

APPROACHING PLATO



A Guide to the Early and Middle Dialogues

Welcome to *Approaching Plato*,¹ an online text designed to provide aids to the study of Plato's early and middle dialogues. Here you will find material covering 15 of Plato's works. For each of the dialogues there is a list and brief description of the main characters, outlines (both a short and a longer, more detailed version), and an interpretive essay. Other supplementary material is included as well, such as an imagined letter from Xanthippe to her mother reflecting on the actions of Socrates and his friends during the days leading up to the philosopher's execution; and an account of the various ways Socrates characterizes his relation to the oracle of Apollo in the *Apology*. The longer outlines are supplemented with Greek text so that those who know the language can see for themselves the original words and phrases behind our translations.²

We have designed the material included on this site to be of use to students and professors of every level. The outlines are useful in a number of ways. Those who read a dialogue for the first time (or for the first few times) often find it difficult to follow the course of Plato's arguments, which can be dense, allusive, concealed, and often long and interwoven with other material. The outlines assist comprehension by highlighting the dialogues' main themes, their order of presentation, and their interconnections. The section-divisions within each outline indicate which parts of a dialogue must be read as one—read, that is, in one sitting—and thus where one may take a break from reading without breaking the thread of an argument. Students and professors alike can also use the outlines as brief reminders of the main themes and arguments of dialogues with which they are already well acquainted. As noted above, we have designed the outlines in such a way that those who can read Greek and who wish to see certain words and phrase in the original language can do so.

There are many ways to read Plato. The essays on this site are interpretive, not exhaustive. They have been written with advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and professors in mind. They are not summaries of the dialogues or introductions to the scholarly consensus about their meaning or import. Rather, they are occasionally idiosyncratic and, we hope, always challenging and provocative reflections on Plato's work. The essays provide historical, biographical, and philosophical information that situate the dialogues in a broader context and thus render them more accessible. They also stand as examples of how an intelligent and curious mind engages with Plato's work. Philosophical novices can learn from both of these features. But we also believe that even the most

¹ All the material on this site © 2009 by Mark Anderson and Ginger Osborn.

² The translations throughout are the authors' own.

mature readers of the Platonic texts will appreciate the essays, whether they learn from them, object to them, enjoy them, or are exasperated by them.

This site is no substitute for the direct and careful reading of Plato's texts. It is not meant to be; no project of this sort can be. If you have found this site while seeking a short-cut to a personal engagement with the dialogues, you have come to the wrong place. You will find nothing here to assist you—unless by assistance you understand a correction of the misguided desire to avoid the serious and rewarding work of reading and struggling with the primary texts. If you are or have been engaged in this struggle and are seeking an enthusiastic ally, then make whatever use of this site you can.

Entries on the [Contents](#) page link to corresponding outlines and essays; major divisions in the short outlines link to corresponding divisions in the detailed outlines, and vice versa. The essay on [Happiness and Eudaimonia](#) addresses some important terminological and philosophical matters. For a more thorough account of the substance and intentions of this site, please see the [Introduction](#).

If you have any questions or comments regarding this site, please [contact us](#). (Also, please do take a moment to let us know your level—undergraduate, graduate student, professor, etc—and in what way you found the site helpful.)

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INTRODUCTION

Plato's dialogues operate on many different levels simultaneously. The two most fundamental levels are the dialectical and the dramatic. Every Platonic dialogue comprises long and often complex arguments embedded in the dramatic form of a philosophical debate or conversation. Many of the characters who appear in the dialogues are known from the historical record, and in most instances we can establish the year and location of the conversation. Plato evidently took great care to outfit the dialogues with dramatic features that associate them with actual events in Athenian history, and the arguments occur against and supported by that background. When reading a Platonic dialogue we must try always to attend to both of these elements.

This site is designed to help the reader do just that. Each of the fifteen sections corresponds to one of the early or middle dialogues;³ and each one covers both the dialectical and the dramatic elements. An outline explicitly displays a dialogue's main themes, principal divisions, and salient arguments; an interpretive essay situates the work in the relevant cultural and/or philosophical surroundings. Taken together, the outlines and essays introduce a reader to the two principal levels of each dialogue.

In the remainder of this introduction we shall explain these points in greater detail. In so doing we intend not only to familiarize the reader with the nature of this site,

³ These fifteen account for all but two of the indisputably authentic early and middle dialogues. We have chosen not to include the *Republic*, for which a number of excellent introductions are available. We have, however, included a short-form outline of the *Republic*. This will provide a basic level of assistance with the dialogue, at least enough to indicate its main themes and their interrelations and divisions. We hope the interested reader will follow the example of the dialogues that do receive full coverage and produce for the *Republic*, either as a whole or in part, his or her own long-form outline and interpretive essay.

We have elected to omit the *Menexenus* as well, which omission we justify by noting its specialized appeal and the paucity of overtly philosophical substance.

The *Theaetetus* and the *Parmenides* are variously classified as late-middle or early-late. Whatever one thinks about this matter, the fact is that these are difficult texts that require a longer and more detailed treatment that this site is meant to provide.

The *Hippias Major* and *Alcibiades I* are not generally accepted as authentic. Each of them has many able defenders, and indeed one of the authors of this site is inclined to accept them both. Nevertheless, we must draw the line somewhere, and this is where we have drawn it.

but also to provide suggestions and warnings to keep in mind when reading Plato's dialogues. What follows, then, is as much an introduction to the reading of Plato as to the content of this site.

Socrates' conversational style is idiosyncratic; one might call it downright peculiar. Notoriously, the thrust of his questions or assertions is often obscure, especially at the beginning of an argument. He frequently elicits his interlocutor's opinion on a topic that seems innocuous, silly, or utterly irrelevant to the immediate context. As perplexing as this can be in itself, even more confounding is his tendency to later recall and employ the statement as a premise of an argument against that same man's position. This practice can affect the reader in the same way it affects Socrates' interlocutor: neither initially understands what motivates Socrates' words. As a result, when he later reveals his conclusions we are surprised and unsure how they follow from what has preceded. This can be frustrating. And, indeed, Socrates' dialectical partners often express exasperation and incomprehension at the progression of their conversation. The confusion is occasionally so pronounced that Socrates must clarify the matter by rehearsing the course of the argument—he must explain, point by point, how some specific set of agreements generated a particular conclusion.

An example of this procedure is *Protagoras* 332a-333b, where Socrates develops an argument against the sophist's assertion that the virtues are distinct by asking initially whether there is such a thing as folly and whether it is the opposite of wisdom. The questions seem trivially obvious and benign, as do some of the other questions Socrates asks in this exchange. Yet at the end Socrates "sums up" Protagoras' agreements and concludes that at least two of the virtues, temperance and wisdom, are the same. Protagoras did not see this coming: he accepts Socrates' conclusion, but "very unwillingly."

Call this trickery if you will; or call it keen rhetorical strategy. However we classify it, we cannot escape the fact that it tends to obscure our view—as it so often obscures Socrates' interlocutor's view—of an argument's logical development. We must, therefore, attend closely to every exchange, however apparently trivial. This will enable us to identify an argument from its inception and analyze it in its entirety.

As important as it is to comprehend the individual arguments, we must also bear in mind their interrelations. A single argument may depend upon a premise that itself must be established by way of a detailed argument. In this case Socrates must temporarily defer the primary argument in order to demonstrate the premise. Having accomplished this, he can return to the main argument. This procedure generates a structure of arguments nested within arguments. Alternatively, Socrates may employ the conclusion of an argument, arrived at by way of many premises, as one among many other premises, each of which was itself formerly the conclusion of its own long parade of premises. From these conclusions-cum-premises Socrates can then construct an argument on a larger scale, or on a higher level, than the premises occupied as the conclusions of their own individual arguments. From this perspective the dialogues appear to be constructed of arguments built upon arguments.

For example, consider Socrates' conversation with Callicles in the *Gorgias*. In this section Socrates attempts to demonstrate that a life of self-discipline is happier than a life of self-indulgence. Yet Callicles' commitments are such that Socrates cannot make his case without first securing Callicles' agreement that the pleasant and the good are different. This requires its own long proof. Only after Callicles agrees to this does Socrates return to the argument that self-discipline is necessary for happiness. Thus Socrates must as it were burrow into his primary argument to establish one of its premises before he can resurface and complete his overarching demonstration. In this we

see the internal movement of the argument. It has an external thrust as well: Socrates proves the value of the good, and its distinction from the pleasant, in order to make his broader case about self-discipline. But this defense of self-discipline in turn grounds a still broader case in support of a just life, which connects Socrates' conversation with Callicles to his earlier discussion with Polus. These arguments continue to build upon one another until their implications extend even into the matters of contention featured in Socrates' exchange with Gorgias.

One other factor to keep in mind when considering a dialogue's dialectical level is the problem of translation. An argument's major, minor, and middle terms are words, words that stand in specific relations to one another. We must, therefore, be clear about these words, and understand their meanings, to evaluate an argument properly. Unfortunately, the standard translations are often less than helpful in this regard. Consider the second half of the *Phaedrus*, for example. A central theme of this section concerns speaking and writing well. The "well" here translates the Greek καλῶς, the adverbial form of the adjective καλός. This word, καλός, is notoriously difficult to translate, for it has several meanings, "noble," "beautiful," and "good" among them. A native Greek speaker employing this word, even when intending different nuances of meaning, can imply much beyond the basic linguistic signification because these diverse meanings are communicated by one and the same word. In our translations, however, if it appears that Plato intends the aesthetic sense of καλός we must write "beautiful," which has no obvious relationship to our word "noble." What, then, shall we do when he employs καλός in the sense of "beautiful" in proximity to καλός in the sense of "noble," or to καλῶς meaning "well"? We cannot believe that the repetition is accidental or insignificant, which would suggest a carelessness or indifference incompatible with the meticulous attention to detail evinced elsewhere in the dialogues. We can only conclude

that Plato intended to produce these semantic resonances. Yet it is a rare translation that reproduces this feature of the dialogues. We have tried to do this through consistency of translation as well as by providing links to the original Greek.

Having stressed the importance of the dialogues' dialectical components, we must insist that logic is not the sole, nor always the primary, criterion according to which one should interpret and evaluate Plato's work. To attain an appropriate perspective on the dialogues we must be alert to their various dramatic elements. The main action of some dialogues occurs within elaborate frames; some dialogues draw attention to their setting and surroundings; some introduce historical figures whose presence, given the facts of their lives, must be significant. Some dialogues are Socrates' own retelling and narration of an earlier conversation, which affords him the opportunity to reveal to his present audience thoughts and observations that he kept to himself during the original exchange. In some dialogues Socrates mocks, deceives, or misleads his interlocutors; on occasion he even colludes with one against another, or intentionally provokes disagreement and discord among the other participants. A scene, a phrase, even a single word, may reverberate throughout a dialogue with unexpected and profound effects. One must always be alert and willing to pause and cast one's eye over the dialogue as a whole in search of inter-textual resonances and influences.

For an example of the dialogues' dramatic elements consider the complex frame in which the *Symposium* is set. We do not engage with this dialogue at first-hand, as we do the *Meno*, say, or the *Laches*. Nor do we receive it directly from one who was himself present for the conversation, as we receive the *Protagoras* or the *Euthydemus* from Socrates. The *Symposium* is narrated years after the actual event by Apollodorus, who was a child unacquainted with Socrates at the time of the gathering at Agathon's house. Apollodorus learned the details from Aristodemus, who attended the event with Socrates.

Aristodemus, however, did not recall all of the evening's speeches, and at one point he fell asleep and so missed what must have been a fascinating discussion among Socrates, Aristophanes, and Agathon concerning, at least in part, comedy and tragedy. Moreover, Socrates' speech is itself a retelling: it is his narration of an earlier conversation with a woman named Diotima. This, one of the most famous speeches in all of the dialogues, is presented to the reader at fourth-hand. Apollodorus notes that he verified Aristodemus' account with Socrates himself, which of course lends credibility to his narrative. Still, we cannot easily dismiss the dialogue's frame; it stands before us almost insistently. Separated as we are in this way from the conversations themselves, one wonders what Plato intended by distancing his readers so. Are we to question the accuracy of the speeches? Are we to reflect on memory and, therefore, on the possible interrelations between memory and Eros? Is Plato directing his reader to the mystery itself—is the veil he has cast around this dialogue significant in itself?

These and other features of the dialogues reveal a broader point about their larger-scale structure. The dialogues are multi-layered; but two of these layers stand out and must constantly be kept in mind. There is the level of the conversation itself, which we may call Socrates' level. Then there is the level of the dialogue that contains the conversation, which we may call Plato's level. These two levels open every dialogue to at least the following two types of question: first, what are the problems, methods of investigation, solutions, failures, etc. of Socrates' conversations? Second, what does Plato intend by presenting these problems, methods of investigation, etc. in the precise manner and mode in which he has in fact presented them? In short, what has Socrates done and why has Plato made him do it? These are related but distinct questions, and one may have to employ different techniques, not only to answer them, but even to formulate them clearly.

Plato's dialogues are set in a very specific time and place, replete with references and allusions to the history and culture of Athens and indeed to the whole of the Greek world. To judge from the works themselves, Socrates and Plato thought deeply about the cultural as well as the traditionally pedagogical education of Athens' youth. The dialogues suggest that under ideal circumstances education takes place between and among friends, particularly friends whose bonds cross generational divides. As we have remarked, there is always more to a Platonic dialogue than pure dialectic. These themes of friendship, education, and the associations between young and old in Athens are a salient part of this non-dialectical material.

These are just a few examples of the various manifestations of Plato's dialectical and dramatic art. We have not intended to present an exhaustive catalogue of the numerous surprises and challenges the dialogues contain, but to alert the reader to the intricacies of Plato's work. Bearing these forewarnings in mind and consulting the outlines and essays as needed, the reader should in time both learn from the wisdom and appreciate the beauty of Plato's dialectical dramas.

A final caveat: Plato is infinite; like all great art, his dialogues are inexhaustible. Consequently, it is impossible to confine the substance of his works between the covers of a book or within the pages of a website. The elements of Platonic "doctrine" concerning which some level of scholarly consensus has been reached, considered from the widest possible perspective, are perhaps the least significant aspects of his work. This is not to suggest that the analytical minutiae, the explicit principles and expressible facts, are unimportant. To the contrary, they are almost always of great interest—in themselves, in relation to their influence and development in subsequent intellectual history, and as essential components of the *whole* in which we believe the highest value of the dialogues resides. Yet we *are* suggesting that our ultimate goal in reading the dialogues should be

to engage with and to develop, if not an exhaustive understanding, at least an appreciation of this whole, of this artistic and intellectual achievement that stands as near to the beginning as to the summit of our western heritage.

A NOTE ON THE ARRANGEMENT OF THE DIALOGUES

The dialogues on this site are presented in sequence according to their dramatic dates. The authors expect this arrangement to reward the reader with a fresh perspective and new insight into Plato's work. It is impossible to assign to every one of the dialogues a specific dramatic date, but for most this can be accomplished with a reasonable degree of confidence.⁴ Indeed, all but two fall into an uncontroversial order. As for these two—the *Lesser Hippias*, which may be set at any time within a period of about five years, and the *Gorgias*, which has the appearance of being deliberately anachronistic—we have situated them in relation to the other works on the basis of thematic continuity. With these two exceptions, the dialogues exhibit such continuity of themselves. There is no way to know what Plato intended in this regard, of course; but the fact that a sequence based upon dramatic chronology produces such thematic resonances is remarkable.

Apart from these thematic considerations, the dramatic-chronological arrangement yields something approaching a biography of Socrates' philosophical life. That the dialogues provide such a dramatic biography is acknowledged by the customary *Euthyphro-Apology-Crito-Phaedo* sequence. We have tried to develop the dramatic-biographical possibilities inherent in this sequence by extending the organizational principle on which it is based to the arrangement of the entire series of dialogues.

⁴ In this effort we have relied on Debra Nails' invaluable work, *The People of Plato* (Hackett: Indianapolis & Cambridge, 2002).

This arrangement has the added advantage of placing first what is easily one of the best of the early dialogues, the *Protagoras*. We encourage the reader to begin with this work, for it exhibits not a few of the themes, modes of inquiry, and dramatic elements that appear to greater or lesser degrees in most of the other dialogues. Having offered these few remarks by way of explanation and justification, then, we leave it to the reader to discover the dialectical-dramatic interconnections for him or herself. We are convinced that the very act of reflecting on the interplay of content and chronology will be illuminating in its own right.

HAPPINESS AND EUDAIMONIA

When reading Plato's dialogues in translation we repeatedly encounter the words "happiness" and "happy." Indeed, many of the dialogues, either in whole or in part, seem to be about "happiness." Given the centrality of this theme, we must take care not to misunderstand it, for if we do, we may very well misunderstand everything else. Unfortunately, the very words "happiness" and "happy" all but ensure that we *will* misunderstand. This is so because an important part of what we mean by these words is *directly opposed* to what Plato means by the Greek words they are commonly used to translate. The Greek words are eudaimonia (εὐδαιμονία) and eudaimōn (εὐδαίμων),⁵ and "happiness" and "happy" are inaccurate and misleading translations. This is a serious problem. It is for this reason we have included this note as a separate entry.

