-nosed qualities with the comparison. The *Theaetetus* calls attention to Socrates’ appearance and physical strangeness by describing Theaetetus as resembling Socrates – as unhandsome but brilliant, a disturbing contradiction to most Athenians. But Alcibiades’ notoriety as one of the great beauties of Athens accentuates Socrates’ corporeal disturbances even more. When he realizes that Socrates sits next to him at the *Symposium*, Alcibiades reacts viscerally: “What!? By Herakles it’s you, Socrates!” (213c). Socrates’ physical interposition into Alcibiades’ life finds expression in Alcibiades’ own descriptions of how he sought to flee from Socrates, to escape his sight, to maneuver out of Socrates’ grasp (216a). In the middle of Alcibiades’ speech Alcibiades describes his failure to conquer Socrates physically, and this seems to have piqued Alcibiades the most. Socrates affects Alcibiades’ physical senses: Socrates’ words resemble music that makes Alcibiades’ feel drunk (215c-d); the sight of Socrates drives Alcibiades wild; and Socrates’ seductions have the bite of a snake (218a). Alcibiades cannot escape the draw of Socrates’ presence: “his powers are really extraordinary,” Alcibiades says (216d).
Physically disruptive, draped in disturbing images, dislocating the space and time of his fellow Athenians: these all describe aspects of Socrates’ \textit{atopia}, aspects that culminate in the speech of Alcibiades from the \textit{Symposium}. One could argue that Alcibiades hardly offers an objective portrait of Socrates, but it echoes other elements that we have observed in the \textit{Meno}, \textit{Theaetetus}, \textit{Gorgias}, and \textit{Apology}. \textit{Atopia} thus interweaves the different sides of Socrates’ strangeness through these multiple meanings. It captures these many “Socrateses,” we might say, without solving them.\textsuperscript{31}

Yet while at this point Socrates’ \textit{atopia} may appear simply critical and destructive, \textit{atopia} does not lack a constructive side. If we turn to the \textit{Republic}, I argue, we can see Socrates in terms of – although not defined by – three major motifs – what I call “topoi” – developed there for understanding the figure of Socrates: viewing Socrates as founder, as philosopher, and as hero. These motifs serve to frame questions about how and why Socrates creates a political community; about his practice of philosophy and its consequences; and about his role as a hero (or not). The \textit{atopic} Socrates, I want to suggest now, gives us a way of further framing Socrates’ strangeness with the constructive practices of these topoi while also resisting any direct identification among them. In this way we can connect Socrates’ appearances, activities, and the consequences of these to the roles he takes up, subverts, and creates in Athenian political culture.\textsuperscript{32} An \textit{atopic} Socrates transfigures politics, philosophy, and heroism in strange new ways.

\textsuperscript{31} Paul Plassman also calls our attention to how \textit{atopia} undermines Socrates’ status and authority in the dialogues, which both elicits responses from his interlocutors and, as I will discuss below, requires a certain kind of engagement from his readers. See Plass, “Philosophic Anonymity and Irony,” 255.

\textsuperscript{32} Although one must note that Socrates did not \textit{actually} transform Athenian political culture – this is simply the possibility implied by the drama of the dialogues.
III.

Socrates never uses atopia in the Republic to describe himself, nor do any of his interlocutors call him atopic. Although atopia and its variants occur frequently in the dialogue, they stay at a distance from the discussion’s participants. Thus Socrates describes sophistic education as atopic (atopos, 493c7) or Glaucon calls the images of the cave atopic: “It’s a strange image you’re describing, and strange prisoners,” Glaucon comments (atopon, ἐφή, λιγεία ἔικονα καὶ desmōtas atopous, 515a4). Most often atopia describes strange behavior or things that emerge in the conversation, but without any particular pattern: “strange” names for diseases such as “flatulence” and “catarrh” (atopa, 405d6); the “strange” idea that one should not breed animals in their prime (atopon, 459b9); a “strange” general who could not count his troops, not knowing number and calculation (atopon, 522d9); and the many “strange” types of constitutions people talk about (atopi, 544d4). For the most part, atopia appears as a surprised response to something Socrates proposes, an indication of his willingness to delve into the weird.

Yet atopia also appears in one significant place in the Republic – in the description of the philosopher. Socrates has just introduced the idea of the philosopher king, and now he has described to Glaucon what makes these philosophers so unique. Glaucon responds.

Glaucon: Then many strange people will be philosophers [Polloi ara atopoi esontai soi touioutoi, 475d1-2], for the lovers of sights [philoteamones, d2] seem to be included, since they take pleasure in learning things. And the lovers of sounds are very strange people to include as philosophers [bēi te philēkooi atopōlatoi tines eisin hōs g’ en philosophois titbenai, d3-4], for they would never willingly attend a serious discussion of spend their time that way, yet they run around to all the Dionysiac festivals. . . . Are we to say that these people . . . are philosophers?

Socrates: No, but they are like philosophers [homoious men philosophois, e2].

G: And who are the true philosophers?

S: Those who love the sight of truth [Tous de alētheias . . . philoteamonas, e4]. (475d1-e4, 1102)
Such a direct distinction between the *atopia* of lovers of sights and sounds and the implicitly non-strange “true philosophers,” the lovers of the sight of truth, would seem to vanquish any connection between Socrates and *atopia* in terms of the *Republic*. Indeed, *atopia* returns in the subsequent discussion only in such a negative context, as something philosophers do not possess and as that which the argument renders moot.\(^{33}\) Thus this glancing appearance would seem to hint at the lack of connection between philosophers as understood in the terms of the *Republic* and *atopia*.\(^{34}\) What then might this tell us about the atopic Socrates?

The appearance of *atopia* around philosophy and philosophers in the *Republic* might tempt us to declare Socrates as the definitive philosopher of the *Republic* and thus as essentially solved by that great text.\(^{35}\) But this would miss the ambiguity introduced by Glaucon’s use of the term. Glaucon calls the lovers of sights and sounds atopic while the “true philosophers” are not. But Socrates in the *Republic* does not include himself as one of the “true philosophers.” While Socrates does later include himself and Theages as “natural philosophers,” he excepts himself from the discussion because of his strange daimon and lack of formal education.\(^{36}\) Socrates does not fit the topos of this philosopher. In fact, the philosophers do not strike Glaucon as strange, one could argue, because they have a topos in the *Republic* – the *kallipolis*. The noble and beautiful regime that Socrates suggests will only

---

\(^{33}\) It appears three times in the context of discussions of philosophy, but not as attributed to the philosophers or philosophy directly: 484d8, 491c8, 501d3.

