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Image and Power in the Socratic Problem

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Abstract

This paper reinterprets the Socratic problem through the lens of image and power, arguing that the historical Socrates is best understood not as the originator of a philosophical method or doctrine but as a powerful ethical image whose authority reshaped the meaning of philosophy itself. Rather than attempting to reconstruct a system of propositions from Plato's early dialogues, I contend that the genre of the *logoi sokratikoi* reveals something more significant: the construction and deployment of the image of Socrates as a vehicle of intellectual and moral influence. Plato's *Apology*, constrained by its historical setting and its claim to eyewitness testimony, provides the closest access to Socrates' self-presentation. There, Socrates emerges not as a methodological thinker but as a protreptic figure whose power lies in exhortation and example.

Central to this self-fashioning is the story of the Delphic Oracle. By presenting himself as divinely commissioned yet ignorant, Socrates crafts an image of paradoxical authority—human wisdom grounded in acknowledged ignorance. This image operates as a form of power: it legitimizes his public mission, unsettles Athenian political authority, and displaces traditional claims to expertise. The divergence between Plato's and Xenophon's versions of the Oracle further demonstrates how competing representations of Socrates reflect differing investments in the power of his character.

Finally, by situating Socrates within the older tradition of the Seven Sages, the paper shows that his enduring influence derives less from doctrinal content than from the symbolic and cultural power of his image as a sage. Across Greek, Roman, Christian, and Islamic traditions, Socrates functions as an exemplar whose authority lies in embodied practice rather than in a theoretical system. The Socratic problem thus becomes not merely a question about historical reconstruction but an inquiry into how philosophical power operates through image, narrative, and cultural memory.

Introduction

"I entrust my soul to the keeper of sages' souls."[1]

What we call the Socratic problem—that of how to distinguish the philosopher Socrates and his philosophy from the character Socrates in the writings of Plato, Xenophon, and other Socratic writers—has generated an enormous body of literature since Schleiermacher's (1818/1852b) essay "On the Worth of Socrates as a Philosopher" (Burnet, 1928; Kahn, 1996; Prior, 2006; Brickhouse & Smith, 2000; Taylor, 1955; Vlastos, 1991). Schleiermacher sees the problem as one of how to reconcile the rather amiable and unassuming character that Socrates is described as being with the towering figure who is represented as the impetus of a whole new period in philosophy, indeed as one of the most influential philosophers in history. Stated succinctly by Prior:

> "Socrates is one of the most famous and influential figures in the western intellectual tradition; but who was he? His disciples included the most influential philosophers of his time, who are credited by historians of philosophy with founding several schools; but what did he teach them?" (Prior, 2006, p. 25).

One way to think of this is to try to reconcile the rather bland Socrates that one sees in the writings of Xenophon with the more profound figure we see in the dialogues of Plato. The common way to frame this issue is to say that Xenophon was no philosopher, and as such his accounts of Socrates are not

[1] Socrates' last words according to al-Mubashshir ibn Fatik, 90.13, as cited in Alon (2006, p. 323).

very philosophically astute, whereas Plato was *too much* of a philosopher, and as such he infuses his Socrates with ideas and theories that extend far beyond the purview of Socrates the man. Given such a context, one is tempted to say that the "real" Socrates lies somewhere in between the two, and to answer Schleiermacher's problem by saying that it was Plato's Socrates, and not the historical Socrates, who has exerted such a profound influence on Western culture under the name Socrates.[2] The problem goes deeper than this, however, for we are still left with the rather embarrassing problem of knowing very little about the most influential philosopher in history. Socrates inspires and informs Hellenistic philosophy, the early Christian and Muslim traditions, the Renaissance, the French Revolution, existentialism, and postmodernism in ways too extensive to catalogue. Given this, it seems not unnatural to ask two questions. What philosophical positions did Socrates hold and what kind of philosophical methodology did he employ? What kind of philosopher was he? I think that it is a mistake to think that an answer to the second question can be supplied by an answer to the first, for the simple reason that there is good evidence to believe that philosophy, for Socrates, was not a set of philosophical positions, or even a methodology (Brennan, 2006, p. 297). Philosophy, in the context of Socrates, must be understood under the rubric of that old formula, so oft repeated—philosophy as a way of life (Dorion, 2006, p. 94). I proceed in the following manner. First, I discuss attempts to understand Socrates as a philosopher in terms of positions and methodologies and address the limitations of such an approach. Second, I discuss the nature of Socratic writings (the *Sokratikoi Logoi*) and the relation of this kind of writing to Plato's *Apology*. Third, I argue that there is good reason to accept the *Apology* as an account of the historical Socrates, and that this leaves us with a picture of Socrates as a non-methodological philosopher with a protreptic mission. Fourth, I attempt to demonstrate that this protreptic Socrates can be seen both in Plato's *Apology* and in Plato's dialogues, mostly implicitly, though sometimes explicitly in the latter. Fifth, I examine the story of the Delphic Oracle as it appears in Plato's *Apology*, and the importance of how it differs from the version told in Xenophon's *Apology*.