In contemporary usage "happiness" is synonymous with "contentment," "joy," "a good mood." It is the opposite of "sadness," and like "sadness" it designates a *feeling*, a subjective state of mind. "I feel sad," we say. And, similarly, "I am feeling happy today." If questioned whether or not we are "happy," we have only to introspect, to "look inside" ourselves and evaluate our emotional and/or psychological state. To be sure, we may address the issue by reflecting on more than just our *present* mental state. We may consider whether we are "happy" *these days*, recently, over some extended period of time. For perhaps we believe that the question, "Am I happy?" applies not just to one fleeting moment in time, but to a more stable and lasting condition. Be that as it may, whether we conceptualize "happiness" as ephemeral or as a more enduring condition, the fact remains that we consider it a subjective state of mind. Only *you* can say for sure

⁵ Eudaimonia, the noun, is pronounced as follows: the "eu" rhymes with "you" (technically speaking, this is not exactly right; but it will do), the "dai" with "my," the "mon" with "bone" (also not exactly right, but close enough), the "i" with "me," and the "a" with the "u" in "up." The accent falls on the second "i;" thus, eu-dai-mon-**i**-a. The accent of the adjective, eudaimōn, falls on the second syllable; thus, eu-**dai**-mon.

whether you are “happy” and this is because only you know your own mind, only you know how you feel. Others may be more or less able to infer or guess whether or not you are “happy,” but since they do not have direct access to your feelings, they may be mistaken.

Eudaimonia is altogether different. It designates, not a subjective state of mind, but an objective state of being; it signifies, not how one *feels*, but how or what one *is*. The etymology of the word may help to clarify this. First, ignore the “-ia” ending, which serves only to make the word a noun. Now consider the “eu” and the “daimon” independently. The “eu,” when used by itself (εὖ), is an adverb that means “well.” Thus, when it functions as or in relation to an adjective or noun, as it does as a component of the word “eudaimonia,” it means “good.” Now for “daimon.” In Greek, “daimon” (δαίμων) is a noun that designates a divinity. It may be used to refer to any divinity—Zeus for example—especially if the person using the term does not know that the divinity in question is Zeus. If he does know, he will probably just say “Zeus.” If not, he might refer to the “daimon” who, say, recently appeared to him. The word has a related but somewhat different meaning. According to this meaning a “daimon” is some “lesser” or “minor” divinity, a divine being not among the twelve Olympians—a nymph perhaps, or Atê (ἄτη), a personification of the force Agamemnon in the *Iliad* blames for his coarse treatment of Achilles. You will find another fine example of the use of “daimon” to designate a minor divinity (with a particular Platonic twist) in the *Symposium* (202e-203a). To this “minor divinity” meaning is related a still different one, which brings us nearer to the sense that interests us. A “daimon” may be a divinity similar to what some people today call a “guardian angel,” that is, a divinity that watches over the course of one’s life. Now, finally, there derives from this sense of the word another sense, according to which one’s “daimon” is not a divinity at all, but simply *the course of one’s*

life. One's daimon is one's lot in life. According to this meaning, then, "daimon" designates the path one takes through life, with all that one does, all that one suffers and experiences, all that one *is* taken as a whole.

Adding all this up, "eudaimonia" is a noun that designates a "eu," *good*, "daimon," *lot in life* or *course of life*—or for short, simply: *life*. Thus, "eudaimonia" means "good life."

But do not be mistaken, having come so far: "good" here is not a matter of opinion. It is not whatever one believes or feels to be good. It designates what *really is*, as a matter of objective fact, good. This distinction is at the root of the difference between our idea of "happiness" and the Greek idea of "eudaimonia." The good life, eudaimonia, is not whatever someone happens to believe or say that it is, even if that person is passionately committed to his opinion. One may believe to one's core that, say, 115×23 is 2650, but it is not (it is 2645); you may conduct physiological research guided by the idea that the brain's principal function is to cool the blood, but you would be wrong, however passionately you believe it and however painful it may be for you to face the facts. Similarly, Plato would say that a man who believes that a life of idleness and self-indulgence is a good life is mistaken, gravely mistaken in fact.⁶

This is not to deny that a life of self-indulgence is pleasurable. It may be very pleasurable indeed (for a time anyway). But pleasure, like "happiness," is a feeling. And the mere fact that a particular activity gives one pleasure, or makes one "happy," does not make that activity good. Consider the man who derives pleasure from torturing animals, raping women, or just being aggressive and rude to others. His pleasure does not make

⁶ We realize that the reader will be more likely to accept the objectivity of math or physiology than of morality. We are not arguing the case here, merely explaining Plato's position. Having said that, the reader should ask him or herself *why* morality seems different. Is it just because we cannot demonstrate the moral claim with a calculator or a scalpel—because we cannot see, hear, or touch it? If this is one's reason, one should ask oneself whether this is a *good* reason.

his actions good. If we tell him that he is not living a good life, he may respond, “Who are you to say whether or not my life is good?! I enjoy it; it gives me pleasure. That’s all there is to it!” Plato would respond that that is *not* all there is to it. He would not deny that the man experiences feelings of pleasure from his activities, but he would insist that the activities are bad and that the man is not living a good life. He would argue, moreover, that there is something wrong with a man who derives pleasure from bad activities. That a man is pleased to act badly not only does not make the act good, it makes the man bad: he who derives pleasure from bad acts is a bad man living a bad life.⁷ The good man living a good life derives pleasure from good acts; bad acts, should he perform them, would cause him pain.

Do not take this to mean that Plato disapproves of pleasure. To the contrary, he believes that a good life is naturally pleasant (pleasure naturally attends, or follows from, the good). The point is that a pleasant life is not necessarily good—because, as we have seen, some pleasures are aroused by bad acts and are therefore indicative of the opposite of a good life. To put this idea in a formula: Where eudaimonia is, there pleasure is as well; where there is pleasure, eudaimonia may or may not be present.

With all of this in mind we can say that Plato is a *moral realist*, an *objectivist*, as opposed to a moral *subjectivist*, or *relativist*. In other words, Plato thinks that moral terms, such as “good,” “right,” and “just,” designate real facts whose status is *independent of an individual’s or a culture’s opinions, beliefs, customs, or traditions* (you may take this phrase in italics as a definition of “objective” for the purposes of this essay). The moral relativist, on the other hand, believes that the truth status of morality *depends upon* an individual’s or a culture’s beliefs, customs, etc. In other words,

⁷ He who (regularly) does bad things is a bad man; he who enjoys doing bad things is even *worse*—he is wicked. That a man enjoys doing what is bad does not prove that what we took to be bad is in fact good; it proves, rather, that the man is perverse.

whatever an individual believes to be good or just *is* good or just for that individual (this is known as “subjectivism” or “individual relativism”); or, similarly, whatever a culture believes to be good or just *is* good or just for that culture (“cultural relativism”). According to this view, there are no real, independent moral facts.

Plato thinks there certainly are moral facts and that humans can know them (which is not to say it is easy to know them. It is not). He argues for precisely this point in many of his dialogues; in others, he assumes it. The reader must be aware of this fact, for if when reading Plato one thinks happiness-as-feeling when Plato intends happiness-as-eudaimonia, one will miss the point entirely. This is especially true in a dialogue like the *Gorgias*, for example. Eudaimonia is at the center of Socrates’ dispute with Calicles. Calicles equates pleasure and eudaimonia; Socrates resists that equation, as you should expect given what we have said so far. Socrates argues that only the self-disciplined man is eudaimôn, and that the man who devotes his life to unrestrained and undirected hedonism is “miserable” (ἄθλιος). Like eudaimonia, “miserable” designates, not a feeling, but an objective state. Not, “he *feels* miserable,” as you might say of someone suffering from the flu; but “he *is* miserable,” as in “he is wretched” or “he is bad.”⁸ If one does not attend to this distinction, then when Socrates declares Calicles or the way of life he advocates “miserable,” one is likely to say, “Who is Socrates to decide that?! If the man does not *feel* miserable, then he must not be.” According to the realist/objectivist understanding of eudaimonia—the Socratic and Platonic understanding—one may say, “He does not *feel* miserable, but he *is* miserable.” This is just another way of saying, “He may be happy-as-feeling, but he is not happy-as-eudaimonia.”⁹

⁸ As Socrates puts it in the *Meno*, “What else is being miserable than to desire and to acquire bad things” (78a7-8)?

⁹ This distinction runs through much of the *Gorgias*, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. It is implicit, for example, when during his conversation with Polus Socrates argues that injustice is bad (474b-475e). The argument will be completely unconvincing unless one understands that this objectivist/realist

So if pleasure or subjective feelings do not guarantee eudaimonia, what does? The fact is that nothing *guarantees* it. For even if one acts always and only according to what is good, one never has complete control of one's life. External circumstances come into play; so does fate or chance. King Priam of Troy may very well have loved and lived for the good, but one day the Sons of the Achaeans descended upon his city and destroyed all that he held dear. His life did not end well, however virtuously he may have lived throughout his many years upon this earth. So, to repeat, *nothing* guarantees eudaimonia. That said, we can identify some necessary conditions, conditions without which one is guaranteed *not* to have it. These are the virtues. The standard list of the Classical Greek virtues includes wisdom (σοφία), justice (δικαιοσύνη), temperance (σωφροσύνη), courage (ἀνδρεία), and piety (εὐσέβεια or ὁσιότης). To “have” these virtues is to *act* in particular ways, to act, that is, virtuously. When one acts virtuously one does what is good. Thus a virtuous life is a life full of good acts; it is, in short, a good life.¹⁰

This account of virtue should illuminate the distinction between happiness-as-feeling and happiness-as-eudaimonia. The virtues are actions—or, more accurately, dispositions toward actions, *habits*. An action or a habit is a real, objective fact in the world. Of course, this is not meant to be a philosophically exhaustive account or definition of either actions or habits. The point is that they most definitely are not feelings, they are not subjective states (though they do have some bearing on, or relation to, subjective states). It should be apparent that merely feeling oneself to be courageous does not make one so.

With this (all-too-brief) account of the virtues in mind, consider our contemporary understanding of happiness. We use the word in such a way that it makes sense to say

notion of morality is in the background. One should be aware of this distinction between appearance and reality—to put it in the most general terms—when reading any Platonic dialogue.

¹⁰ The best ancient account of this—perhaps the best account, period—is in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I and II in particular.

that an ignorant, cowardly, self-indulgent criminal is “happy.” For imagine: “Who are you to say that I’m not happy?!” the criminal might demand. “I like what I do and you have no damn right to say any different.” We might not in fact believe or say that such a man is happy. But the point is that to believe or to say so is in no way self-contradictory. We may deplore the fact that bad men can be happy, but there is nothing in our understanding of happiness that precludes it. But eudaimonia *does* preclude it. If the virtues are necessary conditions for eudaimonia, then it is logically as well as morally impossible for the vicious man to be eudaimôn. According to Plato’s usage, then, it *makes no sense* to say that the criminal is eudaimôn.

Plato would say that the criminal is mistaking pleasure, or “happiness” (in its contemporary sense), for eudaimonia, just like Callicles, and just like many of us. But this is to confuse a subjective phenomenon with an objective one—it is, to say it once more, to confuse a state of mind with a state of being, a feeling with a reality. As the reader will see, Plato (or Socrates) often insists upon a distinction between seeming and being, between that which *appears* to be *x* and that which *really is* *x*. The distinction takes many forms: it applies to everything from the difference between a knack and craft (as in the *Gorgias*) to the difference between physical objects and metaphysical Forms (as in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*). The distinction between pleasure or “happiness” and eudaimonia falls under this division. Pleasure or “happiness” may *seem* or *appear* to be good; eudaimonia *really is* good.

PROTAGORAS

Subject: Virtue, and whether it can be taught.

Mode: Narrative, Socrates to an anonymous friend immediately following the event.

Setting: ca. 433, the house of Callias.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Protagoras.

Hippocrates.

Callias.

Hippias.

Prodicus.

Critias.

Alcibiades.

Others present include Charmides, Eryximachus, Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Agathon.

SHORT OUTLINE

PROTAGORAS SHORT OUTLINE

- 309a-310a: **Socrates and friend:**
Where has Socrates been?
- 310a-319a: **Socrates and Hippocrates:**
Socrates' house (310a-314c).
Hippocrates arrives (310a-311b).
Socrates examines Hippocrates (311b-314c).
House of the sophists (314c-316a).
- 316a-319a: **Socrates and Protagoras:**
Protagoras the sophist (316a-317e).
What does Protagoras teach? (318a-319a).
- 319a-329d: **Can virtue be taught?**
Protagoras says yes; Socrates says no (319a-320c).
Protagoras' *mythos* (320c-324d).
Protagoras' *logos* (324d-326e).
Socrates' one little problem (328d-329d).
- 329e-334c: **On the unity of virtue:**
Protagoras denies the unity of virtue (329d-330e).
Socrates on the unity of justice and piety (331a-332a).
Socrates on the unity of temperance and wisdom (332a-333b).
Socrates on the unity of justice and temperance (333b-334c).
- 334c-338e: **On method.**
- 338e-347b: **Socrates on Simonides' poem.**
- 347b-360e: **On the unity of virtue, continued:**
Protagoras on courage and the other virtues (349a-d).
Socrates on the unity of courage and wisdom (349e-351b).
Socrates on pleasure, the good, and knowledge (351b-357e).
Socrates on courage and wisdom, continued (358a-360e).
- 360e-362a: **Can virtue be taught?**
Socrates says yes; Protagoras says no (360e-361c).
Socrates departs (361c-362a).

[DETAILED OUTLINE](#)

PROTAGORAS DETAILED OUTLINE

- 309a-310a: **SOCRATES AND FRIEND:**
Where has Socrates been?
Socrates has been with the beautiful (καλός) Alcibiades, to whom he paid no attention.
Someone even more beautiful was present: Protagoras, who is beautiful because wise.
- 310a-319a: **SOCRATES AND HIPPOCRATES:**
310a-311b: **Hippocrates arrives:**
Hippocrates wants to study with Protagoras.
311b-314c: **Socrates examines Hippocrates:**
Protagoras is a sophist and by associating with him Hippocrates, too, will become a sophist.
But to present oneself as a sophist would be shameful (αἰσχύνιοι).
Hippocrates: a sophist knows how to make one a clever speaker (δεινός λέγειν).
Socrates: a sophist is a merchant or hawker of teachings who may be ignorant of the manner in which his teachings affect one's soul.
Therefore, he who consumes the sophist's products puts himself at risk, unless he happens to be a soul-doctor (περὶ τὴν ψυχὴν... ἰατρικός).
314c-316a: **House of the sophists:**
Protagoras strolls in the portico surrounded by various men, including Pericles' two sons and Charmides.
Hippias of Elis discusses physics and astronomy with Eryximachus, Phaedrus, and others.
Prodicus sleeps, attended by Pausanias, Agathon, and others.
The beautiful Alcibiades arrives, attended by Critias.¹¹
- 316a-319a: **SOCRATES AND PROTAGORAS:**
316a-317e: **Protagoras the sophist:**
Hippocrates wants to associate with Protagoras in order to become famous in the city (ἐλλόγιμος... ἐν τῇ πόλει).
Protagoras on ancient sophists who hid their practices behind poetry, religious rites, music, and even athletics.¹²
- 318a-319a: **What does Protagoras teach?**
Hippocrates will become a better man (βελτίων) if he studies with Protagoras.
He will learn how best to manage his household and how most ably to speak about and perform deeds for the city.
Protagoras teaches the civic art (τὴν πολιτικὴν τέχνην); he makes men good citizens (ἀγαθοὺς πολίτας).

¹¹ Of those present, Eryximachus, Phaedrus, Pausanias, Agathon, and Alcibiades appear in the *Symposium*.

¹² Among these ancient sophists Protagoras mentions Homer, Hesiod, Simonides, Orpheus, and Musaeus.

- 319a-329d: **CAN VIRTUE BE TAUGHT?**
 319a-320c: **Protagoras says yes; Socrates says no:**
 1) the Athenians do not recognize what Protagoras professes to teach as an expertise, for they allow anyone at all to advise them about the management of the city;
 2) the wisest and best Athenian citizens are unable to transmit this virtue (ταύτην τὴν ἀρετὴν) to others.
 Therefore, virtue is not teachable (οὐχ ἡγούμαι διδακτὸν εἶναι ἀρετὴν).¹³
- 320c-324d: **Protagoras' *mythos*:**
 Practical wisdom (ἔντεχνον σοφία) differs among individuals.
 The political virtues of a sense of shame and justice (αἰδώς; δίκη) are shared by all men.
- 322d-c: Therefore, all men by nature have a share in the political virtues.
 323c-324d: We punish people who lack the virtues.
 But we neither blame nor punish those who are bad in ways that are out of their control.
 Therefore, virtue can be taught.
- 324d-326e: **Protagoras' *logos*:**
 Everyone attempts to inculcate in the young the virtue of a man (ἀνδρὸς ἀρετή)—justice, temperance, and piety (δικαιοσύνη καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ τὸ ὄσιον).
 This suggests that the virtues are teachable.
- 326e-328d: All the young constantly receive lessons in virtue from every quarter, which explains why the children of noble men are no more virtuous than others.
- 328d-329d: **Socrates' one little problem:**
 Is virtue one thing of which these are the parts, or are these all names of one same reality (ἐν μὲν τί ἐστὶν ἡ ἀρετή, μέρη δὲ αὐτῆς ἐστὶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ ὀσιότης, ἢ ταῦτ' ἐστὶν ἃ νυνδὴ ἐγὼ ἔλεγον πάντα ὀνόματα τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἐνὸς ὄντος)?
- 329e-334c: **ON THE UNITY OF VIRTUE:**
 329d-330e: **Protagoras denies the unity of virtue:**
 The virtues are distinct and dissimilar.
 A man can have some virtues but not others.
 Each virtue has its own proper power (δύναμιν αὐτῶν ἕκαστον ἰδίαν ἔχει).
- 331a-332a: **Socrates on the unity of justice and piety:**
 Socrates: justice and piety are the same, or most similar (ταῦτόν...ὁμοιότατον).
- 332a-333b: **Socrates on the unity of temperance and wisdom:**
 Folly (ἀφροσύνη) is the opposite of wisdom (σοφία).
 Those who act correctly and beneficially (ὀρθῶς τε καὶ ὠφελίμως) act temperately (σωφρονεῖν); and they act thus by means of temperance.