\(^{34}\) Thus when Andrea Nightingale declares that “the philosopher’s departure from home leads to a permanent state of *atopia*,” while this may hold if one interpreted the passage in light of the trope of the *theoros* (which Nightingale does), the text does not offer much of a foothold. See Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth*, 106.

\(^{35}\) Josiah Ober, for example, advances this argument, writing that “the *Republic* offers a bold solution” to the impasse regarding “the therapeutic capacity of Socratic rhetoric for either the polis or the ideologized individual” (Ober, *Political Dissent*, 215).

\(^{36}\) *Republic* 496b – c. As Melissa Lane has argued, Socrates corresponds in his description to a kind of proto-philosopher and figure who embodies what Lane calls “natural virtues,” uncultivated versions of the “true virtues” Socrates and his interlocutors describe in the argument. See Lane, “Virtue as the Love of Knowledge in Plato’s *Symposium* and *Republic*. 

---

301
come into being with the coalescence of philosophy and power provides a topos, a place and safe haven, for philosophers. And yet given the many anticipations of Socrates’ trial in the *Republic*, we cannot miss the strange figure who lacks such a definite topos – that is, Socrates.

By having Glaucon place *atopia* outside philosophy while also giving the philosophers of the *Republic* their own topos, I would suggest, the *Republic* calls our attention to Socrates’ very literal placelessness – another meaning of *atopia* – as well as his concomitant appearance of strangeness. In other words, the arguments of the *Republic* deny fully encompassing Socrates the topos we might expect (or desire) while also framing Socrates with this topos. Moreover, rather than describing Socrates as *atopic* explicitly in the argument, the *Republic* depicts an *atopic* Socrates in the action of the of the dialogue itself. Socrates’ lack of fit with the topoi of the dialogue becomes apparent with his discordant actions: refusing the credit for the founding of the city in speech; excepting himself from the philosophers in Book VI; and describing justice in terms of “doing one’s own thing” in contrast to Socrates’ own meddlesomeness. Socrates effectively disappears himself from the argument of the dialogue while he appears without a place in the dialogue’s action. This constitutes his *atopia*.

Reading Socrates out of the *Republic* places into question his work of founding, his practice of philosophy, and his enigmatic heroism; viewed through the lens of Socrates’ *atopia*, we can see how Socrates takes up these roles and makes them strange in the other dialogues I have treated thus far. Rather than founding a conventional *polis*, whether by colonizing and creating a philosophical community like later followers of Socrates or by any other means, Socrates makes the *sunousia* of Athens strange. He turns this educational institution into a space of friendly philosophical conversation, as we can see idealized to

---

37 Such as the Stoics or the Cynics. See Paul Van der Waerdt, *The Socratic Movement.*

38 See Chapter 4 for further argument as well as Kevin Robb, “Asebeia and Sunousia” and Kenneth Sayre, *Plato’s Literary Garden.*
some extent in the *Theaetetus*; yet Socrates’ philosophical *sunousia* can also have radically disorienting and disturbing effects, as Alcibiades’ reaction illustrates, because it abstracts from the conventions and norms of democratic Athens.

Socrates’ *atopic* founding, then, reorients politics away from the relatively predicable norms and conventions of democratic institutions and toward the uncertainty that comes with raising questions about the way he and his fellow citizens live. This has a constructive side without completely fulfilling the topos: Socrates locates his philosophical community in the *sunousia* while also transfiguring this Athenian institution. Moreover, the philosophical *sunousia* does not embody the stability of its predecessor: One could provoke the ire of Anytus or the shallow mimicry of Apollodorus, but one might also stimulate the work of examining oneself and others that Socrates deems crucial to any life of flourishing (as he declares in the *Apology*). Or one could fail entirely to rouse one’s fellows, and end up talking to oneself as at the end of the *Gorgias*, in a sense we witness this in the example of Agathon, who notes Socrates’ strangeness but remains unaffected by all appearances, drifting off along with Aristophanes at the end of the *Symposium* while Socrates continues discoursing. Thus *atopic* founding in the mode of Socrates does not found in any conventional sense: its purpose lies in provocation rather than perpetuation, in questioning rather than practicing established ways of life, and in constituting publics around inquiry shared in common rather than forming a public as a way of circumscribing the common.

One could argue that we must view the character Socrates by the legacies of the historical figure of Socrates who founded communities of Socratics – Plato among them – that promulgated their own doctrines and that we should judge any political legacy attribute to “Socrates” – literary or historical – based on these groups’ contributions (or lack
thereof. Indeed, although Plato’s elitist credentials have come under fire, his example alone as perhaps the most famous disciple of Socrates would seem to definitively shape any conception of political community that might follow from Socrates. On such a reading, we could view Plato’s academy as an actual institution based on the *sunousia*, one that purportedly created bastions of political elitism where statesmen might train themselves in philosophy; Plato’s own political involvements with tyrants in Sicily would give us good reason to doubt it could go any other way.

Yet not only has such a view of Plato become contestable— but we cannot convict Socrates on the basis of a backward inference. For one, if another twenty votes had gone his way according to the *Apology*, Socrates would have escaped conviction in his trial. This fact alone should make us pause. But even more important, the character Socrates’ “politics,” if we can call them that, remain ambiguous across the dialogues. While he declares himself as practitioner of the “true political art” in the *Gorgias*, his failure to persuade any of the interlocutors calls into question whether this political art meant anything— or could have any effect. After Socrates seems to have convinced Meno to pursue true opinion through elenchic inquiry, Meno ships out to Thessaly where he acts like a tyrant. And while Alcibiades may come to mind when we reflect on Socrates’ “corrupting [of the] youth,” at least on the basis of the *Symposium*, Alcibiades declares that Socrates has not taught him

---

39 Debra Nails raises this as one reading in *Agora, Academy, and the Conduct of Philosophy*. But she insists— rightly, I think— that we cannot place Socrates solely based on Plato’s record.

40 Kenneth Sayre, while leaving aside the politics, does connect Socrates’ use of the *sunousia* to Plato’s discussion of it in the Seventh Letter. See Sayre, *Plato’s Literary Garden*.

41 In an argument most persuasively advanced by S. Sara Monoson in *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements*. This runs contrary to the once dominant reading articulated by, e.g., George Klosko in *The Development of Plato’s Political Theory*.