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[2] Tad Brennan raises the possibility that "the real Socrates may have been just as repetitive and platitudinous, just as philosophically unfruitful, as Epictetus was" (2006, p. 297). He asks whether the philosophical sophistication of the Platonic dialogues may owe more to Plato than to the historical Socrates.

Finally, I suggest that the Oracle story connects the historical Socrates with a different tradition than that of methodological or propositional philosophy, namely the older tradition of the Seven Sages. The upshot of this enquiry is that Socrates' philosophy should not be understood as reducible to a method or a set of philosophical positions but rather understood through an appreciation of Socratic philosophy as a way of life. The implication of this is that the Socratic problem is mitigated by understanding that it is a question framed from the point of view of philosophy as a methodological approach or a set of consistent philosophical claims.

Socrates' Philosophical Positions, Socrates' Methodology

Responses to the Socratic problem range from suggestions like those of Burnet (1928) and Taylor (1955) that everything in Plato's dialogues is based somehow on something that Socrates said, to the more recent and most influential account of the twentieth century, that of Gregory Vlastos, who maintains that the Socrates of Plato's so-called early dialogues differs from that of Plato's middle dialogues in a way that can help us uncover the historical Socrates. According to Vlastos (1991, p. 49), where the Socrates of the early dialogues differs from the Socrates of the middle dialogues, we can discern the positions and methodology of the historical Socrates in the former. This approach both depends on and supports a developmentalist view of Plato, such that Plato begins by writing simplex dialogues and begins writing his own mature philosophy in the so-called middle period. Such a view has recently come under significant criticism; Annas (2002) argues that there seems to be no clear-cut set of criteria to distinguish between early and middle dialogues, and even computer-assisted stylometric analysis (the dating of dialogues based on stylistic differences; Thesleff, 1982) has had little success in establishing a clear line of demarcation between early and middle dialogues (Kahn, 1996, p. 42). This is not the only problem with Vlastos' approach, however. There is no good reason to assume that the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues is not just as much a literary creation of Plato as the Socrates of Plato's middle dialogues, regardless of how well one is able to define the difference between early and middle dialogues (Prior, 2006, p. 28; Rowe, 2006). The Socrates that Vlastos generates out of that difference may merely mark the difference between two literary creations of Plato, an early Socrates and a middle

Socrates, while leaving the historical Socrates still shrouded in mystery. This possibility seems all the more probable given the differences between Plato's early Socrates and the Socrates of other Socratic writers, and is made perhaps even more probable once one considers that our two most important sources for the ostensible historical Socrates—Plato's early dialogues and the writings of Xenophon—fall under the category of what Aristotle called *Logoi Sokratikoi* (*Poetics*, 1447b; *Rhetoric*, 1417a).

Logoi Sokratikoi and Plato's *Apology*

Logoi Sokratikoi, or "Socratic conversations," were written by a number of disciples or intimates of Socrates, including Phaedo,[3] Antisthenes, Aeschines, Euclides, Aristippus, and Xenophon.[4] The originator of this form, according to a fragment attributed to Aristotle, was a certain Alexamnenos of Teos, of whom we know nothing (Kahn, 1996). If Plato's early dialogues are to be characterized as *Logoi Sokratikoi*, the defining mark of which is the employment of the figure of Socrates to explore philosophical themes with creative literary freedom, then the Socrates of the early dialogues is less of a key to the historical Socrates than Vlastos would wish.[5] *Logoi Sokratikoi* enable their authors to use Socrates as a spokesperson to explore their own ideas, even if such works represent attempts to work out what their author might have assumed Socrates might say about a particular issue or to represent how they assumed he would approach a particular topic.

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[3] Diogenes Laertius also attributes a dialogue entitled *Simon* to Phaedo (DL 2.105).

[4] For a review of the evidence, see Kahn (1996, Chapter 1). For the principal collection of surviving texts and fragments, see Giannantoni (1991).