¹³ Notice that Socrates has progressed from “the civic art,” through “this virtue,” to simply “virtue.”

Those who act incorrectly act foolishly; and they act thus by means of folly.

Each thing has one opposite.

That which is done in an opposite manner is done through an opposite power.

Therefore, since that which is done temperately is opposed to that which is done foolishly, temperance must be the opposite of folly.

But wisdom is the opposite of folly.

Therefore, if both temperance and wisdom are opposed to folly, and if each thing has only one opposite, then temperance and wisdom must be identical.

333b-334c: **Socrates on the unity of justice and temperance:**¹⁴

Does he who acts unjustly act temperately?

Protagoras is evasive.

Socrates contrasts injustice and the good (which he relates to temperate activity).

Protagoras is exasperated and defensive.

Socrates asks about the relation between the beneficial (ὠφέλιμα) and the good (ἀγαθά).

Protagoras launches into a speech on the relativity of the good.

334c-338e: **ON METHOD:**

Socrates threatens to leave if Protagoras will not keep his answers brief. All those present beg the men to settle their differences and continue the discussion.

Socrates suggests that Protagoras ask questions of him so that he may demonstrate how to answer with the appropriate brevity.

Protagoras must then consent to be interrogated in turn.

338e-347b: **SIMONIDES' POEM:**

Protagoras: the greatest part of a man's education to be clever about poetry (περὶ ἐπῶν δεινός).

Socrates and Protagoras dispute whether Simonides contradicts himself when in a poem he (a) claims that it is difficult for a man to become good (ἀγαθὸν) and (b) denies that it is difficult to be good (ἐσθλὸν).

In the course of his analysis Socrates observes:

1) that the Cretans and the Spartans are the wisest of the Greeks, and that their acknowledged superiority is more a result of their philosophical education than their martial valor.

2) that nothing is bad other than being deprived of knowledge (αὕτη γὰρ μόνη ἐστὶ κακὴ πράξις, ἐπιστήμης στερηθῆναι);

3) that no one willingly either errs (ἐξαμαρτάνειν) or does shameful and bad deeds (αἰσχρὰ τε καὶ κακά).

347b-360e: **ON THE UNITY OF VIRTUE, CONTINUED:**

347b-348e: Protagoras is shamed into returning to the main question at issue.

349a-d: **Protagoras on courage and the other virtues:**

¹⁴ Combined with the previous two arguments this would prove the identity of all four virtues.

- Wisdom, justice, temperance and piety are similar to one another.
 Courage is altogether different.
- 349e-351b: **Socrates on the unity of courage and wisdom:**
- 349e-350c: The courageous are both confident (θαρραλέοι) and knowledgeable.¹⁵
- 350c-351b: Protagoras: all courageous men are confident, but not all confident men are courageous. Technical knowledge (τέχνης) may increase one's confidence, but courage is a product of nature and the appropriate nurturing of the soul.
- 351b-357e: **Socrates on pleasure, the good, and knowledge:**¹⁶
- 351b-e: Pleasures *qua* pleasures are good.
- 352a-353b: Knowledge is powerful and the proper ruler of men.
 If a man knows good and bad, nothing can force him to act contrary to the good.
 But the many claim that a man may fail to do what he knows to be good if he is overcome or mastered (ἡττωμένους; κρατουμένους) by pleasure, pain, love, or fear.¹⁷
- 353c-354e: The many call those pleasures “bad” that deprive one of greater pleasures or produce future pain, and they call those pains “good” that produce future pleasure or minimize future pains.
- 355a-356c: But if the good amounts to nothing more than the pleasant and the bad to the painful, then to say that someone does what is bad having been overcome by pleasure is to say that he has done what is bad having been overcome by that which is good; or, to put it the other way, it is to say that he has done what is painful having been overcome by pleasure.
 But this must mean that he mistakenly thought the pleasure would outweigh the pain.
- 356c-357e: To determine the proper ratio between pleasures and pains requires measurement, which is a type of expertise and knowledge (τέχνη καὶ ἐπιστήμη).
 Therefore, to be overcome by pleasure is the result of the greatest ignorance (ἀμαθία ἢ μεγίστη).
- 358a-360e: **Socrates on courage and wisdom, continued:**
- 358a-d: Actions productive of a painless and pleasant life are noble, beneficial, and good.
 Only the ignorant will neglect to strive for the best possible life.
 Ignorance is having false beliefs about significant matters.
 No man willingly chooses the bad instead of the good.
- 358d-360e: Fear (δέος καὶ φόβος) is the expectation of bad.
 If no one willingly approaches the bad, and if one fears what one believes to be bad, then the courageous do not willingly approach that which they fear.
 The cowardly as well as the courageous, then, avoid what is fearful and approach only that about which they are confident.

¹⁵ Compare *Laches* 193a-d, where Socrates employs similar examples to develop what appears to be a contrary point.

¹⁶ Socrates must address the relations among pleasure, the good, and knowledge before he can complete his case about courage and wisdom. He takes up this case again at 358a.

¹⁷ The examination of this matter concludes at 357e.

But the cowardly and the courageous attempt completely different things: the courageous are willing to go to war, for example, whereas the cowardly are not.

War, being noble, is good and pleasant.

Therefore, courageous men are confident about that which is noble, good, and pleasant, whereas cowardly men fear it.

Therefore, the confidence of courageous men is due to knowledge (of what is and is not to be feared), whereas the fear of cowardly men is due to ignorance.

360e-362a: **CAN VIRTUE BE TAUGHT?**

360e-361c: **Socrates says yes; Protagoras says no:**

Socrates and Protagoras have switched positions:

Socrates has been arguing that the virtues are knowledge, which would imply that they can be taught.

Protagoras has maintained to the contrary that the virtues are not knowledge, which would imply that they are not teachable.

361c-362a: **Socrates departs:**

Socrates suggests that they determine what virtue is and then consider anew whether it is teachable.

Protagoras declines to continue the discussion.

Socrates departs.

PROTAGORAS INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

Opening lines are always important. Socrates has just left the home of Callias where he engaged in a long, arduous, and frustrating conversation with the most famous sophist of the day, Protagoras of Abdera. Their conversation took place in the presence of no fewer than twenty prominent men whom Socrates knows by name, along with several other acquaintances, strangers, foreigners, and, no doubt, eavesdropping servants. These onlookers have treated the conversation between Socrates and Protagoras as their own special entertainment.

After leaving Callias' house, Socrates is hailed by an unsuspecting friend: "Where have you come from, Socrates?" the man asks, and he hazards a playful guess that Socrates has been pursuing the beautiful Alcibiades, slyly adding that Alcibiades seems to have turned the corner into manhood with his first beard. It is a wholly innocent and playful comment, if laced with light envy.

But Socrates is still on edge from his encounter with Protagoras. Conversations tend to linger in the heart even after they are over, for better or worse. The mention of Alcibiades enlivens the sour taste in his mouth. Mentors don't particularly want to be reminded that a prized young associate is growing up. It brings to mind how much is left undone and how little may have been accomplished. But more than that, it acutely reminds Socrates that this particular young man has just had to jump into a fray and loudly defend him in front of all those people, both friends and strangers, at the home of Callias. Socrates must have felt both grateful and little diminished by that. Mentors protect their young associates, not the other way around.

Of course, his inquiring friend doesn't know any of this. But he certainly couldn't miss the snappishness in Socrates' replies or the testiness in his voice.

Upon learning that Socrates has been front and center with the famous sophist at the packed home of Callias, and sensing the tension, this anonymous friend generously invites Socrates to tell him all about the encounter, insisting that he would count it “a favor.” In reply, Socrates is grateful and counts it “a favor” that he is willing to listen. This trading of “favors” is not unimportant.

Socrates’ narration proceeds smoothly; his friend does not interrupt. This is in stark contrast to his encounter with Protagoras. That encounter was punctuated with abrupt starts and stops, breaks, jolts, and jerks owing to a fundamental difference between Protagoras and Socrates in their approach to conversing. Socrates prefers conversation; Protagoras wants to shine before the others in attendance. The two men trade complaints and more than once the discussion threatens to break off altogether. At one point Socrates even gets up to leave, insisting he cannot and will not continue if Protagoras refuses to answer his questions. “For my part,” he says, “I thought engaging one another in dialogue to be distinct from public speaking” (336b2-3).

Here, then, is the point:

The narration Socrates delivers to his friend is another kind of talk—albeit a second-order talk about talk—that allows us to see and to judge the other two sorts of talk. This is the “favor” the friend has offered Socrates. He will hear Socrates out therapeutically so that Socrates can examine, process, and purge what has just occurred without letting it fester or boil inside him.

One sometimes hears Socrates insist that the activity of philosophy is a *therapeia*, a therapy for the soul. Most of us associate that claim too closely with the Socratic method and dialectical conversations of the sort Socrates endeavored to have with Protagoras. However, the frame of the *Protagoras* suggests that recounting one’s

philosophic conversations with others may have a healing power all its own. Such is the nature of the favor the friend offers Socrates.

The topics of discussion entertained by Socrates and Protagoras are serious and beautiful; they include the education of the youth, the nature of virtue, and the various ways we go wrong in life. But the two speakers wrap and offer their discourses on these topics differently. We might liken Protagoras' words to a beautiful package with ribbons and bows, whereas Socrates' language comes in a plain brown wrapper. The methods have very different aural rhythms, and they provoke very different receptions from the large audience in attendance.

The first sort of reception Protagoras enjoys is from adoring students. It is best described when Socrates enters Callias' house. Two sweeping, silent columns of rapt young men follow Protagoras step for step, up and down a hall, and, in his wake, each one seems to be drinking in his golden Orphic voice. The second form of reception occurs later, when, in response to Protagoras' speeches, the audience breaks into enthusiastic applause.

The Socratic method, in contrast, poses a counter-rhythm that disrupts and resists the smooth flowing, solo-cadences that Protagoras is adept at producing. Think of it as a short, precise, "tick-tock" that alternates between two speakers. That is how Socrates' dialectical Q and A operates. We hear it occur effortlessly only once in the dialogue: between Socrates and the young and eager-to-learn Hippocrates before they leave to find Protagoras. After that, it occurs only intermittently between Socrates and Protagoras and these exchanges are filled with tension, marked by refusals to answer, grudging complaints, and sullen silence. There is no applause for Socrates.

When Socrates kindly asks for brevity and for shared dialectical investigation, Protagoras barks, "Socrates, I have entered into many contests of words (ἀγῶνα λόγων)

with men, and if I were to do what you say—if I were to converse as my opponent bid me to converse—I would appear superior to no one, nor would the name of Protagoras be known to the Greeks” (335a4-8).

But Socrates’ method does not focus exclusively upon opponents and victory. Rather, it is meant to uncover and test for true beliefs between willing partners. Appealing to the opinions of others, be they poets, scientists, politicians, or the popular masses does not lead us to the truth, for these people are not present to answer questions and explain themselves. Socrates is suspicious of longwinded speeches brimming with eloquent allusions and quotations because these make it harder to follow what is being said, harder to maintain univocal understanding, and harder still to retain the thread of the argument. But Protagoras relies on these to captivate his audiences.

So in the *Protagoras* we have two men talking at cross purposes. Protagoras’ method is meant to secure victory over an adversary and thereby preserve and advance his reputation. Socrates is searching for a partner with whom to unearth the truth.

There are at least two Platonic purposes at work here. The first is to display these rival conversational methods, tones, and timbres in order to suggest that only Socrates’ method is capable of producing conclusive arguments. Lectures, speeches, sermons, critical interpretations of another’s work: these rhetorical tactics cannot accomplish the true purpose of discourse, however eloquent or gratifying they may be. (This essay, by the way, is inadequate, too. The authors can’t answer if you have a question. You are only getting our interpretation here. Without dialectical examination, even we don’t know if what we have said is true.)

The second purpose is more nuanced and layered: Plato is attempting to mirror dramatically a central, first-order concern of the dialogue, namely, that what we enjoy

and applaud—that is, what appears to us to be most pleasant or enjoyable—may tend toward our destruction.

For example, the large audience in attendance enjoys and applauds Protagoras' rhetorical displays more than once. That is one reason Protagoras speaks as he does: he needs an audience and that audience's approval. He strives for the "wow" factor to secure his reputation. The Socratic conversational process, on the other hand, is choppy; and we have to admit that the sort of Q and A Socrates prefers can be embarrassing, tiresome, and wickedly difficult—as Protagoras soon discovers. Socrates realizes that his method is not pleasant. He knows that his eloquence does not inspire applause. Moreover, he is well aware of his interlocutors' discomfort and frustration. But he is not being perverse; his very method of conversation illustrates something central to the logos.

The enactment of this dialogue insists that if we accurately "measure" the real and ultimate consequences of our enjoyments, then when we take the measure of these rival methods of conversation we will always prefer the hard Socratic work, however painful, to the pleasant Orphic entertainments. To be sure, we do not always make the right choice; the audience at Callias' home certainly did not. But that is because they and we are ignorant of its real and true benefits.

The men in attendance are tempted by the sweet and easy way. When they applaud Protagoras, and long to mimic his style, they choose badly. If they took Socrates seriously, they would search for partners with whom to converse and critically examine their beliefs. The Socratic cross-examination is the best way to improve one's beliefs, diminish one's ignorance, and thereby avoid mistaking the apparently pleasant and good for the truly pleasant and good.

The *Protagoras*, then, exhibits three different conversational methods and three different manners of listening. First, the question and answer that occurs early morning

between Socrates and the young Hippocrates; second, the pleasant golden-voiced Protagoras with a large circle of men enjoying his aria; and third, the friend who listens patiently to Socrates in sympathy after the encounter with Protagoras is over. We readers are meant to become aware of how well and how often we engage each of these modes of discourse. If we yield to the temptation of passive, pleasant entertainments of the sort provided by Protagoras, we risk our philosophic lives.

Now to the first-order issues:

Before dawn a young man, Hippocrates, bangs on Socrates' door and begs him to wake up and get dressed. Protagoras is in town and Hippocrates hopes that if Socrates introduces them, Protagoras will accept him as a pupil—even though, as it turns out, Hippocrates confesses that he has no firm idea what the famous man might teach him.

Socrates is alarmed by this. He has no idea? No idea what Protagoras will teach, nor what, therefore, he will learn—what his lessons will make of him, what sort of man he will become as a result of such lessons? But these are the most important questions. As the two converse, Socrates urges Hippocrates to consider his choice of teacher seriously. A bad education can damage one's soul: "It is not possible to carry lessons away each in its own vessel; rather, one pays the fee, takes the lesson into one's soul, and departs having learned what may be harmful or beneficial" (314b1-4).

Who is educating the young? The question is of great consequence. The dialogue will eventually reveal Protagoras' character, which is deeply informed by his mastery of sophistry; it will likewise reveal Socrates' commitment to education guided by dialectic. The contrast between them should provide Hippocrates—and the reader—the information necessary to make informed choices about what sort of teacher one should seek. We shall have to watch Hippocrates to see whether the lures of easy pleasure and admiration divert him from the path toward wisdom.

Socrates and his young charge arrive at Callias' home to find the place jam-packed with all sorts of people, domestic and foreign, friends and strangers, and acquaintances of every stripe; it resembles a gigantic open classroom teeming with activities and buzzing conversation. The famous Protagoras strides to and fro with eager students hanging upon his every word; another group of students sits on the floor at the feet of another teacher who is lecturing about natural science and astronomy; a third group is seated on couches chatting amicably. Amid this hubbub, the famous Prodicus somehow manages to sleep.

Socrates is not a shy man. He marches Hippocrates straight up to Protagoras and announces that the young man "desires to become famous in the city, and he thinks this is most likely to occur if he associates with you" (316b10-c2). He leaves it up to Protagoras to decide whether they should talk about this matter in public or private, though he suspects that the sophist wants to speak publicly in order to make a display and show off.

Our system of higher education is so far removed from what Socrates is doing that one can only gape at his presumption. Most college students know not one single thing about their teachers. Students may have visited the campus, of course; perhaps they received a guided tour to get a feel for the place; but as far as meeting and talking to professors, much less demanding of them how they will benefit from their instruction—well, hardly. Students often register for classes based on the time they meet relative to their other classes and their work schedules. If they are lucky, they may hear something through the grapevine about this or that professor; often such rumors provide the sole criterion of their choice of classes. They would not dream of interrogating a professor before enrolling in his class. Our impersonal system with its cafeteria-menu of courses tends to erode any confidence that professors can impart something personally relevant to the lives of their students.

When Socrates demands what Hippocrates will gain from studying with him, Protagoras answers silkily and at length about the many hazards he has endured as a traveling sophist, blithely claiming that any teacher, from Homer to harpists, are just sophists “in disguise.” He is implying that there is no more danger to Hippocrates’ studying with him than from his apprenticing with the local blacksmith. But Socrates has already alerted Hippocrates to a vast difference. We know from the start what a blacksmith, a cobbler, or a doctor will teach us. What, exactly, will we take away in our souls from lessons under Protagoras?

Appealing to Protagoras’ vanity, Socrates suggests they invite the others to listen to their conversation. Callias seconds this idea. With that, the men drag tables, benches, and chairs across the floor. Alcibiades and Callias even wake the sleeping Prodicus and secure him and his companions a ringside seat. It must have been a huge circle. Hippocrates sits between Protagoras and Socrates, which emphasizes symbolically the choice he must make.