42 On this reading, see J. Peter Euben, “Reading Democracy” and Christopher Rocco, *Tragedy and Enlightenment*.

43 Roslyn Weiss, among others, notes these ambiguities in Plato’s *Meno*. Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*.
anything and only frustrated him. Socrates refuses to participate on the terms that most Athenians understand or desire, but this would hardly seem a capital offense. Socrates’ *atopic* founding does not show itself as aligned with or opposed to Athenian democracy. Hence its *atopia*—it literally appears “out of place.”

***

In terms of philosophy, Socrates resists conventional understandings while also creating a newly transformed practice of philosophy that reorients Athenian democratic culture. As we saw in the *Republic*, Socrates declines to discuss his own case, saying that he seems too unusual to merit discussion. But this refusal to connect his practice of philosophy with other known philosophers—philosophers familiar to his fellow Athenians—occurs across the dialogues. Part of Socrates’ strangeness in this regard consists in his denial of knowledge, such as in the *Meno*, or in his assertion of strange, unfamiliar knowledge, such as the knowledge of things pertaining to *erōs* in the *Symposium* or the art of maieusis in the *Theaetetus*. Alternatively, Socrates denies knowing anything (other than “human knowledge”) but rather insists that his activity nonetheless benefits his fellow citizens. Such a stance seems implicit in the *Gorgias* when Socrates denies knowledge of justice and injustice but still characterizes his work as “practicing the true political art,” and appears even more strikingly in the *Apology* where Socrates denies any wisdom other than his own awareness of a lack of wisdom. Whereas Athenians would have considered philosophers to possess some knowledge, even if spoken cryptically like Heraclitus, Socrates disturbs this assumption. He does not fit the expectation—neither his fellow Athenians’ nor ours.

---

44 As even I.F. Stone allows.

45 See, for example, Andrea Nightingale’s discussion of the cultural practice of philosophy in *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy* as well as Pierre Hadot’s introduction to *What is Ancient Philosophy*. One could also point to how Socrates acts as if philosophers have knowledge and true accounts in his treatment of Protagoras, Heraclitus, and Parmenides in the *Theaetetus*. 
As we saw in Chapter 4, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* also illustrates the *atopic* quality of Socrates’ practice of philosophy in its constructive aspects. In the first place, Socrates distinguishes himself from the sophist Protagoras.⁴⁶ Nor does Socrates resemble the philosopher of the digression later in the *Theaetetus*, as others have argued.⁴⁷ Instead, the juxtaposition of the midwife and the *sunousia* in the *Theaetetus* offers a different way of imagining Socrates’ philosophical practice; by speaking of *sunousia*, Socrates explicitly takes up a traditional institution of Athenian political culture, but by connecting the *sunousia* with the image of his activity as a kind of intellectual midwifing, Socrates also shifts these traditional institutions in a different direction – towards the collective practice of philosophy. Thus we can see further evidence of Socrates’ creating what we might call “publics,” philosophical associations oriented toward the common world yet outside the conventional spaces and institutions of politics. As we saw earlier, viewing the *sunousia* in such a way casts a dialogue like the *Meno* in a different light, if we see Anytus’s scorn toward Socrates’ questioning as stemming from a defense of traditional institutions.⁴⁸ As in the case of Socrates’ challenge to the “erotics of democracy” in the *Symposium*, Socrates thus appears to work both within and against Athenian democratic life, utilizing traditional institutions while also orienting them in an untraditional, perhaps even anti-traditional, direction.

The ambiguous position of this constructive aspect of Socrates’ *atopic* philosophy appears in starkest relief in the *Apology*. The closeness of the jury’s vote, Socrates’ claims to have benefited the city through his gadfly activity, and the belligerent response of Meletus all testify to the lack of definitive evidence either for or against Socrates. Without evidence,

---

⁴⁶ As Cynthia Farrar has underscored in *The Origins of Democratic Thinking*.

⁴⁷ See, e.g. Harry Berger, Jr., “Plato’s Flying Philosopher” and Rachel Rue, “The Philosopher in Court.”

⁴⁸ As noted by Robb, “Asebeia and Sunousia,” 85 – 89.
unsubstantiated opinions rule the jury; the charges against him, Socrates argues, come solely from an ignorance about the nature of his activity – they really just correspond to the image of the philosopher that exists in rumors around Athens. Do the people of Athens confuse Socrates for Anaxagoras (26d)? Berating Meletus, Socrates continues:

> Are you so contemptuous of these men [andres dikastai, 27d4; viz. the jurors] and think them so ignorant of letters as not to know that the books of Anaxagoras of Clazomenae are full of those theories, and further, that the young men learn from me what they can buy from time to time for a drachma, at most, in the bookshops, and ridicule Socrates [Sokratous katagelan, c1-2] if he pretends that these theories are his own, especially as they are so absurd [atopa onta, c3]. (26d-e, 25)

Socrates does not claim knowledge nor does he write books, as Anaxagoras did; he does not correspond to this topos of the philosophers. Even the young men know this, ridiculing Socrates if he claims to have the knowledge of Anaxagoras – despite these theories’ being atopic as well.

***

One could argue that rather than fulfilling the conventional roles of founder or philosopher in Athens’ democratic culture that Socrates appears instead as a new kind of hero, one meant to replace Achilles as well as Solon and Pericles and win the admiration and emulation of his fellow Athenian citizens by his great example. On this argument, Socrates does not necessarily correspond to these past heroes in any direct way but instead modifies the heroic norm, transforming it as it turns from founders and statesmen to an ugly philosopher.⁴⁹ This argument has great merit, considering that Socrates appears in nearly all of Plato’s dialogues as their ostensible hero, and that Plato had plenty of competition in his own day among

---

⁴⁹ So Ruby Blondell writes that “in his very atopia, then, Socrates re-embodies the traditional norm of the idealized hero figure. He turns conventional atopia on its head, making his opponents the ones who are decentered or ‘out of place,’ while he himself reclaiming the ‘heroic norm’” (Blondell, *The Play of Character*, 24).
writers of “Socratic dialogues” (Σοκρατικοί λόγοι) – Plato simply remains the longest lasting. The “Socratic movement” had Socrates as its cynosure and waves of subsequent philosophic schools embraced Socrates as a hero for philosophy, politics, and life in general.