[5] Dorion (2006, p. 93) claims:

> "…the Socratic question, as it was debated from the time of Schleiermacher to the beginning of the twentieth century, is not only an unsolvable problem – as is shown by the lack of any agreement – but also a pseudo-problem. If the *Logoi Sokratikoi* are works of fiction, allowing their authors considerable scope for invention not only in the setting but also in the ideas expressed by the characters including Socrates, then it seems hopeless to try to reconstruct the thought of the historical Socrates on the basis of the *Logoi Sokratikoi*."

See also Dorion (2011, p. 14): "One of the reasons the Ancients never debated the Socratic problem is because they fully recognized the fictional nature of the *logoi sokratikoi.*"

Their authors are not, however, constrained by the desire to present a faithful historical reproduction of Socrates, but are rather free to see in Socrates, or employ Socrates in whatever they wish. This was recognized in ancient times. Consider St. Augustine's observation in *The City of God:*

> Because, in the disputations of Socrates, where he raises all manner of questions, makes assertions, and then demolishes them, it did not evidently appear what he held to be the chief good, every one took from these disputations what pleased him best (Augustine, as cited in Lapatin, 2006, p. 110).

An obvious example of how Plato can be seen to employ Socrates in the service of his own ideas is Plato's *Phaedo*. One might wonder why, in the *Phaedo*, the dialogue, which represents Socrates' last hours on earth, Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates a complex account of Plato's theory of recollection and theory of Forms, in the service of establishing the immortality of the soul, something about which Socrates says he is quite uncertain in the *Apology*—Plato's account of Socrates' trial. How could Plato show such disrespect for the martyrdom of Socrates as to employ Socrates' dying hours to articulate his (Plato's) own theories? Plato clearly indicates to us that he was not present at Socrates' execution (he was ill—Phd. 59b), and the report of the execution is given second hand through *Phaedo*, long after the actual event. One possible explanation of Plato's use of the *Phaedo* in this way is to read the dialogue as Plato's *homage* to Socrates, his way of saying, "Look, Socrates, at what your life meant to me, of what it inspired in me." Regardless of the explanation, what the *Phaedo* makes clear is that even Socrates' execution is an opportunity to employ the figure of Socrates to explore issues of concern to Plato (metaphysics and the afterlife) in Plato's own fashion. Historical accuracy is not the intention of the dialogue, or, one might say, of any of the *Sokratikoi Logoi*.

There is perhaps one of Plato's writings, however, that falls outside the category of the *Logoi Sokratikoi*, namely Plato's *Apology*.[6] For certain reasons, I think that this writing can get us closer to the historical Socrates, yet even the *Apology* has identifiable limitations. One limitation in using the *Apology* as evidence regarding the historical Socrates is the ambiguous nature of the document itself (Leibowitz, 2010, pp. 5–6).

[6] For a list of commentators who defend this position, see Dorion (2011, p. 17, n. 44).

Is it, like Xenophon's *Apology*, the author's defence of Socrates, or is it an account of Socrates' defence of himself? Xenophon claims that others have furnished us with details of the trial and that his aim is to describe Socrates' preference for death and defend Socrates' character.[7] Plato never gives us such straightforward accounts of his intentions, but begins *in scene*, as it were, and as such we may plausibly raise the question, "Is this how Plato would defend Socrates as he understood him, or is Plato depicting his recollection of what Socrates actually said?"[8]

Dorion argues that we cannot exempt the *Apology* from the *Logoi Sokratikoi* because (i) there are several *Apologies* by several rival authors, and we have no reason to give priority to Plato's, and (ii) much of what happens in the *Apology* finds confirmation in other dialogues, hence, we must give these elements historical status even though they are admitted to be *Logoi Sokratikoi* (Dorion, 2011, pp. 17–18). To (i), one may reply that Plato claims to be an eyewitness at Socrates' trial, and that Xenophon remarks in his *Apology* that Socrates' trial has been well covered by others, suggesting that Xenophon does not dispute the details in any way that would render him a rival. While we know that Xenophon was not present at the trial, we should assume that he would have had access to other accounts of the trial no longer extant, and that he would not have remarked on sufficient coverage of detail were there important inconsistencies of detail. To (ii) one may say that while the *Logoi Sokratikoi* have creative licence, it would be extremely odd if they had nothing to say about the historical Socrates. I think that despite these limitations, we should take the putative purpose of Plato's *Apology* to be an account of Socrates' life and philosophical activity.