When everyone has taken a seat, Socrates reiterates the purpose of their visit and asks Protagoras once again to say what Hippocrates will take away from associating with him.

Protagoras is vague: Hippocrates will become better, he says. Socrates immediately pushes him to be more specific. Better, how? Fabulous, flowery descriptions of the benefits of becoming his pupil ensue, at the conclusion of which Socrates says bluntly, “I think you mean the political art (τέχνην) and apparently you promise to make men good citizens” (319a3-5). Protagoras agrees that this is exactly right.

Socrates honestly and openly doubts that civic virtue can be taught, and he tells the entire company why.¹⁸ Yet he would be glad to hear Protagoras' opinion. Protagoras is even happier to share it. The sophist responds at great length, summoning all of his oratorical eloquence. He begins with a beautiful myth concerning the distribution of the virtues, then presents several reasons to reject Socrates' doubts concerning the possibility of teaching virtue, and concludes by insisting that everyone always teaches virtue.

Please imagine yourself sitting in the circle listening to this discourse. The great Protagoras has identified you as a teacher of virtue. Wow. Give yourself a pat on the back. You didn't even know you taught such important lessons, did you? But mean old Socrates says no, not you, nor anyone else, is competent to teach virtue. Which side of this coin is more appealing?

Socrates confesses to his anonymous auditor that when Protagoras finally stopped speaking, "I was enchanted and continued to look at him for a long time, eager to listen in case he should say something else" (328d4-6). This must be an example of Socratic irony, for if the philosopher were truly beside himself in this way, he would not have had the presence of mind to reply, with devastating nonchalance, "Now, Protagoras, I need one little thing—answer me this and I'll have everything" (329b5-7). And with that he observes that in his speech Protagoras seemed to assume that justice, temperance, piety, and the other virtues constitute one unified whole. He wonders, therefore, whether these are parts of virtue or on the contrary several names of one and the same thing. "This," he concludes, "is what I still long to know" (329d1-2). This "one little thing" is explosive, as we shall see.

Protagoras responds that the question "is easy to answer," but the ensuing conversation reveals that it is anything but easy to answer. Anything but easy, that is, if

¹⁸ Compare his similar position in the *Meno*.

one takes seriously one's responsibility to answer the question sincerely. Every possible answer requires a painstaking explanation, and Socrates is relentless in his pursuit of explanation and clarification. Protagoras, on the other hand, is unwilling to examine his own position. Instead, he temporizes, hypothesizes, and qualifies.

As Socrates tries to discover what it is that Protagoras really believes about virtue, Protagoras suddenly sidesteps: "What difference does it make? If you want, let justice be piety and piety justice" (331c3-4). Socrates is alarmed. What does Protagoras really believe? If he suddenly huffs, "What difference does it make?" how can one find out? Socrates stops him: "I do not want to examine this 'if you wish' and 'if it seems good to you;' I want to examine myself and you...and I think the argument will be examined best with this 'if' removed" (331c5-d1).

Socrates is trying to tie Protagoras' beliefs to his words. When we simply assume, for the sake of argument, any old thesis— x or y , take your pick—we take ourselves and the stake we have in our actual beliefs off the table; we move the conversation toward hypothetical people with hypothetical beliefs. This is an evasion.

As the conversation proceeds, Socrates questions Protagoras point by point, and although he senses Protagoras' rising anger and tries to be gentle, he cannot forestall the eventual eruption. The famous man, exasperated by Socrates' procedure, finally bursts into a streaming oration that provokes enthusiastic applause from the audience.

When the noisy approval finally fades, Socrates asks Protagoras to answer more concisely and avoid long speeches. Protagoras refuses: he wants to answer however he likes. Confronted with this impasse, Socrates regrets that Protagoras, who claims to be able to speak concisely as well as to deliver long speeches, is unwilling to converse in a manner that he can follow—and with that he rises to leave.

But now the circle of men in attendance jump in to arbitrate; they want to save the conversation and their entertainment. Several men offer suggestions as to how the conversation should proceed, eventually hitting on a solution that satisfies almost everyone. Protagoras is the only exception. He accepts the ground-rules, but only grudgingly. Still, the conversation will go on. These onlookers are jubilant: they give themselves a hearty round of applause and assume their former places.

Under the new rules the two men will take turns questioning one another. Protagoras goes first.

Surprisingly, he begins by reciting a verse from one of Simonides' poems. Declaring that "the greatest part of a man's education is to be clever about poetry," Protagoras insists that he is only "transferring" their discussion of virtue to the realm of poetry (338e7-339a6). Surely, though, the sophist is attempting to sidestep further examination of his personal beliefs. Lucky for Socrates that he knows this poem.

Protagoras claims that the poem contains an inconsistency. Socrates insists that it does not. Protagoras offers his exegesis, which, when he is finished, is greeted by warm and enthusiastic applause. At this, Socrates confesses that he felt as if he had been "hit by a good boxer" (339e1-2). But he soon regains his footing and at the conclusion of his careful and convincing exegesis, an excited Hippias jumps up and volunteers to give everyone his own interpretation of the poem.

Now, this spontaneous interruption is no mere frill. It underscores Socrates' objection to long-winded, hypothetical, interpretive speeches—whether they are offered by Protagoras or by himself. One is apt to lose the thread and purpose of the original conversation just as Hippias has done.

When it is Socrates' turn to ask a question, he gently suggests they set poetry aside and return to their original question. He doesn't care who asks or who answers, he

just wants to return to the main point. But Protagoras will not commit himself to participate.

For the second time, the audience of men protests in order to rescue the conversation. Alcibiades, clearly miffed, complains loudly that if Protagoras will not answer as they had all agreed, then “Socrates can converse with someone else, or any one of us can converse with whomever he wants” (348b7-8). Others chime in with various suggestions and complaints. This general hubbub finally shames Protagoras into keeping his word, and although he can barely conceal his rancor, he manages to grumble his answers.

In what follows Socrates makes clear his view that no one commits a wrong knowingly, but only through ignorance of the best and truly pleasant course. The courageous man, for example, marches resolutely into battle, while the coward turns and flees. Both men hope to achieve the good. The difference is that the coward doesn’t know what his true good really is; if he did know, he would stay. Because we often confuse the immediately pleasant with the true good, we make decisions we ultimately regret. Such is the coward’s lot. All sorts of hedonistic choices follow from mistaking the apparent for the truly pleasant and good.

This may be Socrates’ subtle way of telling Protagoras that his cowardly attempts to wriggle out of their conversation have been due to the fact that he is ignorant of his own true and most pleasant good. In preferring the applause of others, the fame he enjoys, and the fees he collects, he has ignorantly wronged himself. Had he realized the true benefits of a dialectical conversation, he would have participated eagerly to improve his beliefs and thereby himself. By extension, the audience of men in attendance may be making a similar mistake. Their present enjoyment is no proof that they are doing well.

Such a position identifies the capacity for virtue with one's knowledge. It is this connection that leads Socrates to consider that virtue can be taught. It can be taught because it is knowledge, which may be taught and learned. But, of course, it can only be taught by one who has knowledge. The conversation reveals that Socrates, not Protagoras, is the more knowledgeable man. But he isn't as much fun.

Socrates recalls that their conversation began with Protagoras insisting virtue could be taught and his denying it. But in the course of the conversation, Protagoras adopted the position that it cannot be taught, while Socrates has unwittingly discovered that perhaps it can. Blaming himself for this awkward turn of events, Socrates suggests they should someday begin again in earnest in order to discover, once and for all, what each man believes about virtue. Upon parting the two men observe all the proper social protocols.

Protagoras must have felt like he had just had several teeth pulled, while Socrates must have felt like he had been trying to teach a stone to sing. It was a miserable event for both of them. Only the circle of men at the fringes seemed to have had a good time. They enjoyed what was pleasant, even if damaging in the long run. Unless we appreciate this dialogue with the same sympathetic ears of Socrates' friend, his anonymous auditor, we readers may well find that we belong to that circle of men.

One important question remains: who did Hippocrates choose as his teacher? Did he remain behind to become Protagoras' newest student or did he depart the home of Callias seeking the company of Socrates? We do not know. Whatever Hippocrates chose, though, the *Protagoras* urges us to select the more difficult teachers like Socrates and to avoid the sophists among us, despite the promised pleasure of their siren-songs.

CHARMIDES

Subject: Temperance.

Mode: Narrative, Socrates to anonymous friend.

Setting: 429, a palaestra in Athens.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Chaerephon.

Critias.

Charmides.

SHORT OUTLINE

CHARMIDES SHORT OUTLINE

- 153a-158c: **Socrates' arrival:**
Socrates returns from Potidaea (153a-d).¹⁹
Athenian youth (153d-155a).
Charmides' headaches and Socrates' charm (155b-157c).
Charmides' temperance (157c-158c).
- 158c-162e: **Socrates and Charmides:**
What is temperance? (158c-159a).
Charmides' first definition (159b).
Socrates' objection (159c-160d).
Charmides' second definition (160e).
Socrates' objection (160e-161b).
Charmides' third definition (161b).
Socrates' objection (161c-162b).
Critias' consternation (162c-e).
- 162e-175a: **Socrates and Critias:**
Socrates' objection to Charmides' third definition continued (162e-163e).
Critias' first definition (163e).
Socrates' objection (164a-c).
Critias' second definition (164c-165b).
Socrates' doubts (165b-166e).
Final formulation of Critias' second definition (166e-167a).
- 167b-175a: **The possibility and benefit of a science of science:**
Parameters of the investigation (167b).
Whether a faculty can be a faculty of itself (167b-169d).
Whether to know oneself is to know what one does and does not know (169d-171c).
Doubts regarding the benefit of temperance (171d-172d).
Whether temperance is beneficial (172d-173d).
Happiness results from knowledge of good and evil (173d-174d).
Temperance, as presently defined, is not beneficial (174d-175a).
- 175a-176d: **Aporia:**
Socrates despairs (175a-176a).
Charmides needs Socrates' charm (176a-d).

DETAILED OUTLINE

¹⁹ On Socrates' military career see "Socrates as Hoplite."

CHARMIDES DETAILED OUTLINE

- 153a-158c: **SOCRATES' ARRIVAL:**
153a-d: **Socrates returns from Potidaea:**
At a local palaestra Socrates encounters Chaerephon, Critias, and others.
Discussion of battle.²⁰
- 153d-155a: **The beautiful Charmides:**
Socrates would like to examine Charmides' soul to see if it is well-formed (τὴν ψυχὴν...εὖ πεφυκώς), which he will do by engaging him in conversation (διαλέγεσθαι).
- 155b-157c: **Charmides' headaches and Socrates' charm:**
Socrates, though overcome by Charmides' beauty, manages to maintain his composure.
Socrates' cure (φάρμακον) for Charmides' morning headaches is a leaf (φύλλον) accompanied by the singing of a charm (ἔπωδή).
To heal the body one must heal the soul, which is effected by the charms of beautiful words (τὰς δ' ἔπωδάς...τοὺς λόγους...τοὺς καλοὺς) engendering temperance (σωφροσύνη).
- 157c-158c: **Charmides' temperance:**
Regarding temperance Charmides is superior to everyone of his age.
- 158c-162e: **SOCRATES AND CHARMIDES:**
158c-159a: **What is temperance?**
Is Charmides temperate?
If so, he should have an opinion about what temperance is.
- 159b: **Charmides' first definition:**
Temperance is quietness/stillness (ἡσυχία), as is evident from the fact that men are praised for acting orderly and quietly (κοσμίως...καὶ ἡσυχῆ).
- 159c-160d: **Socrates' objection:**
Temperance is admirable.
Many activities, both of body (159c-d) and of soul (159e-160b), are admirable through quickness.
Sometimes, therefore, ἡσυχία is *not* admirable (160b-d).
But temperance is always admirable.
Therefore, temperance is not ἡσυχία.
- 160e: **Charmides' second definition:**
Temperance is modesty/sense of shame (αἰδώς).
- 160e-161b: **Socrates' objection:**
Temperance is admirable.
Temperance is good.
Homer says that αἰδώς is not good for a needy man.
Sometimes, therefore, αἰδώς is *not* good.
But temperance is always good.
Therefore, αἰδώς is not temperance.
- 161b: **Charmides' third definition:**

²⁰ On Socrates' military career see "[Socrates as Hoplite](#)."

- 161c-162a: *Temperance is doing one's own business* (τὸ τὰ ἑαυτοῦ πράττειν).²¹
Socrates' objection:
 If a city is governed temperately, it is governed well.
 But to govern according to the principle of doing one's own business is not to govern well.
 Therefore, to mind one's own business is not temperance.
- 162a-e: **Critias' consternation:**
 The definition is a riddle (ἡνίττετο).
 Socrates invites Critias to take Charmides' place in the discussion.
- 162e-175a: **SOCRATES AND CRITIAS:**
 162e-163e: **Socrates' objection to Charmides' third definition continued:**
 Craftsmen produce goods for others as well as for themselves but are not thereby intemperate.
 Critias on Hesiod and the distinction between producing or making things for others and doing other people's business.
- 163e: **Critias' first definition:**
Temperance is the doing of good things.
- 164a-c: **Socrates' objection:**
 A temperate man must know he is (being) temperate.
 A craftsman or a doctor may on occasion do that which is beneficial (ὠφέλιμα) without knowing it to be beneficial.
 But by doing what is beneficial he is doing what he ought to do (τὰ δέοντα), and by doing what he ought to do he is being temperate.
 Therefore, the craftsman or doctor may on occasion be temperate even though he is ignorant of his temperance.
- 164c-165b: **Critias' second definition:**²²
*Temperance is to know oneself.*²³
- 165b-166e: **Socrates' doubts:**
 If temperance is a sort of knowing, it must be a type of science and it must be a science of something.
 Critias: (a) temperance is a science of oneself (ἑαυτου, 165c7); (b) it is a science of *itself* (αὐτῆ ἑαυτῆς) as well as of other sciences (166c2-3).²⁴
- 166e-167a: **Final formulation of Critias' second definition:**
Temperance is a science of itself and of the other sciences, also of the absence of science.
 The temperate man will know of himself (and of others) what he knows and what he does not know.
- 167b-175a: **THE POSSIBILITY AND BENEFIT OF A SCIENCE OF SCIENCE:**
 167b: **Parameters of the investigation:**
 1) whether it is possible to know that one knows and does not know what

²¹ To this compare the definition of justice in the *Republic*.

²² Critias' second definition, which is fully developed at 167a, is not completely distinct from his first definition. This becomes clear later when it is assumed that temperance must be beneficial, that it must do good things.

²³ There is an ambiguity here: the word for "of oneself" (ἑαυτοῦ) can also mean "of itself." The dialogue progresses from the first of these two meanings to the second beginning at 165e.

²⁴ Notice that temperance has gone from being a science of *oneself* to a science of *itself*.

one knows and does not know:

1a) whether a faculty can be a faculty of itself (167c-169d);

1b) whether to know oneself is to know what one does and does not know (169d-172c).

2) whether, if this is possible, it is beneficial (172d-175a).

167b-169d: **Whether a faculty can be a faculty of itself (examination of 1a):**

Examples of faculties or powers that do not have themselves as object (167c-168a).

Other cases in which it is odd to say that something is of itself (168b-169a).

Therefore, it is doubtful whether a science of science is possible.

It is equally doubtful whether, if such a science *were* possible, temperance would be it—this can be settled only by determining whether such a science would be beneficial (2a).

*Grant 1a as an hypothesis.*²⁵

169d-171c: **Whether to know oneself is to know what one does and does not know (examination of 1b):**

The science of science distinguishes science from non-science. It knows *that* one knows.

But to know *what* one—or someone else—knows, requires specific first-order knowledge.

171d-172d: Temperance was thought to be of benefit by distinguishing what one knows from what one does not know (167a), for one could then pursue the former and avoid—or seek knowledge regarding—the latter. Also, regarding others one would be able to distinguish those who know from pretenders and so properly organize the city (i.e., assign tasks to those with knowledge of them) such that the citizens fare well and are happy (καλῶς καὶ εὖ πράττειν...εὐδαίμονας εἶναι).

Grant 1b as an hypothesis.

172d-173d: **Whether temperance is beneficial (examination of 2):**

Socrates' "dream": even if a science of science were possible, and to know oneself were to know what one does and does not know; and even if we were ruled by temperance such that we could distinguish knowers from pretenders and organize the city accordingly (by assigning tasks to those who have knowledge of them)—still this may not lead to our faring well and being happy.

173d-174d: The only knowledge that produces happiness is knowledge of good and evil (τὸ ἀγαθόν...καὶ τὸ κακόν). Without this knowledge no specific discipline will perform *beneficially* (ὠφελίμως).²⁶

174d-175a: But this knowledge, according to the present definition, is *not* temperance. Therefore, temperance must be something other than beneficial.

175a-176d: **APORIA:**

175a-176a: **Socrates despairs:**

Temperance cannot be fine²⁷ if it is useless (ἀνωφελές, 175b1).

²⁵ Compare *Meno*, 86dff

²⁶ Compare *Laches*, 195d

It was rash to grant (1a) that there can be a science of science and (1b) that a man can know both what he knows and what he does not know.

The argument must be flawed, for temperance is a great good, and those who have it are blessed (μέγα τι ἀγαθὸν; μακάριον, 175e7-176a1).

176a-d:

Charmides needs Socrates' charm:

Charmides does not know whether he is temperate since he does not know what temperance is.

Charmides consents to Critias' suggestion that he be charmed by Socrates daily.

Socrates wonders what the two men are plotting (βουλεύεσθον, 176c5),

and asks whether Charmides intends to resort to force (βιάση, 176c7)

without granting him a preliminary hearing (ἀνάκρισίν, 176c7).

Charmides replies that he will resort to force if Critias commands it.