And yet this argument rings only partially true, I want to suggest, if it ignores the atopic dimension of Socrates’ heroism – the strangeness of Socrates qua hero. Again and again Socrates distances himself from Athens’ (and Greece’s) proverbial heroes, thus refusing easy incorporation in the heroic myth; in this manner the figure of Socrates resists domestication to the heroic paradigm, instead inhabiting it strangely, taking different guises and also eluding final definition. Socrates appears in the Apology as deeply pious in his devotion to the service of Apollo; in the Symposium he appears as a Homeric hero like Heracles, Achilles, or Odysseus while also appearing as a daimon akin to the god eros itself; in the Gorgias Socrates plays Amphion to Callicles’ political Zethos, characters from Euripides’ Atiope; in the Theaetetus Socrates presents himself as a midwife while in the Meno he accepts being called a stingray. As Diskin Clay writes of these various manifestations: “All of these other comparisons recognize the most glaring fact of Socrates’ life in Athens: he is out of place (atopos).” All of Socrates’ heroic images begin from Athenian norms and expectations, but their sheer multiplicity troubles any direct correspondence to the heroic topos entirely.

50 See Paul Van der Waerdt, The Socratic Movement and Charles Kahn, Plato and the Socratic Dialogue for details on other writers of “Socratic Dialogues” as well as speculation about Plato’s predominance among them.

51 Diskin Clay calls attention to these different guises, writing that “in order to ‘place’ him [Socrates] and make him intelligible, Plato has adduced a great variety of paradigms from Greek culture and in doing so has transformed the terms of comparison and, with these, traditional Greek values” (Clay, Platonic Questions, 52). The rest of this paragraph draws on Clay’s enumeration of Socrates’ different appearances.

52 See the discussion by Andrea Nightingale, “Use and Abuse of Athenian Tragedy,” in Genres in Dialogue, 60 – 92.

53 Clay, Platonic Questions, 52.
In addition to this list of “Greek” archetypes, Socrates also does not quite fit to the uniquely democratic Athenian paradigm. We see this especially in the *Apology* where Socrates takes up the tropes of democratic dicastic rhetoric but subtly subverts them, such as when he declares he will not act like most Athenians by parading his weeping wife and children before the jury.\(^{54}\) And yet while rejecting these conventions, Socrates also couches his arguments in democratic terms, casting himself as a great boon to democracy and building on democratic practices by his demanding of accounts and practices of examination.\(^{55}\) Socrates criticizes Athenian democracy while embodying – in a maximal sense – one of its most prized virtues, *parrhēsia*.\(^{56}\)

***

With all of the forgoing argument I do not mean to assert that Socrates acts as an anti-hero or that he does not feature most prominently in Plato for a reason. We cannot dispute, I believe, that Socrates *does* appear as a founder, a philosopher, and a hero across the dialogues. He does. Moreover, these three topoi stem from the ambient Athenian political culture; in order to critically confront his influences, Plato had little choice but to cast Socrates according to these different paradigms. No thinker begins completely *de novo*. And thus these topoi roughly describe areas of commonality among Socrates’ different guises.\(^{57}\)

\(^{54}\) As Josiah Ober comments, Socrates’ speech is “a rhetorical masterpiece” (Ober, *Political Dissent*, 168).

\(^{55}\) Most notably, the Athenian institutions of *dokimasia* and *euthunai*. See Martin Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to Rule of Law* and J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*.

\(^{56}\) See the discussion of Socrates and *parrhēsia* by Arlene Saxonhouse in *Free Speech and Athenian Democracy* and the historical account of *parrhēsia* in S. Sara Monoson, *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements*. See also critical discussion of both in Elizabeth Markovits, *The Politics of Sincerity*.

\(^{57}\) Andrea Nightingale arguments for viewing Plato as writing in an “intertextual mode” support my assertions here, as we could view Socrates’ strange position “betwixt and between” these topoi as akin to Nightingale’s argument that “Plato uses intertextuality as a vehicle for criticizing traditional genres of discourse and . . . for introducing and defining a radically different discursive practice, which he calls ‘philosopher’” (Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue*, 5).
But crucially, I would insist, Socrates remains non-identical to each of these topoi; *atopia* describes this non-identity and the ultimate irreducibility of his character. In this sense Socrates’ *atopia* resists solving the strangeness and mystery of his character by fitting him to a paradigm and being done with it. Such domestication would do violence to the ways in which Socrates does not fit the *topoi* and how his *atopia* acts against the domesticating effects of his interlocutors’ preconceptions as well as his readers. We cannot solve Socrates.

**IV.**

But how can we understand the *atopic* Socrates in terms of the questions raised by Arendt, Wolin, and Latour and their suggestions about the radically anti-democratic and even anti-political meaning of Socrates? I want to suggest that paradoxical as it may sound, Jacques Rancière gives us a way of bringing the *atopic* Socrates to contemporary theoretical debates. On the one hand, Rancière regards Socrates as standing at the beginning of a history of political philosophy that has cordoned off the disruptive force of politics, in turn leading to today’s era of political nihilism and complacency. Socrates began this trend when he denied the politics of Athens a proper place entirely, and in interrogating the possibility of political philosophy, Rancière argues against the philosophic rejection of politics and instead advances what he calls “disagreement” as the “rationality of politics” that philosophy attempts to reduce.\(^{58}\) In language that echoes Arendt, Wolin, and Latour, Rancière writes that “the initial project of philosophy was to eliminate politics to achieve its true essence.”\(^ {59}\) Philosophy “effaces the litigiousness constitutive of politics” in favor of effecting a unitary “archi-politics,” a term that resonates with Arendt’s concern about a “tyranny of truth” and

\(^{58}\) To recall the epigraph from Chapter 5, Rancière writes of Socrates that “Socrates never reflected on the politics of Athens. He is the only Athenian to “do politics,” to be involved in politics *in truth* as opposed to all that is done in Athens in the name of politics. The first encounter between politics and philosophy is that of an alternative: either the politics of the politicians or that of the philosophers” (Rancière, *Disagreement*, viii).

\(^{59}\) Rancière, *Disagreement*, 135.
Latour’s protestations against capital-R Reason as embodied by Socrates.\textsuperscript{60} For Rancière, Socrates’ philosophy demands a “politics of truth” that destroys the politics of fact, silencing a politics animated by the ceaseless contestation of the boundaries of the political world and eliding the fundamental disagreement at the root of all human relations.

Yet while Latour and Wolin both call for abjuring Socrates and political philosophy and instead returning to politics, Rancière’s account resists this in a way that further inflects the \textit{atopic} Socrates. As Rancière argues, declarations that politics has ended and declarations that we must return to politics amount to the same thing:

> The ‘end of politics’ and the ‘return of politics’ are two complementary ways of canceling out politics in the simple relationship between the state of the social and a state of statist apparatuses. ‘Consensus’ is the vulgar name given to this cancellation.\textsuperscript{61}

Because “the essence of politics resides in the modes of dissensual subjectification that reveal the difference of a society to itself,” any attempt to create or maintain a homogeneity in the political world, whether through declaring the end or the return of politics, occludes the disagreement at the core of politics and political life. As Rancière explains: “‘Return of politics’ and ‘end of politics’ are two symmetrical interpretations producing the same effect: to efface the very concept of politics, and the precariousness that is one of its essential elements.”\textsuperscript{62} Politics for Rancière must rather “break the cheerful circle of consensuality” to which both declarations of its end and its return aspire.