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[7] Xenophon explicitly acknowledges earlier accounts of the trial: "Others have written on this theme, and all without exception have touched upon the lofty style of the philosopher, which may be taken as a proof that the language used by Socrates was really of that type" (*Apology,* 1).

[8] While there is no space to embark on a detailed treatment of it here, the simplest characterization of the *Memorabilia* is that it does what Plato's writings might be said to do if his dialogues were presented as a continuous volume starting with the *Apology*. In the *Memorabilia*, there is a discussion of the trial and an attempt to show that Socrates was wrongly convicted, followed by a number of anecdotal reports about Socrates' character and in-depth discussion of topics that interest Xenophon, employing the creative freedom of the *Logoi Sokratikoi*, with Socrates serving as the mouthpiece for these views.

On its own, the *Apology* is admittedly limited in what it can tell us about Socrates, but it helps prevent us from attributing more than is warranted to the historical Socrates based on reading the early dialogues as historical accounts. I shall in fact be arguing that the picture of the historical Socrates that we can retain from the *Apology* and Plato's dialogues is that of a protreptic philosopher, who possesses neither doctrine nor philosophical method.

Another limitation of Plato's *Apology* as a historical source, one expressed by Morrison (2005), is that an attempt at historical writing would necessarily reflect the bias of Plato. Consider his remarks:

> "Plato's sincere efforts to present the essence of Socrates' views are likely to be so philosophically penetrating as to be unreliable guides to the views which Socrates actually expressed and would assent to." (Morrison, 2005, p. 106).

This may be true of the early dialogues, but it may be countered by Vlastos' contention that the *Apology* would be a failure if it varied too much from the truth of the trial (Vlastos, 1971, p. 3). Vlastos is correct. Morrison expects far too much objectivity from historical writing, thus setting up criteria for historical reliability that have never been met by *any* historian. If it is Plato's intention (as I think it is) in writing the *Apology* to give us an account of how Socrates defended himself, it remains the best and closest thing we have to a historical report of Socrates from the horse's mouth, and I will offer reasons for this below. We cannot hope for anything better.

I now intend to address in more detail why the *Apology* differs from Plato's other writings, and why, if this difference is significant, it presents us with a Socrates that is different from but related to the Socrates who appears in Plato's other writings. Two other things that need to be considered are the nature of Socratic protreptic—for that really is what one sees of Socrates in the *Apology*—and the way in which the account of the Oracle at Delphi in Plato's *Apology* differs from the account in Xenophon's *Apology*. Consideration of the Oracle trope in both authors links Socrates to a tradition outside of the *Sokratikoi Logoi*. Initially, however, the following points about Plato's *Apology* are worth considering:

1. Socrates speaks in his own voice and at length about his life. While it is certainly true that Socrates says things about himself in other

dialogues—his mother was a midwife,[9] and he had an interest in natural science in his youth (*Phaedo*, 96a)—it is possible to see these as literary tropes employed by Plato to further a point of dramatization, philosophical method, or doctrine.[10] Plato's dialogues employ Socrates in various and often inconsistent ways in the service of demonstrating points about aporia, elenchus, definition (methodological points) or about politics, metaphysics, love (philosophical claims). By contrast, as the *Apology* is an extended discussion of Socrates' life, with a clear purpose—to explain and defend Socrates' life—it would seem counterproductive to infuse it with much false elaboration.[11] Moreover, even if the *Apology* were Plato's attempt to defend Socrates' life instead of a presentation of Socrates' own defence, it stands to reason that it would still aim at the historical Socrates, not at a literary creation.

2. Plato is present at the trial, and attention is drawn to this by Socrates (*Apology*, 38b). The significance of this is that only at this point in his writings does Plato bear some responsibility for the truth of what he reports. Plato's credibility as an author is front and centre, for if he were at the trial, he would be at less liberty to employ the literary freedom of the *Sokratikoi Logoi*. This is not to suggest that Plato's *Apology* must be taken as a *verbatim* account of Socrates' defence. Nor does it mean that Plato's version of the defence is free of his own interpretation or embellishment. Plato is, however, constrained by

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[9] See *Theaetetus* 149a. Prior (2006, pp. 33–34) argues that this image is difficult to reconcile with the protreptic Socrates of the *Symposium*. If the *Apology* is taken as our default picture of the historical Socrates, the midwife image is better understood as Plato's literary invention, whereas the protreptic mission finds corroboration in the *Apology*.