Socrates will not resist (οὐ...ἐναντιώσομαι, 176d5).

²⁷ They have agreed it is the finest of all (κάλλιστον πάντων, 175a11-b1).

CHARMIDES INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

The *Charmides* is Socrates' recollection of an earlier conversation with Critias and his beautiful young ward Charmides. There is nothing to indicate the precise date of Socrates' narration, but sometime after the restoration of the Athenian democracy in 403 seems plausible.²⁸ We can easily imagine someone asking Socrates about his connections to these men who, together with a few others, dominated Athens after her surrender to Sparta in 404 and who died fighting to preserve their power. Their notorious behavior and the recent battle would naturally remind Socrates of an encounter long ago, following a battle, during which he discussed with these two men the nature of proper behavior. Were there, perhaps, intimations even then of their violent fate?

On that day so many years ago Socrates spoke with Critias and Charmides about the virtue known to the Greeks as "sophrosyne." This word is notoriously difficult to translate. It is standard practice to render it "temperance" or "moderation." Yet it must be noted that the English language really has no equivalent term. The virtue of sophrosyne involves an internal harmony, an orderly spiritual or psychological state that enables one to avoid excessive behavior and stick close to the mean. Sophrosyne generally manifests as self restraint or self control. It depends upon a deep level of self awareness that enables one to grasp a situation and respond to it holistically and appropriately. Because human circumstances differ and the challenges we face are varied and unexpected, one's sophrosyne is apt to be tried and tested in many surprising ways.

²⁸ Some versions translate the opening lines as if Socrates' narration takes place the day after the conversation itself. But τῆ προτερείᾳ should be translated "the day before" rather than "yesterday," for which Plato would have used χθές, as in the first line of the *Republic*. The sense is that Socrates returned to Athens "the day before" his conversation with Critias and Charmides, not that both his return and the conversation occurred "yesterday" in relation to the time of his narration. Moreover, setting the narration on the day after his return eliminates the motivation of lines 153b5-6, for Socrates would have no need to identify for his auditor an event (the battle near Potidaea) that just the day before was forefront in everyone's mind.

We may view the *Charmides* as a dramatic enactment of sophrosyne in Socrates that occurs at a human and erotic level.

Speaking to an unnamed friend, Socrates recollects a conversation he participated in upon his return from Potidaea, where he had served as a hoplite in the Athenian army laying siege to the city.²⁹ At the time of the conversation, probably in the spring of 429, he had just survived a severe battle during which many of his comrades fell. Facing the prospect of one's own death day after day and watching one's friends die takes both physical stamina and psychic focus that may narrow one's vision to a pinprick of light: standing at one's post becomes the focus of all one's courage and dedication.

Later history will record the facts about Potidaea and the battles that occurred during the Athenians' time there. But dramatically such knowledge lies in the future. Athenians in the spring of 429 would still have been craving information about the most recent battle and those who had died there. Now, suddenly, one who has managed to survive has returned home.

Opening lines are important: the day after returning from Potidaea Socrates "went gladly to his customary haunts." This sounds reasonable, casual, and nonchalant. But it is telling. Socrates experienced the palaestra—where men and youth gather for exercise and, at times, education—nostalgically and objectively. His military life had eclipsed his former civilian activities. Students who return to the halls of high school having been in college for three years express the same emotional distance. They return to look at "their old haunts" and encounter themselves as if they are ghosts in the halls they once knew so well.

Surprised at Socrates' sudden arrival, the men in the palaestra approached from all directions to greet him. Chaerephon in particular, "since he is mad" (ἄτε καὶ μανικὸς

²⁹ On Socrates' military career see "[Socrates as Hoplite](#)."

ὤν, 153b2), hurried toward him, grabbed his hand, and inquired about his recent experience of battle.

All this commotion must have reinforced Socrates' sense of returning to his "old haunts." Everyone now regards him as hoplite warrior. And while it is true that Chaerephon is rather impulsive to rush over to greet and seize the hand of his friend, it is also true that this is the very man who conveyed to Socrates the message of the Oracle at Delphi—the message that changed the commission and course of Socrates' life. Socrates' characterization of Chaerephon and his terse replies to the man's innocent inquiries smack of Lacedaemonian restraint. Military discipline saturates Socrates to the extent that he automatically judges his old friends in terms of military bearing. He has returned to civilian life in body, but not in mind.

Once seated, Socrates submits stoically to their questions, each and every one, though he pointedly omits rehearsing a single one of them for his listening friend. When the men finally tire of questioning him, Socrates interrogates them in turn, asking about the situation in Athens. He inquires, in particular, whether any young men have become distinguished in wisdom, or beauty, or both. It is a restrained Socrates, taking his turn, making a single bid to change the subject.

How does one returned from war recover his former civilian bearings and direction? How does one recover one's fuller self? In part by remembering and revisiting the "old haunts" that used to fuel one's life; by recalling what used to provide a reason to get out of bed in the morning. At first, though, it seems to be only a memory.

Responding to Socrates' question, Critias turns and gestures toward a pack of noisy youths pouring into the palaestra and, recognizing many of them, confidently predicts that one will soon enter who is thought to be the "the most beautiful (καλλίστου) of the present generation" (154a5-6). This is Charmides, Critias' cousin,

who was barely an adolescent when Socrates went off to war. Yet Socrates remembers the child: “By now,” he says, “I suppose he is very much a young man” (154b4-5). Much time has passed and Socrates is reminded that he has contributed nothing to the maturation of this or any other youth.

When he first beholds Charmides’ extraordinary beauty, Socrates is almost yanked back into the present, back into life, back into himself, back into his Delphic mission. As the other men make knowingly erotic remarks about the young man’s physical beauty, Socrates wonders aloud whether he has a noble soul. Didn’t questions of the soul use to be Socrates’ most pressing concern? Critias confidently assures the philosopher that the beauty of the young man’s soul corresponds to that of his body. It is almost too good to be true.

“Then why don’t we undress this part of him and view it before viewing his bodily form? For he must be of such an age as to be willing to engage in a discussion” (154e6-7). Anyone can see the physical beauty of another with one’s eyes; Socrates here suggests that only by conversation, by discussing beautiful and serious topics, can one see through to another’s soul and thereby regard the whole person. He remembers believing this. But was it true? Socrates urges Critias to call Charmides over, remarking that “there could be nothing shameful in his talking to us before you, his guardian and cousin.” Again we hear the still-insistent echo of military protocol.

Critias instantly develops a ruse to draw Charmides over, sending a servant to tell him that an unnamed physician (Socrates) has arrived who may have a cure for his nephew’s morning headaches. Why such a ruse is needed can only be explained in one way. Charmides would not have come over at all unless he thought there was something directly relevant to him in the offing. That his uncle calls him is not enough. With the bait that there is indeed something in it for him, though, he makes his way toward the men.

As Charmides approaches and the crowd makes room for the beautiful youth, Socrates confides to his listener a sense of growing panic: first, he experiences anxious doubts, then a sense of claustrophobia, and finally an eruption of pure lust. He tells his listener, “I was at a loss (ἠπόρουν), and I was abandoned by that former boldness which I had of easily conversing with him. And then, when Critias declared that I was the one who knew the cure, and he looked me in the eyes in a way I cannot describe and was preparing to speak, and everyone in the palaestra gathered round us in a circle, then...I saw inside his cloak and caught fire, and I was no longer within my own self. Then I thought Cydias most wise about erotic matters, for advising another about a beautiful youth he said ‘the fawn should take care lest in looking at the lion he be seized as part of the meat’—for it seemed that I had been seized by such a beast” (155c5-e2).

Socrates’ confession that he felt awkward and that his former boldness had evaporated, are nothing compared to his experience of this sudden and near uncontrollable lust. He confides that it is only because the youth laughingly exposed Critias’ fib about the presence of “a physician,” and because he remembered Socrates from three years ago, and, finally, because he amicably responded to Socrates’ first flurry of questions, that he began to regain his confidence.

Socrates has been remembered. This, and Charmides’ easy willingness to engage in conversation, help subdue and re-channel Socrates’ erotic appetites at the same time they restore his former confidence in conversation. The enactment here suggests that between logos and lust there is an ideal proportion, harmony, measure or common boundary. The one is rational, the other animal. The temperate man is aware of sudden shifts or changes in this boundary in himself and takes them seriously.

Because Charmides has morning headaches, Socrates begins by inviting the young man to take a holistic view of human illness. Announcing that the health of the

body depends upon the health of the soul, he adds that the soul is cured “by certain charms, and the charms are beautiful words (τοὺς λόγους...τοὺς καλοὺς). From such words temperance comes to be in the soul; and when it has come to be and is present it is easy to provide health to the head and to the rest of the body” (157a4-b1).

There is dramatic irony in Socrates’ words, irony directed at the philosopher himself, best captured by “Physician, heal thyself.” Socrates’ participation in a conversation of “beautiful words” will ultimately heal his own flammable and wounded soul and restore his *sophrosyne*.

As Socrates is recovering his erotic bearings and remembering his talent for seeking definitions before anything else, Critias boasts of Charmides’ unparalleled temperance. For his part, after praising Charmides’ heritage and family, as one might acknowledge superior officers in a glorious army, Socrates simply asks, “Do you agree with this man, and do you claim already to possess temperance sufficiently, or do you still have need of it?” (158c3-4).

Charmides blushes: a wordless and powerful demonstration of both his youthful modesty and desire to please. These are qualities of temperance in a youth being interrogated by an adult. So yes, indeed, it seems he does have the seeds of *sophrosyne*; yet when pressed to explain what sort of nature *sophrosyne* has in itself, he ultimately fails to give an adequate account. Having suffered this defeat, the boy hits on a most devious stratagem to hand off the conversation to Uncle Critias. He tells Socrates a half truth: he has just remembered another definition that he “heard someone saying, namely that *sophrosyne* is doing one’s own business” (161b5-6). Socrates sees Critias flinch with recognition and rightly suspects that he is the source of Charmides’ maxim.

After pondering it a bit, Socrates insists the definition is a sort of riddle. “Whatever is this doing one’s own business? Can you say?” Whereupon Charmides

responds, “I do not know, by Zeus. But perhaps nothing prevents him who said it from knowing what it means.” Socrates informs his anonymous auditor that as Charmides said this “he laughed slyly and cast a glance at Critias” (162b9-11).

Laughter and sly looks: Charmides is testing his uncle, whom he does not quite respect. Such behavior in a youth toward his adult guardian conceals the seeds of a youthful hubris. Charmides is young, feeling his way across a frontier boundary between temperance and arrogance. He enjoys his uncle’s discomfiture and is pleased that his little ruse and pretense finally draws an offended and huffy Critias into the conversation. For his part, though, Critias is unwilling to acknowledge his responsibility for Charmides’ remark—even though he was clearly agitated to hear his nephew and Socrates complain about the definition. Critias has suffered a cunning insult from his young nephew; but his own pretenses made this possible.

Socrates knows anger when he sees it, and to deflect it he reminds Critias of Charmides’ youth. It is no wonder, he observes, if a young man of his age does not understand the definition. Then, appealing to Critias’ inflated self-evaluation, he says, “I would with much more pleasure investigate with you whether what has been said is true or not” (162e4-5). Socrates displays a prudent and measured response to calm the hidden passions he senses between uncle and nephew. He has read the situation holistically and has acted just in time to prevent a family quarrel: *sophrosyne*.

Critias allows himself to appear outwardly mollified by Socrates’ intervention, and generously agrees to take over the conversation. He and Socrates begin in earnest to examine the “riddle” of his definition, but the conversation is choppy and unsuccessful. Eventually, recalling the Delphic command, “Know thyself,” Critias abandons his former definition and adopts the position that “this is very nearly what temperance is, to know oneself (τὸ γιγνώσκειν ἑαυτόν)” (164d3-4). He is, he insists, prepared to prove this

definition if Socrates does not accept it. This is an eristic challenge and somewhat aggressive.

Socrates feels harried; he protests to Critias, saying “you approach me as if I claim to know the things I ask about, and as if I could agree with you if I wanted to. But this is not the case, for I am always investigating along with you that which is proposed because I myself do not know. I wish, therefore, to consider the matter and then to say whether or not I agree. So wait until I consider it” (165b5-c2). “Consider,” Critias responds.

Now one cannot actually “consider” on command, but this is Critias’ stance and attitude toward Socrates. The conversation is becoming reminiscent of battle.

Defensively, Socrates suggests that if sophrosyne is a species of knowledge, then “it must be a science (ἐπιστήμη), and a science of something.” Critias immediately agrees that it is a science “of oneself (ἑαυτοῦ),” but he objects loudly when Socrates tries to analogize to other sciences for comparison. Temperance alone, he insists, is a science of itself as well as of the other sciences (166c).

Socrates tries then to bring the lofty definition down to reside in the character of the particular man who is actually temperate by imagining what can only be regarded as a Socratic self- portrait: “only the temperate man will know himself and will be able to examine what he knows and what he does not know, and similarly will be able to investigate others to determine what a man who actually knows both knows and thinks he knows, and what a man who does not know thinks he knows; and no one else will be able to do this. And this is being temperate and temperance and knowing oneself, namely knowing what one does and does not know. Is this what you are saying?” Critias assures him that this is his position (167a1-7).

Socrates doesn't yet see his words as composing his own portrait. For him it is like seeing someone you think you know across a room, not yet realizing that it is actually one's own reflection in a mirror. Socrates' eventual fame will rest on the claim that he has examined himself and discovered clearly that he doesn't know anything, which makes him that much wiser than those who claim to know what in fact they do not. But that fame lies in the future; so here Socrates raises all the objections associated with such second-order knowledge, and in his objections is buried a description of philosophy and its apparent uselessness. "I do not trust that I am capable of handling these matters, which is why I am unable confidently to assert that a science of science may come to be, nor, if it is indeed possible, do I accept that it is temperance before I investigate whether such a thing would benefit us at all or not. For I divine (μαντεύομαι) that temperance is something beneficial and good" (169a7-b5).

Now Critias bears a significant responsibility for Socrates' conundrum, for it is his definition they are examining. One would expect him to offer some way out of what should be experienced as a joint perplexity. But as before, when Charmides articulated his "riddling" definition, Critias maintains a façade of distance. He will not step up to own or help alleviate the confusion his definition has generated.

In the end, Socrates cannot escape feeling that there is something unsatisfactory about this definition. Overcome by a strange foreboding, he expresses his doubts to Critias, who hasn't felt anything amiss. But Socrates cannot shake his suspicions, which he excuses on the grounds that "a man must investigate that which presents itself to him, and he must not proceed at random, if he cares even a little for himself" (173a3-5).

Only an omniscient and divine being could afford to dismiss second thoughts, for only an omniscient being could truly claim to know himself as thoroughly as the present definition of temperance suggests one must. But a human being is not omniscient and he

cannot afford to let his reservations or suspicions pass unnoticed. It is one mark of human temperance to have, voice, and be willing to examine our worries. Our fallibility demands it. God would be able to dispense with this, of course; but so also would any man who believed hubristically and erroneously that he possessed such an all-encompassing discernment. Such a man, like Critias, would neither feel, nor hear, nor be willing to examine his hesitations in light of his own human fallibility. Perhaps he could not even feel such hesitations.

So Socrates wonders aloud how temperance as they have defined it can produce happiness (εὐδαιμονία). And here Critias owns that the happy man must possess a science by which he knows good and evil (174b). Socrates rightly objects that this science, “whose function is to benefit us,” is distinct from temperance as they have defined it; this beneficial science would completely usurp any advantage sophrosyne was to have provided in the first place! Their logos has come to ruin.

But not the enactment. The enactment is still brimming, still churning:

Turning to Charmides in abject defeat, Socrates says, “For your sake, Charmides, I am very distressed that although you possess such physical beauty and in addition a most temperate soul, you gain nothing from this temperance, nor does it benefit you at all in life” (175d6-e2). Then, reconsidering his words and taking the blame on himself for the failure of their investigation, Socrates stoutly insists, “I am a worthless inquirer, for temperance is a great thing, and if you have it you are blessed” (175e6-176a1). He thereupon urges the youth to “see whether you have and do not need this charm. For if you have it, I would rather advise you to judge me a fool who is impotent to seek anything whatever by argument; and to judge yourself to be the happier as you are the more temperate” (176a1-5).

Platonic dialogues often portray the traps and nets words can set and the ensuing aporia dialectical inquiry produces. Socrates is willing to admit that some mistake in the conversation has led them down a blind alley; even so, “beautiful words” in earnest conversation impart temperance to an inquirer who honestly recognizes the error and hence the boundaries and limits of his rational abilities. Accepting our human fallibility may mark the cornerstone of temperance, which is an essential part of human wisdom. By admitting his disappointment in the argument, and freely taking the blame upon himself, Socrates manifests both his intellectual honesty and consciousness of his fallibility: *sophrosyne*.

Critias is not like the philosopher. He takes Socrates’ self-condemnation as complete absolution for himself. He immediately redirects his attention to Charmides, and the two behave as if nothing that has been said has any bearing on how they should comport themselves. They return to their playfulness and erotics: Charmides volunteers to be “charmed” by Socrates everyday, and Critias openly applauds his decision. Charmides, says Critias, will prove his *sophrosyne* if he commits himself totally to Socrates. Is it really so simple? The only person who seems to feel the sting of loss here is Socrates.

The closing lines blur the boundaries between playful and violent erotics. Critias and Charmides stand apart and whisper, prompting Socrates suddenly to ask what the two are “plotting.” “Nothing,” Charmides replies, “our plotting is complete.” Considering this response and his interlocutors’ conspiratorial behavior, Socrates inquires, “Will you force me; and will you not give me a preliminary hearing?” (176c6-7)

The resonance of this statement cannot be exaggerated, for dramatically it indicates a historical reality that Plato’s audience will have known well. In 404 the historical Critias and Charmides participated in the overthrow of Athenian democracy.