In this precarious space of what Rancière calls politics I want to suggest that we can hear echoes of the \textit{atopic} Socrates – that is, what Rancière describes as the activity of politics gives a language for capturing the politics of Socrates’ \textit{atopic} activity. Just as the \textit{atopic}


Socrates disrupts the spatial and temporal arrangements of democratic Athens, Rancière’s politics disturb the partition of the sensible, the ordering of Arendt’s “space of appearances.” Just as the atopic Socrates questions the unquestioned ideology of Athenian democracy, Rancière’s politics raises questions through its introduction of the part that has no part. Just as the atopic Socrates physically disrupts the status quo of Athenian political life, Rancière’s politics displace the boundaries of the political by forcing recognition of its constitutive exclusions. While I would not maintain that any perfect analogy exists between the two, Rancière’s language intensifies the edginess of the atopic Socrates and thus highlights the way in which this Socrates exploits the so-called tensions between politics and philosophy in his disturbances of both. Rather than resolve this tautness through Villa’s “philosophical citizenship” where philosophy spells the return of politics or Nehamas’s “art of living” where philosophy marks the end of politics or Nussbaum’s liberal utopia where neither threatens the other, Rancière’s politics illuminate the atopic Socrates’ disturbing position ‘betwixt and between’ – unsettled and unsettling, like the stinging and circling gadfly of the Apology.

Taken in such terms, the atopic Socrates embodies neither pole of the “philosophy” and “politics” dichotomy often used to characterize his activities and commitments, and we saw emphasized by Arendt, Wolin, and Latour in their criticisms. In contrast this binary, Socrates’ philosophic practice, as we have seen, comes with a political valence; yet on the other hand, however, Socrates’ politics neither embody Athens’ democratic norms nor completely abjure them. By both advancing while critically countering Athenian political culture, Socrates introduces radical innovation while also maintaining a connection to the circumambient democracy. Socrates practices philosophy that remains connected to Athens yet his criticism includes these very connections. Socrates destroys while he also creates,
disturbing while he supports. The atopic Socrates, I have argued, thus resists all attempts at solution.

While Rancière’s account helps us see Socrates’ radical position between today’s oft-invoked polarity of “philosophy” or “politics,” it also overemphasizes disturbance at the cost of omitting the constructive side of Socrates’ strangeness. As we have seen, Socrates recreates democratic practices as he also criticizes them, but Rancière’s insistence on disagreement drowns out these constructive moments. As a way of balancing Rancière’s language, I want to return to Hannah Arendt’s essay, “Philosophy and Politics.” In this essay, Arendt places Socrates before the estrangement of philosophy and politics and thus gives us a concrete and constructive way of picturing the atopic Socrates, one that we can counterpose to the atopic Socrates as inflected by Rancière. I want, then, to turn briefly to Arendt’s account in order to elaborate the politics of the atopic Socrates while maintaining the critical edge of Rancière’s description.63

---

63 Here I concentrate solely on “Philosophy and Politics,” although Hannah Arendt both probed and used Socrates throughout her work and in various ways. On the one hand, Socrates’ commitment to philosophy and opposition to the vita activa earns disparagement in The Human Condition, where Arendt “wars on philosophy” and, indirectly, on Socrates. Arendt also casts the “Socratic conscience” aside in her essay on civil disobedience as “antipolitical,” where she contrast Socrates’ fidelity to himself with a political relation to others, her preferred concept of civil disobedience.63 But on the other hand, Arendt devoted a substantive and laudatory section of Thinking, the first volume of the planned three-volume Life of the Mind, to Socrates as a “model for thinking.”63 Although thinking only becomes politically relevant in emergencies, Arendt speculates in Life of the Mind that the presence of the kind of reflective thinking Socrates exemplifies could also “protect against the worst.” In this more positive light, the midwife also appears along with the stingray and gadfly as metaphors describing the provocative action that Arendt saw as the heart of Socrates’ activity: “... arous[ing]” those around him to “thinking and examination,” “purging people” of their opinions, and “paralyzing” others while they surged with internal “winds of thought.” Socrates shows “what thinking is good for”:63 while it has a destructive side in calling into question what has hitherto lain untouched and unqueried, it also unsettles the language codes and ossified beliefs that may allow people to participate unknowingly in the greatest evil.
In “Philosophy and Politics,” Arendt places what later became a metonym for thinking in a concrete depiction of Socrates. Arendt begins the essay, “opened historically with the trial and condemnation of Socrates. . .” Arendt thus traces the diremption of philosophy and politics which began with the death of Socrates and provoked Plato, on Arendt’s reading, into deep distrust of persuasion and opinion. Persuasion – which “weakly” translates the Greek peithein – constituted “the specifically political form of speech” and the art of persuasion “the highest, the truly political art” (73-74). Yet Socrates’ inability to convince his judges showed Plato the limits of persuasion and led to his condemnation of politics. Connected to this was Plato’s “furious denunciation” of opinion, doxa, which Plato opposed with truth – Plato despised opinions and yearned for “absolute standards,” Arendt argued: “such standards, by which human deeds could be judged and human thought could achieve some measure of reliability, from then on became the primary impulse of his political philosophy . . .” (74). Philosophy, threatened by the “storm and dust” of political life, withdrew from it; as Frederic Dolan puts it: “Between philosophical ideas and political reality, Arendt sensed, lies an abyss.”

---

64 While this lecture remained unpublished until after her death, it contains seeds of later published work on Socrates – ideas we find especially in Thinking but also in “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” an essay that appeared in Social Research in 1971. I will not attempt to adjudicate which Socrates constitutes Arendt’s authentic Socrates, nor how one version might inform our understanding of her thought in general.

65 Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 73. I will cite the page numbers of this edition in the text of this section.

66 I would, of course, contest this reading of Plato, as have many scholars. Arendt seems to draw the inspiration for her arguments from Plato’s Seventh Letter, but given the letter’s questionable authorship as well as its relative brevity in comparison to the long and deep political engagements – whether democratic or not – of other dialogues, I would resist allowing the Letter to govern all interpretations of Plato quite so hegemonically.