[10] Hence, in response to a claim like that of Nails (2006, p. 13): "Though Socrates denies outright [in the *Apology*] that he is a natural scientist, his familiarity with their investigations and his own naturalistic explanations make it no surprise that the jury could not tell the difference (e.g., *Theaetetus* 152e, 153c–d, 173e–174a; *Phaedo* 96a–100a)," I would reply that these references are marks of Plato's Socrates which indicate a difference from the Socrates of the *Apology*. Among other pieces of evidence from the Skeptics, Bett (2006, p. 299) notes that "Sextus (*Against the Professors* 7.10), criticizes Plato for misrepresenting Socrates as not solely concerned with ethics."

[11] This line of argument extends as far back as Schleiermacher (1818/1852a, pp. xiv–xv).

a degree of respect for fact in the face of other witnesses and other "defences" of Socrates, in a way that he simply is not in any of his other writings.[12]

3. In the *Apology* Socrates believes himself to be wise (23b). His wisdom consists in knowing that he knows nothing; he does not think that this particular brand of wisdom is worth much in comparison to divine wisdom. However, his reference to himself as a gadfly, his claims to have done a great service to the city (30e), and his suggestion, upon conviction, of a penalty of free meals at the Prytaneum in exchange for his services to Athens (36d) show just how much he thinks his human wisdom is worth. While Thrasymachus in the *Republic* may accuse Socrates of being ironic in saying he knows nothing (*Republic*, 337a), and while Socrates often says he knows nothing of how things stand in the dialogues, nowhere else but in the *Apology* does Socrates claim to be *wise* in virtue of not knowing, and nowhere else does he explain his intentions so explicitly. We should note here that the conception of wisdom as knowledge that is central to the *Republic* is quite different from the wisdom claimed by Socrates in the *Apology*. In the *Republic*, Plato, by incorporating formal knowledge into his account of (Pythagorean) wisdom, places it within human reach, but only for a select few (Plato, *Republic*, 476b).
4. Socrates claims that his life's mission, imposed by the Oracle at Delphi, is a protreptic mission.[13] While there are instances of others attributing this protreptic role to Socrates, for example, in the *Symposium* and the *Clitophon*, nowhere else does Socrates overtly attribute this role to himself. In his treatment of the *Clitophon*, Slings (1999) has argued at length that the Socrates of Plato's dialogues is consistently implicitly protreptic. If Slings is right, this would suggest that Plato's dialogues employ a feature of Socrates in accordance with Plato's own literary and philosophical predilections, but that, in contrast to the *Apology*, the explicit feature is made implicit.

The first two points here suggest that the intended purpose of the *Apology* is to give an account of Socrates and not something else—an account of an historical

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[12] That Plato is absent from the *Phaedo* is perhaps telling in this regard.

[13] Nails (2006, p. 13), following Dover (1968), suggests that the jury's perception of Socrates, influenced by Aristophanes' depiction of him, conflated sophistry and natural science.

event—Socrates' trial—that Plato witnessed along with over 500 other people. The latter two points suggest that Socrates' search for wisdom was a protreptic one. The involvement of the Oracle at Delphi in Plato's account of the trial is something that requires further investigation. As a way into this discussion, we might ask the following questions: Where or *who* was Socrates before Plato? With which tradition would he most likely be aligned if Plato had not written about him?

In the *Apology* Socrates claims that he has no interest in or knowledge of cosmological speculation, which would seem to differentiate him from the philosophical tradition of the Presocratics as much as the name "Presocratics" does. Xenophon tells us how Socrates expressed disdain for cosmological investigations that served no practical purpose—the kind of investigation for which Thales was so admired—but approved of them for use in navigation and the like. Consider further Aristotle's claim that philosophy is born of cosmological wonder and luxury—Socrates expresses disdain for both. Could Socrates truly be called a philosopher, if this is how philosophy was characterized before Plato? The problem is that to call Socrates outside of Plato's dialogues a philosopher imposes certain Platonic ideas about philosophy itself upon Socrates. What was a "philosopher" before Plato made Socrates its champion? What did Anaximander and Parmenides do? What did Pythagoras do? It seems that philosophers were engaged not in question and answer but rather in natural science and rudimentary metaphysics. In short, a philosopher, before Plato's reinvention of the philosopher as an inquirer into ethics, and then into metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology, is hardly what Socrates could have been prior to a Platonic conception of philosophy. Indeed, it is not with the tradition of the natural scientists of Miletus, the flux theorists of Ephesus, the mathematicians of Italy, or the qualitative pluralists who respond to Parmenides that Socrates aligns, any more than it is with the Sophists. If Socrates himself excludes himself from this philosophical tradition, as he does in the *Apology*, where are we to locate the historical Socrates? Because philosophy before Plato really means natural science, I suggest we look for the historical Socrates not in Plato's early dialogues, but rather in a tradition which precedes him and with which he seems more closely aligned. I am speaking of the tradition of the Seven Sages. My suggestion will be that a certain key part of the *Apology*— namely, the story of a quest for the wisest man initiated by the Oracle at Delphi (20e, ff.), together with its variant in Xenophon—finds its first expression within