Critias was one of leaders of The Thirty, a cabal of violent oligarchs who suspended the democratic constitution, ignored judicial restraints, and ordered summary executions of their enemies. Charmides was one of The Ten who dominated the Piraeus.

Dramatically speaking, then, the conclusion of the dialogue suggests that the seeds of these oligarchs' bloody deeds lie far, far back in Critias' belief that human sophrosyne must be infallible. Perhaps it is not too much to suggest that Critias fancies himself sufficiently temperate and quite infallible. The violence that typically bursts forth from such hubris would have been all too apparent to Athenian readers.

Still, one has to wonder how Socrates comes to blurt out such a wild question! Other than suggesting that he was suddenly capable of a clairvoyant utterance worthy of the blind seer Teiresias, the only reasonable explanation seems to be this: in their bearing toward one another, and in the cryptic way they spoke together, Socrates intuited a latent but powerful conspiratorial confidence and hubris in Critias and his beautiful nephew.

Socrates has been at war for three years, an extremity in which conspiracies were common among the Greeks; he has witnessed the violence and brutality that attend wars and rebellions. In the moment Critias and Charmides leaned in to whisper to one another, Socrates made a subterranean connection that would prove true decades later. This flash of insight, then, rests in part on his recent military experience. In a sense the experience itself generated these unusual words: Socrates may very well have had no conscious awareness of the threads knitting up this unusual question.

Socrates understands that the time for "charms" and consideration of beautiful words has passed. Though the logos failed, the beauty of Charmides and the benefits of conversation have restored him to a fuller sense of himself. The palaestra is once again familiar to him. Youth is still important to him.

Yet this particular meeting is still characterized by a strange intermingling of playful and violent erotics. To Socrates' question whether he intends to use force Charmides replies that he does, for Critias has ordered him to do so. In that case, Socrates says, there is nothing for him to do; for when Charmides resorts to force no man can resist him. This prompts Charmides to reply, almost brazenly, "So do not resist me." Socrates submits: "No," he says, "I shall not resist you" (176d4-5).

Here the dialogue ends, leaving many readers wondering whether they managed to resist each other after all. I think they did. One must remember that in exchanging these last words, both parties are actually still resisting. Even saying "No man can resist you" creates for Socrates breathing room to resist. The two are resisting with each sentence and syllable of the closing lines.

We might hope that the next time Socrates and Charmides meet the lucky charm of earnest conversation will implant *sophrosyne* in their souls—yet history informs us that Charmides died a violent death, falling in battle beside his uncle Critias when the forces of Athenian democracy overthrew their bloody and despotic rule. Finally, then, what can one say? Of these three men, each at one time so full of promise, Socrates alone was receptive to the healing charm of beautiful words.

LACHES

Subject: Courage.

Mode: Dramatic.

Setting: ca. 424, Athens.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Lysimachus.

Melesias.

Nicias.

Laches.

[SHORT OUTLINE](#)

LACHES

SHORT OUTLINE

- 178a-181d: **The man fighting in armor:**
Fathers, sons, and teachers (178a-180a).
The appeal to Socrates (180a-181d).
- 181e-189d: **Preliminary opinions:**
Nicias (181d-182d).
Laches (182d-184c).
Socrates on knowledge, teachers, and care of the soul (184d-187c).
Nicias and Laches on Socrates' words and deeds (187c-189d).
- 189d-194c: **Socrates and Laches:**
What is virtue? (189d-190c).
What is courage? (190c-e).
Laches' first definition (190e).
Socrates' objection (190e-192b).
Laches' second definition (192c).
Socrates' objection (192c-d).
Laches' second definition revised (192d).
Socrates' objection (192e-193d).
Aporia (193d-194b).
- 194c-199e: **Socrates and Nicias:**
Nicias' definition of courage (194c-d).
Nicias' definition clarified (194e-195a).
Laches' objection (195a-c).
Nicias' reply (195c-d).
Laches and Nicias quarrel (195e-196c).
Socrates' objections to Nicias' definition (196e-197a).
Nicias' reply (197b-c).
Laches and Nicias quarrel (197c-e).
Socrates' final objection to Nicias' definition (197e-199e).
Laches and Nicias quarrel (200a-c).
- 200c-201c: **They all need a teacher.**

[DETAILED OUTLINE](#)

LACHES DETAILED OUTLINE

- 178a-181d: **THE MAN FIGHTING IN ARMOR:**
178a-180a: **Fathers, sons, and education:**
Lysimachus and Melesias, two undistinguished sons of famous generals and statesmen, seek Nicias' and Laches' opinions regarding the educational value of training to fight in armor.
- 180a-181d: **The appeal to Socrates:**
Laches and Nicias advise the men to ask Socrates.
Laches on Socrates' valor during the Athenian retreat from Delium.³⁰
Lysimachus to Socrates: is it useful (ἐπιτήδειον) for the young to learn to fight in armor?
Socrates defers to his older and more experienced colleagues, Nicias and Laches.
- 181e-189d: **PRELIMINARY OPINIONS:**
181d-182d: **Nicias:**
It is beneficial (ὠφέλιμον) to learn to fight in armor.
It trains one for combat.
It is the first step on the way to the art of the general and the many noble and worthy (καλὰ καὶ πολλοῦ ἄξια) practices associated with it.
Finally, a young man trained to fight in armor will acquire an appearance that will frighten the enemy.
- 182d-184c: **Laches:**
If the practice were beneficial, the Spartans would have adopted it.
Stesilaus, the very man who performed the exhibition, has performed ridiculously in battle.
Finally, a coward who learns the craft will become rash and more readily expose his inadequacies, while a brave man who learns it will be the object of close and critical scrutiny.
- 184d-187c: **Socrates on knowledge, teachers, and care of the soul:**
184d-185b: Must base the decision upon knowledge rather than majority opinion.
Only he who has studied the matter in question under a good teacher will have the appropriate knowledge.
- 185b-186b: They are investigating the practice of fighting in armor in order to evaluate its effects upon the souls of young men (τῆς ψυχῆς ἕνεκα τῆς τῶν νεανίσκων).
Therefore, they must determine whether any of them is skilled in the care of the soul (τεχνικὸς περὶ ψυχῆς θεραπείαν) and has had good teachers in that subject.
Lysimachus and Melesias should seek advice from the man who can prove that he has studied under teachers who are good themselves and who have improved the souls of their pupils, or who can display men whose souls he has improved himself.

³⁰ On Socrates' military career see "[Socrates as Hoplite](#)."

- 186b-187c: Socrates has had no such teachers, nor has he been able to discover the necessary skills on his own.
Perhaps Nicias or Laches has had such teachers or has taught others himself.
- 187c-189d: **Nicias and Laches on Socrates' words and deeds:**
- 187c-d: Will Nicias and Laches consent to be questioned by Socrates?
- 187d-188c: Nicias knows and approves of Socrates' style of inquiry, which scrutinizes a man in all the details of his life.
- 188c-189b: Laches is unfamiliar with Socrates' manner of discussion, but if his words match his deeds (λόγοι; ἔργα), he will be happy to talk with him.
- 189d-194c: **SOCRATES AND LACHES:**
- 189d-190c: **What is virtue?**
The best way to proceed is to discover the nature of that which improves the souls of the young.
Souls are improved by virtue (ἀρετή).
Therefore, the question they must ask is: what is virtue?
- 190c-e: **What is courage?**
They agree to consider a part of virtue, particularly that part to which fighting in armor is most directly related, namely courage (ἀνδρεία).
What, then, is courage?
- 190e: **Laches' first definition:**
Courage is remaining at one's post and fending off the enemy without fleeing.
- 190e-192b: **Socrates' objection:**
Laches' definition is incomplete; he has provided not a definition of courage but an example of one type of courageous action.
- 191e-192b: Socrates on the difference between an example and a definition.
- 192c: **Laches' second definition:**
Courage is endurance of the soul (καρτερία... τῆς ψυχῆς).
- 192c-d: **Socrates' objection:**
This definition is as broad as the previous one was narrow.
Courage is noble.
Endurance is noble only if it is accompanied by wisdom (μετὰ φρονήσεως); if accompanied by foolishness, it is harmful and productive of the bad (βλαβερὰ καὶ κακοῦργος).
Therefore, if courage is noble, but endurance is sometimes noble and sometimes not, the two cannot be identical.
- 192d: **Laches' second definition revised:**
Courage is wise endurance (ἡ φρόνιμος... καρτερία).
- 192e-193d: **Socrates' objection:**
Examples of wise endurance do not qualify as courage.
Examples of foolish endurance that do seem courageous.
In all situations the actions of the man who lacks knowledge are more courageous than those of the man who is skilled in the activity.
Foolish endurance is shameful (αἰσχρὰ) and harmful.
Courage is noble.
Therefore, foolish endurance, which is shameful, is courage, which is noble.

- 193d-194b: **Aporia:**
Socrates and Laches partake of courage, yet their present discourse shows no evidence of the fact.
They agree to endure (καρτερήσωμεν) in the search for courage.
Laches is not accustomed to such discourses, but the love of victory has possessed him.
- 194c-199e: **SOCRATES AND NICIAS:**
194c-d: **Nicias' definition of courage:**
Courage is a type of wisdom (σοφία τίς ἢ ἀνδρεία).
- 194d-195a: **Nicias' definition clarified:**
Courage is knowledge of that which is fearful and that which inspires confidence (τὴν τῶν δεινῶν καὶ θαρραλέων ἐπιστήμην).
- 195a-c: **Laches' objection:**
Doctors, farmers, and the other craftsmen know what is to be feared in their particular area of expertise, but we do not call such men courageous on that account.
- 195c-d: **Nicias' reply:**
Experts know only the objects of their expertise; they do not know whether these things are good or bad.
- 195e-196c: **Laches and Nicias quarrel:**
Laches: Nicias must intend to call prophets courageous.
Nicias: seers know only what will be, not whether what will be is good or bad.
- 196e-197a: **Socrates' objections to Nicias' definition:**
If courage is knowledge of that which is fearful and that which inspires confidence, then courage is extremely rare.
Moreover, according to this definition one must either deny that any animal is courageous or admit that animals possess a type of knowledge that very few humans can claim.³¹
- 197b-c: **Nicias' reply:**
Animals are not courageous.
Any man or beast who from ignorance (ὑπὸ ἀνοίας) does not fear that which is fearful is not courageous but fearless and stupid (ἄφοβον καὶ μῶρον).
What the many call courage is rashness (θρασέα).
- 197c-e: **Laches and Nicias quarrel:**
Laches: Nicias intends to rob men of the honor due them for their courage.
Nicias: I grant any man who is courageous the distinction of being wise.
Laches accuses Nicias of sophistry.
- 197e-199e: **Socrates' final objection to Nicias' definition:**
197e-198a: They have been examining courage as a part of virtue.
But virtue has other parts, such as temperance and justice.
- 198b-c: The fearful is that which produces fear, which in turn results from the anticipation of future evils (τὰ κακά).

³¹ Compare *Republic* 430b-c.

- That which inspires confidence does not produce fear; it refers to future things that are not evil (τὰ μὴ κακὰ) or to future goods (ἀγαθὰ).
- 198c-199a: The past, the present, and the future are all the domain of a single knowledge.³²
- 199a-e: Therefore, courage is not knowledge only of the fearful and that which inspires confidence, for these refer exclusively to the future. Courage must be knowledge of past, present, and future goods and evils. Therefore, courage is knowledge of good and evil generally. But the man who possesses general knowledge of good and evil possesses the whole of virtue. Therefore, Nicias' definition may be accurate regarding virtue as a whole; but it does not adequately distinguish courage.
- 200a-c **Laches and Nicias quarrel:**
Laches mocks Nicias' failure.
Nicias accuses Laches of being more concerned with remarking the inadequacies of others than of acknowledging and improving his own weaknesses.
- 200c-201c: **THEY ALL NEED A TEACHER:**
Laches and Nicias advise Lysimachus and Melesias to entrust their sons' education to Socrates.
Socrates insists that he cannot educate the boys, for, as the conversation has shown, he is as ignorant as Nicias and Laches.
Socrates suggests they find a teacher for themselves as well as for the boys.

³² In this section Socrates alludes to Nicias' role in the Athenians' catastrophe on Sicily during the Peloponnesian War. See Plutarch's *Nicias*, 23 ff.

LACHES INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

Platonic dialogues have layers and perhaps in no other are the layers more clearly discernible than in the *Laches*. The topmost layer of this dialogue is a comedy; the middle layer is purely Socratic in its thrust and purpose; and the third and deepest layer runs like a current of electricity from distant Athens to here and now, leaping wildly over time and space, surveying the perennial cause of intergenerational instability between fathers and sons. We shall take these three layers in order, top, middle, and bottom, waiting to draw general conclusions about the dialogue until the end.

Aristotle insisted that comedy is an “imitation of inferior but not thoroughly vicious men; ...the ridiculous is some mistake or disgrace neither painful nor destructive (*Poetics* 1448a31-35). The readers of the *Laches* are meant to discover that each of the adults has failings the others do not recognize and that one of our most cherished assumptions, namely, somebody (else) somewhere (else) has to know how to educate our children, is chimerical.

In the *Laches* we eavesdrop on five adult men, each one a father of one or more sons, each one concerned that their sons grow up in a way that honors the family name. Two of these men, Lysimachus and Melesias, had illustrious and noble fathers, but they are ashamed to admit they have never done anything useful or noble themselves. They are especially worried that their own sons will grow up to be slackers in turn, and they are taking great pains to see that this does not happen. Their sons are present for this conversation. The other three men have comported themselves magnificently on the battlefield and would count as noble and useful citizens in anyone’s book. Their sons, on the other hand, are not present.

The question the two fathers put to the three battle-hardened men is simple: should we enroll our sons with a teacher who will instruct them to fight in armor?

It seems like a perfectly normal question, akin to asking whether one's son ought to play football or practice karate. It is a question that any one of the three should be able to answer. But they cannot for the life of themselves agree. Two of the men, Laches and Nicias, disagree expressly, while the third, Socrates, argues that the very question is premature—for unless we know what we are trying to instill in the youth, talk about fighting in armor is a waste of time.

The upshot of their snippy-snappy disagreements is an agreement at the end of the day that the adults don't know a thing about courage or how to instill it in their sons; they agree that they all need to find worthy teachers for themselves and return to school alongside their sons. It is a laughable suggestion that removes the sting of previous dialectical failures, embarrassment, and aporia. Ultimately, though, nobody is hurt or pained. At worst, the three leading citizens have been made to feel a bit ridiculous. Ergo, comedy.

The middle layer of the dialogue is the Socratic reading for the rationale or logos. Two concerned fathers, Lysimachus and Melesias, have invited Laches and Nicias, two Athenian generals of repute, to accompany them and their two young sons to a display of fighting in armor by one Stesilaus, much as we might take our children to attend a demonstration of karate by Bruce Lee. After the demonstration, the two fathers confess that they have actually invited the generals to this display in order to ask for their advice. Should their sons enroll in such a school? Would it help improve them?

Both Nicias and Laches agree that their fatherly concerns are admirable. Laches suggests that they include Socrates in the conversation, too, since he spends so much time with the youth of Athens. As Laches continues his introduction of Socrates, Lysimachus

learns that they belong to the same deme. Then suddenly Lysimachus connects the name “Socrates” to one Sophroniscus, his long deceased friend, who turns out to be Socrates’ father. Additionally, Lysimachus remembers having heard both of his sons talk about “Socrates this” and “Socrates that” and, turning to the boys, he learns that this is the very Socrates they have been speaking of. Both Nicias and Laches vouch for Socrates in the warmest terms. This long eulogistic introduction of Socrates prompts Lysimachus and Melesias to bring Socrates within the ambit of their concerns and deliberations with confidence.

The first lines Socrates speaks are deferential: “It seems to me most just that, being younger than these men and less experienced in these matters, I hear first what they say and learn from them. If I have something else to add to what they say, then I may teach and persuade both you and them” (181d3-7).

Nicias begins. He wholly and roundly praises the idea of enrolling the boys with such a teacher in the firm and flowery belief that “the man who knows this would suffer nothing from any single person, nor perhaps from many, but in every situation he would have the advantage. And it inclines a man to desire still another noble lesson, for everyone who has learned to fight in armor would desire also to learn about tactical organization; and once he has acquired these skills and desires through them to acquire honor, he would proceed to the overall business of the general” (182b-c). One is apt to think: all this from acquiring basic combat skills? Sign me up!

Laches, whose battle hardened life included no such schooling, disagrees. He is not so much questioning the prospect of learning as such, as he is suspicious of the sort of the wild promises such teachers and Nicias are apt to make. Laches wonders why the trainers offering these lessons don’t display their skills in Sparta where the acquisition of courage and valor receive the utmost attention. If they are all they tout themselves to be,

doesn't it seem odd that they don't? Furthermore, Spartans are the peak example of courage and valor in all of Greece and they employ no such teachers. Laches also confides to the company that he has seen the very man who has just put on the display in an actual battle and that he made a complete fool of himself. Finally, Laches' personal experience with the men who have had such training is that they often mask their inner cowardice by rashness and their pretensions to bravery by slandering those who are truly courageous. One's schooling is no guarantee of one's character. In all of these ways, Laches dismantles the praises and confidence of his pal Nicias. It had to sting, at least a little.

Having heard one pro and one con, the fathers invite Socrates to share his opinion and adjudicate the dispute between Nicias and Laches.