67 As Socrates describes the philosopher in Plato’s Republic, Book VI.

Yet Socrates inhabited this abyss. Arendt characterizes Plato’s withdrawal as anti-Socratic because Socrates never withdrew from active life in the polis. In contrast to Plato’s designed “tyranny of truth,” Socrates did not claim wisdom, and this led him to engage his fellow citizens. Socrates understood that “as soon as the philosopher submitted his truth, the reflection of the eternal, to the polis, it became immediately an opinion among opinions” (78). In other words, Socrates saw himself as a citizen among citizens, and this recognition of the conditions of plurality in the public sphere led Socrates to question and investigate the opinions of his fellow citizens with the understanding that each opinion represented a unique perspective on the world as it appeared to someone. Here is Arendt:

The assumption was that the world opens up differently to every man, according to his position in it; and that the “sameness” of the world, its commonness . . . resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone and that despite all difference between men and their positions in the world – and consequently their doxai (opinions) – “both you and I are human.” (80)

Thus rather than impose his view of the truth, Socrates on Arendt’s reading saw truth as existing only communicatively: among human beings where each possesses a particular and unique perspective on the truth of things. Socrates’ activity lay first of all in bringing these perspectives to light, assessing, and criticizing them.

What Socrates called maieusis, the work of the midwife, Arendt continues, constituted the art by which he sought to “help others give birth to what they themselves thought anyhow, to find the truth in their doxa” (81). The method of doing this, Arendt explains, is talking something through, a dialectic that does not destroy opinion – as Plato sought to do – but instead “reveals doxa in its own truthfulness” (ibid.). This activity did not

---

69 Arendt: “The opposition of truth and opinion was certainly the most anti-Socratic conclusion that Plato drew from Socrates’ trial” (75).

70 As her readers surely know, Arendt employs masculine pronouns exclusively (to my knowledge) in her examples and descriptions. I will leave these as she has written but try to avoid mimicking her exclusions in my own language by varying the genders.
consist in education so much as collective improvement; Socrates began by “making sure of the other’s position in the common world” and then “talked through” the other’s opinion, working under the implicit assumption that “nobody can know by himself and without further effort the inherent truth of his own opinion” (ibid.).

To put it bluntly (and in Arendt’s words), “maieusis was a political activity”: “a give and take, fundamentally on the basis of strict equality, the fruits of which could not be measured by the result of arriving at this or that general truth” (81; my emphasis). The “truthful dialogue” that arose from Socrates’ maieusis established a common world of friends; “politically speaking, Socrates tried to make friends out of Athens’s citizens” and thus lessen the tensions inherent in Athens’s agonistic democracy (82 – 83). This dialogue also helped to develop the valuable political insight of “understanding the greatest possible number and variety of realities . . . [and] in being able to communicate between the citizens and their opinions so that the common-ness of this world becomes apparent” (84). Socrates saw his political function as facilitating the establishment of a common world, one built on such an understanding of friendship where rulership would be unnecessary.

Taking Arendt’s depiction alongside Rancière’s, I think that we can begin to give flesh to the atopic Socrates. With Arendt, we can recall Socrates among the Athenians, his philosophic pursuits animated by erōs, and his creation of the philosophical associations through the Athenian sunousia. Yet with Rancière, we can also invoke Socrates provoking bitter resentment, the painful irony of Socrates politikos in the Gorgias, and the unsettling disturbances of the heroic gadfly. These multiple aspects sum, as we have seen, to strangeness – the atopic Socrates dedicated to an inquiry and form of questioning that disturbs and displaces the circumambient political culture. This activity elicits paralysis as
well as excitation, arousal as well as disgust: Meno as well as Anytus, Alcibiades as well as Aristodemus, Theaetetus as well as Callicles.

Moreover, despite her sanguine account of Socrates, Arendt ends “Philosophy and Politics” with a baleful prophesy, one which bespeaks the deeply unsettling and unsettled political consequences of Socrates and his activities. Political philosophy, Arendt intones, can never escape its “necessary estrangement from the everyday life of human affairs” (103). Socrates’ pursuits led him into conflict with the polis: while dedicated to eliciting the truthfulness of opinions, the search for truth can also lead to the “catastrophic result that doxa is altogether destroyed, or that what had appeared is revealed as an illusion. . . . Truth can therefore destroy doxa, it can destroy the specific political reality of citizens” (90). Socrates’ attempt to “make philosophy relevant for politics” provoked the conflict between philosophy and politics, a conflict which ended with the defeat of philosophy, the withdrawal of the philosopher, and the beginning of a time when “philosophers no longer feel responsible for the city. . .” (91). Now philosophers’ only desire with respect to politics is to be left alone (92), and the deeper contradiction between the man of action and the man of thought comes into relief. Arendt suggests that Socrates’ own activity stands at the beginning of this progression.

Arendt’s tale may strike us as an intriguing if irrelevant story about philosophers long dead and buried, but she insists that the events set in motion by Socrates – his life and death, as we have seen – “deformed philosophy for political purposes” (102) such that the dilemmas of today require something entirely new. This reiterates the political stakes with which I began this book: Socrates stands at the head of a tradition coming into question today by the likes of Wolin and Latour. For Arendt, the tradition from Socrates through Marx has exhausted its “categories and hierarchy of values” and yet the world today – “a
world in which not even common sense makes sense any longer” – requires thoughtful understanding. Political philosophy as it once existed – the “tradition” – has come to an end and has nothing to say any longer about politics. Thus, Arendt concludes, “the problem of philosophy and politics, or the necessity for a new political philosophy from which could a new science of politics, is once more on the agenda” (103).71

And yet here I would both agree with and dissent from Arendt. For while she views Socrates’ connections to a tradition of anti-political theorizing – that tradition against which Wolin and Latour (and Arendt herself) inveigh – as inextricably corrupting, the atopic Socrates, as we have seen, provides another way. Arendt’s Socrates in “Philosophy and Politics,” in this way, points toward her “new political philosophy,” one between or before the dilemma of “philosophy” and “politics”: a Socrates who arouses, paralyzes, and perplexes, one committed to disturbing those around him but also involved in constructive and collective practices of inquiry – in a word, the atopic Socrates. Arendt places this Socrates in the midst of Athenian democracy and thus gives us a concrete depiction from which to work.72

71 But I should also note that the version of Socrates we encounter in “Philosophy and Politics” does not completely comport with Arendt’s later, published uses of Socrates. In these works Arendt shifts from treating Socrates in the context of democratic Athens and instead focuses solely on the different aspects of Socrates as partial descriptions of Socrates’ thinking and thus a withdrawal from politics. One partial exception to exclusive emphasis on Socrates as representing thinking (after the “Philosophy and Politics” essay) comes in Arendt’s Kant lectures, where she connects the images of Socrates, especially the midwife, with the critical thinking that Kant (and Arendt) argues lays the necessary foundation for the practice of judgment. While beyond the scope of the present work, I would argue that the treatment of Socrates in the Kant lectures exemplifies a synthesis of the interpretations in “Philosophy and Politics” and the those in “Thinking and Moral Considerations” and Life of the Mind. What results remains a mixed portrait, but one that emphasizes the important role Arendt imagines Socrates could play in developing a sensus communis, the common sense upon which Kantian judgment depends, while also acknowledging the ways in which the destructive side of Socrates’ activity can dissolve this same sense and thus negatively redound on political life. Margaret Canovan has some suggestions along these lines in Canovan, “Socrates or Heidegger.”