a tradition that is closely related to, but not the same as, the philosophical tradition. The role that the Oracle story plays in Plato's *Apology* has been questioned by some scholars, and for good reason. It is to these considerations that I now turn before I go on in the final sections of this paper to show what I think the real significance of the Oracle story is.

The Oracle at Delphi in Plato and Xenophon

In Plato's *Apology* Socrates claims that his "mission" was initiated through his interpretation of the claim by the Oracle at Delphi that he was the wisest. What ensued upon Socrates learning this from Chaerephon was a protracted examination of those with reputations for wisdom in order to prove the god wrong. What resulted from these enquiries was Socrates' realization that he alone was wise in recognizing his own ignorance. Some have argued that Plato may have invented the whole story, and Xenophon's mention of the same story in his *Apology* may have been based on Plato's invention.[14] In fact, one reason to doubt the Oracle story is that Socrates would have had to have been known to be operating as a questioner and to have obtained some reputation for wisdom in order for Chaerephon to have put the question to the Oracle in the first place.

Even if we accept some truth in the story of the oracle in Plato's version, there is a significant difference between Plato's version and Xenophon's, one that is worth investigating. In Xenophon's version, the Oracle does not claim that Socrates was the wisest but rather the most "free, upright and prudent."[15] In an astute article, Dorion argues that the significance of such a difference lies in the fact that Xenophon's interest in Socrates lay in his

[14] Dorion (2011, p. 10) suggests that "there is nothing to say that it is not a myth first invented by Plato and later taken up and reinterpreted by Xenophon." Given what I take to be a working hypothesis about the intent of the *Apology*, this seems extreme, yet, as Vander Waerdt (1993, p. 12, n. 38) points out, even in Hellenistic times the story was highly regarded by some and rejected by others: the sceptic Archisilaus took the story as legitimate, whereas the Epicurean Colotes scoffed at it. Further remarks on other scholars' opinions regarding the truth of the story can be found in Vander Waerdt (1993, p. 29, n. 80) and Leibowitz (2010, p. 29 ff.). The suggestion that the story was invented extends at least as far back as R. Hackforth (1933).

[15] Xenophon, *Apology* 14.

character, not in his wisdom.[16] According to Dorion, when Xenophon sets out to defend Socrates against the charge of corrupting the youth, he emphasizes three Socratic qualities:

> *enkrateia* (self-mastery with regard to bodily pleasures), *karteria* (endurance of physical pain), and *autarkeia* (self-sufficiency). Xenophon frequently mentions these three qualities of Socrates in the rest of the *Memorabilia*, and for good reason: this triad forms the core of Socratic ethics in Xenophon's writings.[17]

That Plato would emphasize wisdom and Xenophon character here is telling, but what is equally telling is that in Plato's *Apology* Socrates' mission *began* as a result of consultation with the Oracle, whereas, according to Xenophon, Socrates immediately understands and elucidates the Oracle's meaning. Socrates had, by Xenophon's lights, been questioning things since childhood. Why would Plato cast things in this light? Even if Plato is being historically faithful to Socrates' claims at the trial, the question would then become

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[16] Dorion (2006, pp. 100–101) claims: "In Xenophon's *Apology*, Socrates reports that the Pythia told Chaerephon 'that no man was more free (*eleutherioteron*) than I, or more just (*dikaioteron*), or more moderate (*sophronesteron*).' It is certainly remarkable that this response makes no mention of *sophia* – and this tends to confirm that *sophia* does not play as central a role in Xenophon as in Plato – but the choice of the three virtues that are mentioned is even more revealing, since it is entirely in accord with the preeminence Xenophon gives to mastery of one's pleasures and desires."