But Socrates will not be used in this way. One doesn't reach a serious decision about the care of youth by taking a poll and counting hands. What sort of father does that? He does not want to opine without first examining one of the basic assumptions shared by everyone who has spoken so far.

The fathers rashly assume that the two generals possess some authority concerning the care of the youth and the development of virtue, especially the virtue of courage. But their credentials to decide the matter have not been made explicit. Socrates insists that unless the fathers attempt to examine their credentials to render advice in such a matter, the fathers run the risk of making an uninformed decision on irrational grounds. It is through this ploy that Socrates turns the spotlight upon Laches and Nicias. And although both men have tried to answer honestly whether or not studying to fight in armor is a good thing, it is their adult assumption that they have expertise concerning the youth that warrants further examination.

Although both generals agree to submit their qualifications in this matter to Socratic interrogation, their earlier disagreement on the value of the training under consideration tends to fan out into their separate reasons for submitting to questioning.

An exasperated Nicias laughs that he knew all along that the very presence of Socrates meant that the adults would end up like this: examining their own lives rather than the lives of these boys. Nevertheless, Nicias enjoys words, studies with the sophist Damon, and so he agrees to bear examination patiently if he must. Laches, on the other hand, does not love or even trust words. He has seen wordsmiths twist and turn the lesser argument into the greater. His consent rests on the personal respect he has for Socrates. After all, he has been on the battlefield with Socrates and has witnessed his courage and valor firsthand.³³ In the good man, word and deed must match. Because in his experience Socrates has been such a good man, Laches looks forward to improvement by him.

Laches goes first. He is a brave and competent man of action rather than a dialectician, but he is hopeful and willing. He has to learn in a series of steps exactly what Socrates means when he asks what all courageous actions have in common. And when Laches discovers that he cannot quite say what that common thread might be, he confesses that he is “truly vexed” at being unable to articulate his meaning. He believes he knows the nature of courage since he has been brave in deed over the course of his entire career.

Laches previously agreed to a premise of Socratic dialectical practice that sows the seed of his eventual aporia: if we know the nature of something, we should be able to say what that nature is. Our deeds and words must match. After all, if he is brave, he should be able to say what bravery is. But he cannot.

³³ On Socrates' military career see “[Socrates as Hoplite](#).”

Nicias is next. No stranger to Socratic dialectic, Nicias has enjoyed the benefit of watching his friend's rising discomfiture and in response he attempts to end run his own examination by using words he has heard out of Socrates' own mouth to the effect that courage is a species of wisdom. Laches has a natural response to this claim: wide-eyed wonder. But rather than explain how courage is related to wisdom, Nicias parades first one, then another, definition of the virtue before the assembled group. Laches senses the deviousness of the orator in all Nicias has had to say and blatantly accuses his friend of eristically attempting to dodge honest discourse. As tempers flare, Socrates must quiet the two men and take over the questioning.

Nicias has cast courage as a virtue confined to the future because it is concerned, of course, with future goods and ills. But Socrates points out that what is good or ill saturates the present and past also. Since courage must be tied to both of these temporalities as well, Nicias has only given one third of an account. Nicias admits his definition is too narrow. Thinking too much about one's future hopes and ills, one is apt to lose the moment, as Hamlet discovered.

Laches celebrates the collapse of his friend's pretensions to knowledge and Nicias snipes back with a version of *tu quoque*. The mutual impasse is finally resolved when Laches recovers his humor and advises the fathers present not to listen to either of them, for clearly they do not know what courage is, nor how to implant it in the souls of young men. Rather, if the men are smart, they will question Socrates regarding the proper education of the youth. Nicias, relieved, enthusiastically agrees and confesses that he himself asked Socrates to undertake the training of his own son, but that Socrates refused and suggested the names of others instead.

Upon hearing this, Lysimachus begs Socrates to undertake the task of educating his son; but Socrates reminds everyone that their original question concerned the

credentials one must possess to offer such serious advice. In that regard, Socrates admits that he is no better off than Laches or Nicias. Given the result of their conversation, Socrates insists that all the adults present should seek out the most qualified teachers they can for themselves, first, and then for their sons, and undertake their educations together.

As the above comedy comes to a close, the reader is left wondering how to interpret this dialogue. Is it meant to be a demonstration that nobody knows what virtue is unless he can speak it? Is Plato taking an ironic and perhaps snide jab at Nicias, whose martial career will have already ended with his humiliating defeat and execution by the time the dialogue reaches the Athenian public? For Nicias oversaw the worst defeat the Athenian navy ever suffered when he delayed his troops' departure from Sicily because he was worried about religious omens and their significance for the future. The exchanges with Nicias hint, after all, that concern for the future has a way of clouding one's vision of the present.

I confess I think the dialogue as a whole may convey a warning to all adults who attempt to separate the future from the present and the past.

Adults today exhibit fears and attitudes similar to those of Lysimachus and Melesias. They look back on their lives and confess they screwed up. They may have had noble and good fathers, but somehow it didn't matter: they must have missed the best training, or the best schools, or best teachers, and that must be the primary reason they came to nothing or almost nothing. They figure they can make sure their sons do better in the future than they did by furnishing them the best instruction, the widest opportunities, the savviest teachers. That said, however, it has been forever since they took part in, much less investigated, the present state of education. How should they know what or who is the best in these arenas? They haven't a clue how to decide such things. The opportunities are legion! Some parents enroll their kids in armor schools, or Tai Kwan

Do, or Karate, or Little League. So many choices, so little time. The future of their children is on them like a knife.

How to decide?

If one is not in the know, one may turn to rumor. Or to polls. Or to what the annual *U.S. News and World Report* says about the best and the worst colleges. If, on the other hand, one is personally acquainted with someone who is himself credible or illustrious, perhaps one should seek his advice on these matters. Military schools: does he endorse them or not? Little League, yes or no? So in their worries over the future, parents attempt a short cut to resolution, even though it is their duty to discover and judge by their own lights. In the desperate search for advice, they foist the decision onto others without asking themselves how and whether these “others” have a clue themselves.

It is not that these famed others will have no opinion on the matter. Nicias and Laches are flattered to be asked and they are candid in their replies. They are the adults, after all, who are successful. They have succeeded. Who else is better qualified to step up to the plate and give advice?

That they have not investigated the state of education recently doesn't bother them at all. They have their own lives and experience to consult. That they take no account of the actual children standing before them doesn't even enter their minds. No need to know them, their strengths or weaknesses, their character or dispositions. Children are like little interchangeable pawns. Just line them up and feed them whatever the illustrious man ate. Why shouldn't that suffice?

Because Laches and Nicias work only from their own pasts and opinions to construct the template for the education of the youth, they exhibit the myopic vision of many contemporary adults. Socrates is the only man who actually knows these children outside their family confines. Their fathers suddenly realize and admit that they have

often heard the boys speak of him, but they never made the association. Can they really be seriously concerned with the education of their sons if they hear a name repeated constantly but never pause to wonder to whom it refers, and what the boys are learning from the man? It is not unlike parents who hear their child talking about their favorite bands and musicians, but who dismiss the information as inconsequential. The future: that is what matters. SATs and LSATs. The present, well, it only exists for the future, right?

Socrates gently shows everyone present that protecting and improving the youth is a more complicated venture than reasoning from one's own success or failure. For on that reasoning, Thucydides and Aristides could not have failed to produce noble sons in Lysimachus and Melesias. But they did fail. No doubt these illustrious men hoped to succeed by using their own cases as templates, just as Laches and Nicias have done in making their suggestions from their two different points of view. But such views are too narrow. They fail to know or engage the child as he or she is in the present. Without that engagement, one's future schemes, however well figured or intentioned, "gang aft agley."

Socrates is notoriously engaged with the youth. He proves to be their best educator because he engages them, honors their present character, takes them on their own terms, and hopes by such engagements to steer them toward honor, prudence, temperance, and justice. That conversation is his primary vehicle tends to slyly rebuke reliance on activities such as soccer, Tai Kwan Do, or training in armor.

The virtues that empower us must somehow be made visible to the youth and modeled by adults to ensure they take root. That is the primary reason Socrates can urge the adults present to find the very best teachers they can and, along with their sons, sit at their feet. He is optimistic for the adults as well as for the children. In undertaking such

an adventure together, they might learn to treasure and value the present and thereby secure the ground of their hopes in the future.

I am sure that everyone took Socrates to be in jest. Adults, after all, have to bring home the bacon. Their school days are long gone. They have “no time” for such matters. And besides, it is too little too late, isn’t it? Why go back and learn, say, to play the harp now? I am fifty, for heaven’s sake. Don’t be ridiculous. Wouldn’t most of the American adult population express the same attitude? It is laughable.

But in its deepest layer the *Laches* rebukes the adult who takes this position. Aristotle said it is joy for man to be learning something; Solon celebrated in verse the fact that “I grow old continually learning many things.” To think, “Oh, it is too late for me, but not for my children!” is to give away the most important asset we have in securing the proper and best education of the youth: the continuing educability of their adult counterparts. Were this the prevailing view of this day and age, there could be no such thing as a generation gap. But this is something that almost everyone takes daily for granted. The seeds of its erasure are suggested by Socrates in the closing lines of the *Laches*.

I know. Few adults will hear it.

Silent witnesses to the whole encounter are the sons of the fathers who are desperate for advice. One must never dismiss the silent witnesses. As Milton knew, “They too serve who only stand and wait.” What can we say the boys learned that afternoon?

I think they took away three valuable lessons: First, that their fathers love them and have genuine concern for them. Second, that even though Laches and Nicias sharply disagreed, they somehow overcame their anger with one another and admitted their faults and former pretensions, repaired the rift that had separated them, and resolved once more

to be friends. Third, that their friend Socrates stood as neutral witness among the adults because he believes that they, the children, are “riches” too valuable to hand over to people not thoroughly qualified to handle them. And to discover who is and is not qualified to handle such riches is the most important task adults face.

All in all, I think the kids probably learned quite a bit that day about honestly admitting mistakes; about the nature of friendship; and about the concern adults have for their welfare. The adults may not even realize that they have conveyed something inestimable to them in spite of themselves! Would that all our formal courses everywhere on every subject imparted these same beliefs to their students.

LESSER HIPPIAS

Subject: Voluntary wrong-doing.

Mode: Dramatic

Setting: ca. 421-416, Athens.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Eudicus of Athens.

Hippias of Elis.

[SHORT OUTLINE](#)

LESSER HIPPIAS SHORT OUTLINE

- 363a-364a: **After the exhibition:**
Socrates' silence (363a-c).
Socrates' question (363c).
Hippias' brilliance (363c-364a).
- 364b-369b: **The truthful man and the liar:**
Achilles and Odysseus (364b-c).
Hippias: the crafty man is a liar (364c-365c).
Socrates: the truthful man is a liar (365c-368b).
Hippias' many talents (368b-e).
Socrates' conclusion (368e-369b).
- 369b-e: **On Socrates.**
- 369e-372a: **Voluntary and involuntary lying:**
Achilles lies voluntarily (369e-371d).
Lying, wrong-doing, and the laws (371d-372a).
- 372a-373c: **On Socrates:**
Socrates' uncertainty (372a-373a).
On method (373a-c).
- 373c-376b: **The superiority of those who do wrong voluntarily:**
Preliminaries (373c-374a).
Multiple examples (374a-375c).
Voluntary injustice (375c-376b).
- 376b-c: **The wanderers.**

[DETAILED OUTLINE](#)

LESSER HIPPIAS DETAILED OUTLINE

- 363a-364a: **AFTER THE EXHIBITION:**
363a-c: **Socrates' silence:**
Socrates has neither praise nor criticism for Hippias' oration in which he made some mention of Homer.
- 363c: **Socrates' question:**
Is Achilles superior to Odysseus, or vice versa?
- 363c-364a: **Hippias' brilliance:**
Hippias is always willing to answer any question about any subject for which he has prepared an exhibition.
Hippias' confidence in his soul's wisdom is a blessed state (μακάριον... πάθος).
Hippias has never encountered anyone better than him in anything (κρείττονι εἰς οὐδέν).
- 364b-369b: **THE TRUTHFUL MAN AND THE LIAR:**
364b-c: **Achilles and Odysseus:**
Hippias: Homer depicts Achilles as the best (ἄριστον) of the Achaeans, whereas he describes Odysseus as the craftiest (πολυτροπώτατον).³⁴
- 364c-365c: **Hippias: the crafty man is a liar:**
Achilles not crafty; he is most truthful (ἀληθέστατος).
Odysseus is crafty and a liar (ψευδής).
Socrates infers from this that the crafty man is a liar.
- 365c-368a: **Socrates: the truthful man is a liar:**
Successful liars must be powerful (δυνατοί) and wise (σοφοί):
The powerful and wise man is the most proficient truth-teller.
The ignorant man (ἄμαθής) is *not* the most proficient liar: from ignorance he may involuntarily (ἄκων) speak the truth while intending to speak falsely.
The powerful and wise man can avoid this mistake and so is a more proficient liar than the ignorant man.
Therefore, the same man is both a liar and truthful.
- 368a-369b: **Socrates' conclusion:**
This applies to every sort of knowledge (πασῶν τῶν ἐπιστημῶν).
There is no instance in which the man who can speak the truth differs from the man who can lie successfully.
Therefore, if Odysseus is a liar, he is also truthful; and if Achilles is truthful, he is also a liar.
- 369b-e: **ON SOCRATES:**
Hippias complains that Socrates always sows confusion and argues unfairly.
Socrates replies that he merely attends closely to his interlocutor's words, especially if the man is wise. He asks questions of such men in order to learn from them.

³⁴ In the first line of the *Odyssey* Odysseus is described as πολύτροπον.

- 369e-372a: **VOLUNATRY AND INVOLUNTARY LYING:**
 369e-371d: **Achilles lies voluntarily:**
 Socrates: passages from the *Iliad* prove that Achilles lies.
 Hippias: Achilles lies involuntarily (ἄκων).
 Socrates: Achilles deliberately lies to Ajax.
 Hippias: only Odysseus lies on purpose.
 Socrates: if this is the case, Odysseus is superior to Achilles—for they previously agreed that voluntary liars are better (βελτίους) than involuntary liars.³⁵
- 371d-372a: **Lying, wrong-doing, and the laws:**
 Hippias: the laws consider those who voluntarily do bad things (κακὰ ἔργασάμενοι) worse than those who do so involuntarily.
- 372a-373c: **ON SOCRATES:**
 372a-373a: **Socrates' uncertainty:**
 At the moment Socrates thinks those who harm (βλάπτοντες) others and are unjust, those who lie, deceive, and do wrong voluntarily are better than those who do these things involuntarily.
 But he does not always think this.
 He begs Hippias to dispel his confusion and heal his soul (ἰάσασθαι τὴν ψυχὴν μου).
- 373a-c: **On method:**
 Hippias must not deliver a long speech, but continue to answer questions.
- 373c-376b: **THE SUPERIORITY OF THOSE WHO DO WRONG VOLUNTARILY:**
 373c-374a: **Preliminaries:**
 a) a man who does something well is good at that thing;
 b) the man who voluntarily does something poorly is better than the man who cannot help but do poorly;
 c) to do something poorly is to do something bad and shameful;
 d) therefore, the man who voluntarily does what is bad and shameful is good.
- 374a-375c: **Multiple examples:**
 That these things are so is evident from activities as diverse as wrestling, singing, the practice of medicine, and even the behavior of animals
- 375c-376b: **Voluntary injustice:**
 Justice is either a power (δύναμις) or knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), or both.
 Therefore, the soul that is more powerful or wiser (σοφωτέρα) or both is more just than the ignorant soul.
 This soul, moreover, is better (ἀμείνων) and more readily accomplishes both noble and shameful things.
 Therefore, the just soul will do shameful things voluntarily whenever it does them—for to be incapable of *not* acting unjustly is the mark of the ignorant and inferior soul.

³⁵ What agreement does Socrates have in mind here?

To act unjustly is bad.

Therefore, the more powerful and better soul, whenever it acts unjustly, does so voluntarily.

Therefore, the good man is the man who voluntarily acts unjustly.

This is true, Socrates concludes, *if* such a man exists.

376b-c:

THE WANDERERS:

Hippias rejects Socrates' conclusion.

Socrates cannot come to a settled opinion on this matter; he wanders up and down (ἀνω καὶ κάτω πλανῶμαι).

But this is to be expected if even wise men like Hippias wander as well.

LESSER HIPPIAS INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

The *Lesser Hippias*, considered from one point of view, is a mere trifle. Compared to the other dialogues it is frivolous and inferior. It makes its point through a tedious repetition that perhaps crosses the line into numbing futility. These facts, and Socrates' apparent approval of injustice, have led a few scholars over the years to doubt the dialogue's Platonic provenance. And yet...it has a certain spark. Its central puzzle is enticing, as is Socrates' mode of exposition. Some of the philosopher's remarks are blatantly outrageous, but he occasionally speaks a quiet word that makes one pause. Pause and ponder. Why did he say *that*? Why did he choose precisely *this* formulation? To what previous remark or agreement is he referring? We encourage the reader to pursue these questions. The dialogue is short enough to savor. Take the time to follow the tracks, in whatever direction they may lead. Socrates refers to himself as a wanderer in this dialogue (376c), for he cannot settle his mind on a single answer to the question which he himself has posed. He wanders up and down and cannot stop. Walk with Socrates; the course will be dizzying, but you will not find a better guide.