72 Although this depends on imagining the character of Socrates in the Athenian political context. Arendt does this, and I follow her.
And yet trying to negotiate the concerns of Wolin and Latour while not diminishing the force of these concerns should not obscure the costs of atopia. This Socrates does not seek consensus and thus contribute to community building. This Socrates does not inspire hope for the possibilities of collectively addressing our common problems. This Socrates does not address inequalities of power in the name of justice. Indeed, Cornel West may speak truly when he declares that we need “to out-Socratize Socrates” and supplement his questioning with commitment to justice and hope for democracy. 73 Or, as Jonathan Lear has suggested, Socrates’ questions may demand the impossible – and the trauma these questions caused may have led directly to Socrates’ undoing. 74 Even Arendt’s own sympathies for the virtues of civic republicanism may have prevented her from ever fully embracing Socrates’ strangeness. 75 The atopic Socrates will not lead us toward utopia. But while we cannot celebrate Socrates, we can insist on the need for his strangeness.

V.

In his recent book on intellectuals and politics, Mark Lilla concludes his discussions of thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and others by suggesting the dangers of what Lilla calls “the lure of Syracuse.” The lure of Syracuse describes Plato’s purported journeys to Syracuse to educate her king Dionysus. As recounted in the Seventh Letter – a document with questionable provenance – Plato visited a disciple in Syracuse, Dion, who convinced Plato that Dioynsus might be open to philosophy, and that Plato need only provide good instruction in order to reform and

73 See Cornel West, Democracy Matters, 213.

74 Here is Lear: “Socrates’ fundamental question – how shall I live? – looks so innocent but is in fact traumatic. Socrates rips open the fabric of Athenian life and creates a gap which no one can fill, for as yet there is no established way of taking one’s whole life into account in everything that one does” (Lear, Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life, 101).

75 Dana Villa suggests this in his chapter on Arendt and Leo Strauss in Socratic Citizenship, 246 – 298.
enlighten him – and thus to bring Syracuse benevolent rule. Yet Plato’s visits – two in all – did not go as promised. Dioynsus proved too attached to his political ambitions and his luxurious way of life, and Plato proved too impatient. Philosophy never stuck. Three years after Plato’s final departure, Dion attacked Syracuse with mercenaries and deposed Dionysus, only to die at the hands of betrayers three years later. Dionysus survived, eventually returning to the throne and then later, deposed again, traveling to Corinth where he founded his own school of philosophy.

“Dionysus is our contemporary,” Lilla asserts. “Over the last century he has assumed many names: Lenin and Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini, Mao and Ho, Castro and Trujillo, Amin and Bokassa, Sadda and Khomeini, Ceaușescu and Milosevic – one’s pen runs dry.” The lure of Syracuse thus describes the allure such tyrants hold to an intellectual – one whom Lilla calls “the philotyrannical intellectual.” Just as Plato felt drawn toward Syracuse as a place where he might bring his own philosophy to bear on political life around him, so too these modern Dioynsuses have attracted their own coteries of admiring intellectuals, theorists and artists who gaze on power with salacious interest and seek to influence it through their writings, speeches, and activities. Thus went Socrates and Plato and thus go us.

Yet this description makes the lure of Syracuse sound too abstracted from quotidian life and too distant from our daily appetites and aversions. We can easily dismiss such an allure as applying only to a few heartless minds, abstracted philosophic types with no compassion or sense of justice. But such is not the case. As Lilla puts it:

The lure of Syracuse is strong for any thinking man or woman, and that is as it should be. One need not accept Sartre’s narcissistic myth of the intellectual as hero to see what Plato saw long ago: that there is some connection in the human mind

---

76 Mark Lilla, The Reckless Mind, 196.
between the yearning for truth and the desire to contribute to ‘the right ordering of households and cities.”

In other words, we all long for political re-orderings that embody truth – not simply intellectuals but every one of us. The lure of Syracuse represents, then, this human, all too human desire for what Arendt calls the realm of the eternal, the perfect city, the perfect life.

But a lure is also a trap. Lilla’s account, I would suggest, illuminates the missteps of Wolin, Latour, and even Arendt in identifying Socrates too completely with the lure of Syracuse, and thus attributing to him a philosophic politics or a “tyranny of truth.” All thus fall into the trap of solving Socrates and domesticating him with their own preconceptions about the place and power of philosophy and its relationship to politics. On such a line of thinking, we can discard Socrates because of these associations with power and corruption, his oligarchic friends or his philotyrannical students, and thus spare ourselves the disruption his questions cause. We can vilify Socrates for his pursuit of truth without considering how this inquiry disturbs our settled ideas about how to live and go on together. Socrates becomes an antagonist of freedom in his pursuit of architectonic truth through philosophy. His striving for perfection becomes a tyrannical threat to ours.

In other words, just as it traps Socrates, a fixation on the lure of Syracuse traps politics – as philosophy does, on Rancière’s argument, in a cordoned space purged of disruption and disturbance. Whether one advocates a “return” or an “end” to politics, the lure of Syracuse corresponds to each: either philosophy’s return to political life or the philosophic ending of it. We can declare Socrates an exemplary citizen and announce a

---


78 This trap can go the other direction with a denial of the politics of philosophy – many scholars in political philosophy have long regarded Socrates as exemplifying the “tension between society and philosophy” and thus as revealing the ineluctable opposition between political life and philosophic inquiry. The quote comes from Thomas Pangle’s introduction to Leo Strauss’s collected occasional writings on ancient themes, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*: Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, xvii.
return of politics, but this limits Socrates by assuming the category of citizen. We can find in Socrates an intriguing example of aesthetic self-fashioning and assert the irrelevance of politics, but this blunts the political edge of Socrates’ questions. Socrates may seem to lead us toward liberality but he radically disjoints the very notions that ground our assumptions of “common humanity” and the possibility of “liberal education.” All of these lures trap Socrates and politics by inveigling to coalesce them and thus close down their dynamic tensions – the paradox and agonism we saw earlier in Rancière.