[17] See Dorion (2011, p. 19): "The exegetic choices are the following: either we prefer Plato's version to Xenophon's for reasons that have more to do with bias than the possibility of ruling in favor of one over the other (Vlastos 1991, [SIMP] pp. 288–289); or, rather than keeping one and disqualifying the other, we conserve both versions and strive to note their differences and most importantly interpret them in the framework of the philosophical convictions specific to each of the authors (Vander Waerdt 1993 [Vander Waerdt OSAP]). It seems quite likely that this type of comparative exegesis, because it revives the pertinence of positions hitherto discarded by the Socratic problem, will considerably enrich our understanding not only of the reception of Socratism but also of the authors who express themselves through the intermediary of Socrates." See also Prior (2006, p. 29): "Despite their differences of emphasis, our sources agree about several aspects of Socrates' life, character, philosophical interests and method. Where they concur, we have the best historical evidence about Socrates that we are likely to have. If we reject this evidence, we shall have nothing on which to base our account of the historical Socrates. Where our sources disagree, we may be unable to reconcile them, but in some cases we may not need to: both sides may present aspects of Socrates we ought not to dismiss."

why *Socrates* would cast himself in this light. The mention of the Oracle story causes a *thorubus* or disturbance among the jurors at *Apology* 20e. Why? I think it is because the jurors had heard a story like this before…

The Oracle and the Seven Sages

The Oracle story that Socrates tells at his trial is one that predates his trial by at least 150 years and one that the 501 jurors would certainly have known. Socrates says nothing short of "I call as my surprise witness The Oracle at Delphi." Now surely this has the forensic effect of showing that, far from disbelieving in gods, Socrates' own activities were commanded by Apollo.[18] Yet the trope of the Oracle and the denial of wisdom dates back to the time of the Persian King Croesus (ca. 595—547 BCE), and it is the centrepiece of the legends of the Seven Sages. Vander Waerdt (1993, p. 28) notes the precedent of the Oracle attributing wisdom to unsuspecting people, yet for whatever reason pays very little attention to the stories of the Seven Sages. We should keep in mind that Socrates was reputed to be a philodorean, or lover of Spartan culture, which is exactly the way in which Plato describes the Seven Sages in the *Protagoras*, the oldest extant account of them:

> "All these [the Sages] were enthusiasts, lovers and disciples of the Spartan culture; and you can recognize that character in their wisdom by the short, memorable sayings that fell from each of them they assembled together and dedicated these as the first-fruits of their lore to Apollo in his Delphic temple, inscribing there those maxims which are on every tongue— "Know thyself" and "Nothing overmuch." To what intent do I say this? To show how the ancient philosophy had this style of laconic brevity" (*Protagoras* 343a-b).

[18] In an insightful article, Janko (2006) suggests that Socrates' atheism may well have been equated with reading the myths allegorically in line with scientific investigation. Socrates' incredulity at Euthyphro's taking the story of the castration of Uranus by Cronos literally would fit such a characterization (*Euthyphro*, 6B ff). This story is mentioned again in the *Republic* as the kind of story that should be banned from the Kallipolis (*Republic*, 377e-378e). Yet it is a thin piece of evidence for attributing this kind of allegorizing to Socrates and again runs counter to the exchange in the *Apology*, where Socrates shows Meletus to hold two contradictory positions: that Socrates introduces new gods and that he believes in no gods at all (26B–28b). This, it seems, is a rather straightforward contradiction, and not one bound up with allegorical atheism of the kind Janko sees. The evidence for that kind of atheism is to be found, if anywhere, in Plato's dialogues, but not in the *Apology*.

With the exception of Thales, early practitioners of "ancient philosophy" represent a conception of philosophy quite different from the natural science that Socrates claims to know nothing of in the *Apology* (20c-26d). In short, Plato attempts, through this conception of τῶν παλαιῶν τῆς φιλοσοφίας, to merge the humanist tradition of the Seven Sages with philosophy, and the humanist concerns of Socrates along with it. We may say that Plato sees the historical Socrates as more closely aligned with this conception of "ancient philosophy" than with the philosophy of what we now call the Presocratics.

When Diogenes Laertius comes to distinguish the philosopher from the sage many centuries later, he attests to the fact that philosophers pursue wisdom, whereas sages have perfected it. In what follows, I want to suggest that the central feature of Socrates' reputation for wisdom overlaps in a significant way with a central feature of the Sage narrative, namely *the attribution of wisdom to one of the sages by the Oracle at Delphi*. Before I do so, however, that discussion needs to be prefaced by a bit more background on the extant work in which the Sage/Philosopher distinction and the Sage narrative emerge, namely Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers.* Diogenes classifies Greek philosophy into two main schools, the Italian school, starting with Pythagoras, and the Ionian School, whose founder was Thales. This is the story told by countless historians of Greek philosophy. However, Diogenes actually says that the first Ionian *philosopher* was Thales' student, Anaximander (DL Pro. 13). Diogenes also says that Pythagoras was the first person to call himself a philosopher:

> But the first to … call himself a philosopher [*philosophon*] or lover of wisdom [*philosophian*], was Pythagoras; for, said he, no man is wise [*sophon*], but God alone. All too quickly the study was called wisdom [*sophia*] and its professor a sage [*sophos*], to denote his attainment of mental perfection; while the student who took it up was a philosopher [*philosophos*] or lover of wisdom (DL Pro 8).

If Socrates thinks that he is wise, his account of wisdom is very different from Plato's account of wisdom, which would entail formal knowledge. Socrates' trademark is that he is the wisest because he knows that he knows nothing. But again, careful reading reveals that Socrates does not completely deny that he is wise in the *Apology*:

> The fact is, men of Athens, that I have acquired this reputation on account of nothing else than a sort of wisdom. What kind of wisdom is this? Just that which is perhaps human wisdom. For perhaps I really am wise in this wisdom (20d).

This is what Socrates says in the context of his trial, about the Oracle at Delphi. Chaerephon, an admirer of Socrates, asks the Oracle, "Who is the wisest?" and receives the reply, "Socrates." Socrates describes his life's mission as that of proving the Oracle wrong. He sets out on a search for someone wiser than himself, questioning politicians, poets, and craftsmen, ultimately determining that none of them seemed to have any wisdom of the kind he was seeking:

> I thought to myself, "I am wiser than this man; for neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either. I seem, then, in just this little thing to be wiser than this man at any rate, that what I do not know I do not think I know either…" For on each occasion those who are present think I am wise in the matters in which I confute someone else; but the fact is, gentlemen, it is likely that the god is really wise and by his oracle means this: "Human wisdom is of little or no value." And it appears that he does not really say this of Socrates, but merely uses my name, and makes me an example, as if he were to say: "This one of you, O human beings, is wisest, who, like Socrates, recognizes that he is in truth of no account in respect to wisdom" (21d ff.).

Socrates never actually denies that he is wise. Socrates only actually denies that he is wiser than the gods. Socrates accepts that *he may be wise,* whereas Pythagoras denies wisdom altogether. For Pythagoras wisdom is beyond human capacity, whereas for Socrates, divine wisdom may be beyond human capacity, but clearly human wisdom is not. According to our original distinction, this makes Socrates a Sage, and Pythagoras a philosopher. However, Socrates, as I have intimated, has something more striking in common with the Sage tradition, namely the attribution of wisdom to him by the Oracle at Delphi, and his initial refusal to accept this attribution. The many different versions of this story in the Sage tradition all follow the same basic storyline:

- A tripod or bowl is found, and its ownership is disputed.
- The Oracle at Delphi is consulted.

- The Oracle declares that it should be given "to the wisest."
- It is given to one of the Seven Sages (different accounts name different sages).
- This sage refuses the prize and hands it off to the next sage, and the prize makes the rounds of all Seven Sages, all of whom refuse it, until it returns to the first sage to have received it.
- This sage then says it belongs to Apollo.

When the Oracle attributes wisdom to someone, the mark of their wisdom seems to be the acceptance that someone else is wiser than they are, thereby initiating a search for that person—a search that ultimately ends in failure and culminates in the conclusion that divine wisdom far surpasses that of men.

Sages and Philosophy as a Way of Life

Space here does not permit a discussion of Socrates as a sage beyond the connections with the Oracle at Delphi, but it is worth pointing out that the figure of Socrates is employed both in the context of the Stoic Sage by writers such as Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius and in that of the Muslim Sage by writers such as Abu Bakr al-Razi and al-Mubashshir ibn Fatik, whose report of Socrates' last words stands at the head of this article; in both traditions, Socrates is used as a foil, an exemplar, or an ideal. It is, of course, the case that these impressions are heavily dependent on the literary inventiveness of the *Logoi Sokratikoi*, but we should also consider that such writers were philosophers who were perhaps wise enough to see what the original Socratic disciples saw —a Socrates flexible enough to be the spokesman for their own ideas, in virtue of the fact that he himself was not laden with doctrines but rather manifested philosophy as a way of life.

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