Images like Lilla’s “lure of Syracuse” pervade our thinking about Socrates. Yet in the stingray and the gadfly and the midwife, in Socrates erūtikos and Socrates politikos, we encounter countervailing images that culminate in atopia – Socrates’ strange activity and his strangeness to us. Atopia describes the arousal, paralysis, purgation, and excitation that come with Socrates’ different activities and that displace and challenge the political status quo around him. Indeed, in Lilla’s own story, an alternative to the lure of Syracuse emerges through the figure of Socrates – and this alternative lies in Socrates’ practice of philosophy and the discussion that forms Plato’s Republic. In light of all my argument up to this point and in lieu of Lilla’s “lure,” I want to suggest another image of Socrates, one I hope will prove no less attractive while also importantly polyvocal and multivalent and thus true to the atopic Socrates – the image of Socrates in the Piraeus.

***

As we saw in the first chapter on Plato’s Republic, the dialogue starts with Socrates describing his trip to the Piraeus, the port district of Athens.79 “I went down to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon, the son of Ariston,” Socrates begins:

79 The Piraeus itself contains many different meanings, as Carol Doughtery has recently argued. See Doughtery, “Athens’ Tale of Two Cities.”
I wanted to say a prayer to the goddess, and I was also curious to see how they would manage the festival, since they were holding it for the first time. I thought the procession of the local residents was a fine one and that the one conducted by the Thracians was no less outstanding.80

This most famous argument about justice, an argument that lasts a night and yet that Socrates now recounts to us in full only the next day – this inimitable argument takes place in a highly significant space. Not only did the Piraeus offer the most diverse and bustling commercial space in Hellas, it also served as a base for the democratic resistance against “The Thirty,” a thirty-man junta imposed on Athens by Sparta during 404-403 BCE and which Critias – a consort of Socrates and Plato’s mother’s cousin – led.81 The label “men of the Piraeus” came to identify those who fought for the insurgent democracy, many of them immigrants and the lower ranks of society who lived in the area. The Temple of Bendis, whose festival Socrates and Glaucon in the Republic have just visited, later became the site of a decisive battle between supporters of the Thirty and the democrats, a battle during which Critias as well as Charmides, appointed governor of the Piraeus by the Thirty and Plato’s uncle, lost their lives. Socrates’ associations with Critias and Charmides did not help his reputation among the returning democrats.82

Yet while the subsequent deaths of Socrates and many of his companions shadow the Republic,83 the invocation of the Piraeus signifies a place of change, activity, and drama –

80 Republic 327a, 972.

81 I draw on Ferrari, “Introduction to Plato’s Republic,” for this paragraph.

82 Although one should note that Socrates disobeyed an order of the Thirty (see Apology 32c - e) and also that while the Thirty abused their power, they were not unambiguously unjust. Hence the democrats granted amnesty to many of the participants, including many who figure in Plato’s dialogues. See Nails, The People of Plato, 111 – 113, on the ambiguities of the Thirty and 219 – 222 on the period after the Thirty.

83 And, as George Rudebusch points out, this involves a good dose of irony: “Two of the characters mentioned in the opening are known primarily for being brutally murdered during the reign of the Thirty Tyrants, an oligarchic faction led by members of the family of Plato. Socrates, it is well-known, was put to death by the democracy in Athens shortly afterwards. The characters see nothing of the war, plague, tyranny, betrayals, murders, and execution that lie ahead, nor the exhaustion, defeat, and near destruction of Athens. But the
and associates these with the figure of Socrates. Thus imagining Socrates as we see him in the *Republic*, as traveling to view the spectacle of the festival, intrigued by its novelty – his curiosity brings him – yet also not withholding judgment about its appeal – judging the local procession fine and the Thracian one no less outstanding – we see Socrates within the thick context of Athenian political life, a complex actor embedded within a complex milieu. Moreover, Socrates’ identifications with maieusis and as a gadfly associate him with the “men of the Piraeus,” the lower classes of Athens who would have surrounded him in the festival audience. Socrates lives among these democrats, even if he does not completely identify as one. His fight, the contest we witness in the *Republic* (and one that echoes the “contest” of the *Gorgias*), takes place within democratic life.

The image of Socrates in the Piraeus, I want to suggest, best approximates the situated and yet strange Socrates we have seen thus far – and a Socrates no less political for his philosophic curiosity or less strange for his political embeddedness. Rather than think of the “lure of Syracuse” when we invoke the figure of Socrates, we might rather consider the many “Socrateses” – stingray, *erōtikos*, midwife, *politikos*, gadfly – in this vibrant, diverse place – the space of insurgency as well as creativity, democratic resistance as well as the new forces that unsettled the democracy. Can we tarry with Socrates in this undefined and chaotic space? Can we live with his strangeness and resist domestication, both of his figure and within our own political lives? Engaging Socrates may challenge us yet.

---

audience is well aware that these horrors lie just ahead” (Rudebusch, “Dramatic Prefiguration in Plato’s *Republic*,” 75 – 76).
WORKS CITED


Brumbauch, Robert S. “Plato’s ‘Meno’ as Form and as Content of Secondary School Courses in Philosophy.” *Occasional Paper.* Center for High School Philosophy, School of Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts.


Grant, Ruth W. “The Ethics of Talk: Classroom Conversation and Democratic Politics.” *The Teachers College Record*. Vol. 97, no. 3 (Spring, 1996): 470 – 482.


Author Biography

Born and reared in Seattle, Washington, Joel Alden Schlosser began his education in Seattle Public Schools. Schlosser received his BA from Carleton College, where he graduated Phi Beta Kappa with Honors in Political Science and Honors in Music Performance. After a hiatus from the academy in New York City, Schlosser studied Ancient Greek at the University of California, Berkeley, before entering the Doctoral program at Duke University, where he received his MA and Ph.D in Political Science. During his time at Duke, Schlosser also studied Latin again at Berkeley, French in Aix-en-Provence, France, and taught political theory and constitutional law at Carleton College as a Visiting Instructor. He is currently an Instructor in the Thompson Writing Program at Duke University and will return to Carleton College as a Visiting Assistant Professor in January 2010.