So we leave you to wander through this tangled and surprising work. In this essay we do not intend to analyze Socrates' arguments or Hippias' futile rebuttals. The *Lesser Hippias* exhibits a number of features that occur in other aporetic dialogues, features that illuminate Socrates' Delphic mission and his contemporaries' reaction to his activities. We propose to call your attention to some of these.³⁶

In this dialogue Socrates interrogates a famous sophist, Hippias, a man renowned for his wisdom. In this it is similar to the *Gorgias*, the *Protagoras*, and to a lesser degree

³⁶ This is the only essay in this volume whose main purpose is to emphasize the transdialogical continuities among the early and middle dialogues. The similarities among these works are at times striking, which of course makes the differences noteworthy as well. In the present essay we have cited only some of these similarities; we encourage the reader to identify others and to remark, also, the differences.

the *Euthydemus* and the first book of the *Republic*. As in the *Gorgias* the dialogue begins just after an oratorical exhibition, though Socrates was present for Hippias' display, and may even have interrogated him as he spoke (364b6-8). Hippias' wisdom is admired by the public, to be sure; but he also boasts of it himself time and again, and in this he resembles Euthyphro and Ion.

Socrates explains in the *Apology* that in his service to Apollo he seeks out and questions those who have a reputation for wisdom. Sometimes he encounters such men on the street; sometimes, as in the *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and here in the *Lesser Hippias*, he attends an event at which he knows a reputedly wise man will be present. Occasionally he is invited to ask questions, as when Eudicus urges him to question Hippias or Calicles invites him to question Gorgias. Socrates addresses these men as if he wants to learn from them. They are the wise men, after all; he himself is ignorant. He would like to become Euthyphro's pupil, for example (5a-b), in which case Meletus might drop the charges against him. He will learn from Protagoras that virtue can be taught (320b), and from Meno the nature of virtue itself (71c-d). Similarly, he hopes to learn from Hippias about Homer's portraits of Achilles and Odysseus (364b-d; 369d-e).

None of these men ever declines to teach Socrates. They are confident of their wisdom and of their ability to share it. They are regularly surprised at the extent of Socrates' (professed) ignorance: surely the nature of piety, of courage, even of virtue itself is obvious; surely Socrates admits that virtue can be taught. And so they begin to explain to this poor man what every schoolboy knows. Socrates listens patiently to their account, eager to benefit from their knowledge. Then, having heard them out, and after complimenting their fine and even wondrous words, Socrates confesses to being confused about something—he still has, as he puts it in the *Protagoras*, “one little problem”

(328e4). And with that he delivers himself of a single observation or question that turns everything upside-down. The wise man gets lost, is perplexed, can no longer respond even to his own satisfaction. He grows frustrated or tired and the conversation ends without resolution. It ends, that is, in *aporia*.

To return to Socrates' account of his Delphic mission: when his wise interlocutors fail, as inevitably they do, to resolve his "little problems" and teach him all that they profess to know so well, Socrates concludes that they must not be wise after all. And if this is so, then the god must have spoken some subtle truth when he declared him, Socrates, the wisest of men. How does this go over? How do these wise men react to being confounded by this eccentric ignoramus? In the *Apology* he frankly admits that his dialectical examinations have the regrettable effect of occasionally enraging those who submit to them.

Socrates conducts his interrogations in public; his sessions draw a crowd. The whole atmosphere is potentially explosive, for Socrates questions men whose honor—and in the case of the sophists, whose livelihood—depends on their reputation for wisdom or some other acknowledged excellence. Men in this position simply cannot abide public humiliation. Yet Socrates often embarrasses them—that he does not intend to do so (assuming he does not) is immaterial; the embarrassment itself is the problem. Socrates knew he was making enemies. If he did not realize this to begin with, Aristophanes' depiction of him in the *Clouds* would have informed him of his dubious reputation. Now Socrates definitely did not seek this reputation for mischief. He seems genuinely to have taken precautions against antagonizing his interlocutors: although he did occasionally engage in heated debates, as we can see from his encounters with Calicles in the *Gorgias* and Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, he more often at least tried to be civil. In fact, he seems to have made a point of warning his interlocutor whenever he noticed something

amiss in his argument; at times he all but asks the man's permission to refute him. Thus in the *Gorgias* he defers his refutation until he receives Gorgias' word that he will not be upset if proven wrong (457c-458c); in the *Symposium* he mitigates his contradiction of Agathon's claims about love by assuring him that he himself once entertained the same false ideas (201e); in the *Lesser Hippias* he employs a similar strategy when he informs Hippias bluntly that he disagrees with him but attributes this to his own ignorance and begs the man to cure him (372d-373a).

Yet, however cautiously he proceeds, Socrates frequently irritates his interlocutor. His dialectical partners are forever accusing him of working mischief with their words. Euthyphro accuses him of making the arguments run around in circles (11b-d); Meno likens him to an electric ray that benumbs whomever it stings (79e-80a); Callicles complains bitterly that he interprets propositions according to a standard different from that employed by the man who uttered them (482e-483b). Here, in the *Lesser Hippias*, Hippias complains that Socrates always seizes the most devilish details of the argument and blows them out of proportion (369b-c); he later accuses the philosopher of confounding the argument and almost withdraws from the discussion (373b).

Hippias' desire to terminate the proceedings is an example of another common feature of Socratic examination. It is only natural for Socrates' interlocutors, having become angry and suspicious of his motives, to want out of the situation. We have seen how they complain about Socrates' tactics. If they feel sincerely that they are being mistreated, why continue? Why continue if the inevitable result is public humiliation, whether or not the procedure itself is conducted fairly?

Many of Socrates' interlocutors, doubtless asking themselves these and other related questions, react as Hippias does. Meletus, for instance, only grudgingly responds to Socrates' questions during his trial, even though he was legally obliged to do so (27b

ff); Protagoras is so vexed by Socrates' line of questioning that Socrates must take care to proceed gently (333e); Callicles becomes so frustrated that he outright refuses to answer (505d ff). Anytus does Callicles one better: he not only stops participating, he apparently threatens Socrates (94e-95a). Euthyphro famously hurries off before the investigation has reached a conclusion (15e).

These complaints and near-terminations interrupt the flow of the discussion. They usually follow some particularly vexing question or unexpected conclusion. The participants discuss the problem, either resolve it or agree to set it aside for the nonce, and return to their main subject. Sometimes, though, they take advantage of the break to discuss procedural matters. This usually involves a dispute about whether they should keep their questions and answers brief or deliver lengthy discourses. Socrates prefers brevity, and his interlocutors, even the orators among them, almost always agree to abide by the regulation. Thus Socrates requests Hippias to keep his answers brief, and the sophist complies (373a); Gorgias does too, for the most part (449b). Protagoras is not so pliable: he rankles when in the wake of his very long speech Socrates appeals for brevity (334c ff). Some of the orators seem utterly incapable of either producing or comprehending succinct expressions. Polus, for example, neither asks nor answers questions very well: Socrates must help him formulate his questions properly (462d), and at one point Socrates even delivers a speech because Polus can make no sense of his concise remarks (464b-465e).

Other procedural/methodological considerations include Socrates' frequent insistence that he is concerned to persuade only the specific man in front of him (e.g., *Lesser Hippias* 365c; *Crito* 46b ff; *Gorgias* 487e; *Protagoras* 331c³⁷); his characterization of the ideal dialectical partner as one endowed with knowledge, good

³⁷ But contrast *Protagoras* 333c and *Gorgias* 457e-458a.

will, and frankness (*Gorgias* 487a2-3); and his commitment to the so-called “dialectical requirement,” according to which interlocutors should employ only those concepts that are known to and understood by each party (*Meno* 75d).

During the main break in the conversation in the *Lesser Hippias*, when Hippias seems about to quit, the audience intervenes. Eudicus appeals to Hippias to continue “for our sake” (373c1-3). Plato frequently calls attention to the spectators in this way. In the *Gorgias*, for example, the audience urges Gorgias to continue (458c-d)—Callicles is especially enthusiastic (which is ironic considering his own petulant behavior later in the work). The same thing happens in the *Protagoras* when Socrates and the sophist disagree about the rules that should govern their exchange (335d ff).³⁸ A variation on this theme occurs in Book I of the *Republic* when members of the audience discuss Socrates’ refutation of Thrasymachus’ claim that justice is the advantage of the rulers (340a ff). These episodes remind the reader of one of the many things at stake in Socrates’ conversations: the education of Athens’ youth. This is explicit in the *Laches* from the beginning; it is explicit, also, at the end of the *Charmides*; it is implicit throughout the *Euthydemus*, at the end of which Crito directly frets over the education of his own sons. He fears they may be led astray by experts in eristics such as Euthydemus and his brother Dionysodorus, men who care nothing for the truth but only for victory in debate.

Crito’s worries raise a related issue. Many of the young men who witness Socrates’ examinations are students or potential students of the sophists. These same young men, and the others in attendance as well, are potential “followers” or “associates” of Socrates. When Socrates renders an orator or sophist speechless, the young men in attendance take note—public speaking, after all, is one of the skills they most want to acquire. This is why his refutation of Thrasymachus is so provocative; the young allies of

³⁸ This episode is unusual in that it is *Socrates* who threatens to abandon the examination and leave.

each man have a stake in their mentor's performance, for it is he whom they admire and hope to learn from. The presence of the audience is significant, then, because Socrates' dialectical disputations are at least in part contests for the souls of these young men.³⁹

When the interlocutors and the members of the audience have had their say—when their various grievances, ground-rules, requests, and admonitions have been aired to everyone's satisfaction—the conversation may resume. Yet this is not to say that it will be any more successful than it had been prior to the interruption. It rarely is; often, in fact, after the break the dialogue rushes inexorably toward its conclusion. And as the *Lesser Hippias* ends with Socrates despairing over his indecision and ignorance, so end many of the other dialogues. This is *aporia* (ἀπορία), which literally means “without passage” or “without resource,” but which in Plato commonly designates a state of confusion, puzzlement, an almost helpless feeling of bewilderment. Thus one may refer to the *Lesser Hippias*, as indeed we referred to it above, as an “aporetic dialogue,” which is to say one of the many dialogues that end without answering their main question or resolving their central problem. Of the dialogues covered on this site the *Protagoras*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Euthyphro* and Book I of the *Republic* may be counted along with the *Lesser Hippias* as definitely aporetic; *Meno* and *Ion* are at least partially aporetic.

So we reiterate what we said at the beginning of this essay: read and enjoy the *Lesser Hippias*. It is not completely lacking in substance and charm. And as we have tried to show, it adheres to a pattern that recurs in a number of other dialogues. One can learn from the work, therefore, simply by measuring it against similar dialogues in an effort to chart the many different avenues along which Socrates wanders to arrive at one of his favorite destinations: *aporia*.

³⁹ See the essay on the *Gorgias* for more on this.

PHAEDRUS

Subject: Love and metaphysics; the value of speech-writing.

Mode: Dramatic.

Setting: 418-416, on the banks of the Ilissus, just beyond the walls of Athens.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Phaedrus.

SHORT OUTLINE

PHAEDRUS SHORT OUTLINE

- 227a-257c: **Part one: Three speeches:**
227a-230e: **Socrates and Phaedrus:**
Socrates the lover of speeches (227a-228e).
Beyond the city walls (228e-230e).
- 230e-234c: **Phaedrus recites Lysias' speech.**
234d-235c: **Socrates on Lysias' speech.**
235c-241d: **Socrates' first speech:**
Preliminaries (235c-237a).
Socrates' speech (237a-241d).
- 241d-243e: **Socrates on his own speech:**
Socrates prepares to leave (241d-242a).
Socrates' daimonion (242a-243e).
- 243e-257c: **Socrates' second speech:**
Divine madness (243e-245c).
The immortality of the soul (245c-246a).
The form of the soul (246a-249d).
The madness of the philosopher (249d-253c).
The soul's reaction to beauty (253c-257a).
Final remarks (257a-c).
- 257c-279c: **Part two: On writing and delivering speeches:**
257c-259d: **Is speech writing shameful?**
Lysias and other speech writers (257c-258d).
Among the cicadas (258e-259d).
- 259e-262c: **On rhetoric:**
Is rhetoric a τέχνη? (259e-261a).
The domain of rhetoric (261a-e).
Τέχνη and knowledge (261e-262c).
- 262c-274b: **On the artful and the artless in speeches:**
Preliminaries (262c-d).
Examination of Lysias' speech (262d-264e).
Examination of Socrates' speeches (264e-274b).
From praise to blame (264e-265d).
Dialectic: collection and division (265d-266c).
Mob oratory v. the true art of words (266c-274b).
- 274b-277a: **On writing:**
Writing, memory, and wisdom (274b-275c).
Writing and play (275c-277a).
- 277a-279c: **Conclusions:**
On the artful and artless in speeches (277a-c).
Is speech-writing shameful? (277c-278b).
Messages for Lysias and Isocrates (278b-279c).

DETAILED OUTLINE

PHAEDRUS DETAILED OUTLINE

- 227a-257c: **PART ONE: THREE SPEECHES:**
227a-230e: **SOCRATES AND PHAEDRUS:**
227a-228e: **Socrates the lover of speeches:**
Phaedrus has heard Lysias deliver an address.
Socrates is sick for hearing speeches (τῷ νοσοῦντι περὶ λόγων ἀκοήν); he is a lover of speeches (τοῦ τῶν λέγων ἔραστοῦ).
- 228e-230e: **Beyond the city walls:**
Walking along the Ilissus.
If Socrates were one of the sages (οἱ σοφοί), he would disbelieve and seek naturalistic explanations of traditional tales.
As it is, he is not even able to follow the Delphic advice to know oneself.
- 230e-234c: **PHAEDRUS RECITES LYSIAS' SPEECH:**
Lysias' speech lists several reasons why a youth should prefer a man who does not love him to one who does.
- 234d-235c: **SOCRATES ON LYSIAS' SPEECH:**
The speech was divine (δαίμονίως).
Socrates was caught up in Phaedrus' Bacchic frenzy (συνεβράκχευσα).
Is Socrates playing (παίζειν)?
Socrates' criticism: Lysias said the same thing over and over again, repeating himself in order to display his skill at varying his words.
- 235c-241d: **SOCRATES' FIRST SPEECH:**
235c-237a: **Preliminaries:**
Phaedrus threatens never to recite another speech for Socrates (a speech-loving man, ἀνδρὶ φιλολόγῳ) if he refuses to deliver a discourse superior to Lysias', as he said he could.
Socrates covers his head to prevent the sight of Phaedrus from flustering him from shame (ἐγκαλυψάμενος... ὑπ' αἰσχύνῃς διαπορώμαι).
- 237a-241d: **Socrates' speech:**
Love (ἔρως) is the desire that overpowers the rational opinion that aims for what is correct and draws one toward beauty.
Socrates is divinely inspired (ἐμαυτῷ θεῖον πάθος πεπονθέναι); he is nearly speaking in dithyrambs.
Socrates' reasons why a youth should prefer a man who does not love him to one who does.
- 241d-243e: **SOCRATES ON HIS OWN SPEECH:**
241d-242a: **Socrates prepares to leave:**
Socrates intends to cross the Ilissus and leave before he is possessed (ἐνθουσιάζω) by the nymphs.
Phaedrus begs him to stay and discuss the speeches.
- 242a-243e: **Socrates' daimonion:**

Socrates divine sign (τὸ δαιμόνιον) forbade him from leaving before purifying himself (ἀφοσιώσωμαι), as though he had in some way wronged the divine (τι ἡμαρτηκότα εἰς τὸ θεῖον). Both Lysias' and Socrates' speeches were terrible, foolish, and impious (δεινὸν...εὐήθη...ἀσεβῆ). Eros is a god;⁴⁰ yet both speeches depicted him as base (κακὸν). Socrates must purify himself (καθήρασθαι) according to an ancient purification for those who have gone wrong in mythologizing (τοῖς ἀμαρτάνουσι περὶ μυθολογίαν καθαρὸς ἀρχαῖος). He must recite a palinode to Eros, which he will do with his head bare.

243e-257c: **SOCRATES' SECOND SPEECH:**

243e-245c: **Divine madness:**

A lover is mad (μαίνεται) and a non-lover is temperate (σωφρονεῖ).

But the greatest goods come from madness bestowed by the divine:

1) The madness of the prophet.

2) The madness that issues prophecies and reveals purificatory rites of deliverance.

3) The madness of possession by the Muses that inspires poetry by arousing a gentle and pure soul to Bacchic frenzy (ἐκβακχεύουσα).

245c-246a: **The immortality of the soul:**

That which is always in motion is eternal.

Only that which moves itself is always in motion.

That which moves itself is the source of motion in that which is moved by another.

The source does not itself come to be.

Since it is ungenerated it is also indestructible.

Since it is ungenerated and indestructible it is immortal.

The soul is that which moves itself.

Therefore, the soul is immortal.

246a-249d: **The form of the soul:**

An accurate account of the soul would require a long and divine narrative.

An image of the soul:

A charioteer driving one noble and one base horse.

Souls inhabit different classes of human being according to the extent of their vision of true reality (οὐσία ὄντως οὐσα...τὰ ὄντα...τι τῶν ἀληθῶν) when on the rim of heaven in the train of the gods.

249d-253c: **A fourth divine madness:**

The madness experienced by the man whose vision of earthly beauty reminds him of true beauty (τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἀναμιμνησκόμενος).

Such a man loves beauty and is called a lover.

253c-257a: **The soul's reaction to beauty:**

When the charioteer and his team draw near a beautiful youth the noble horse remains calm but the base horse is violently agitated.

⁴⁰ A god or something divine (θεὸς ἢ τι θεῖον). Compare Phaedrus' assertion in the *Symposium* (178a7) and Socrates'/Diotima's counterclaim in that same dialogue (202b10 ff).

The charioteer's vision of physical beauty leads his memory toward the nature of beauty and he resists the wild horse.

The youth returns his lover's affection, for it is decreed by fate (εἴμαρται) that good cannot help being a friend to good.⁴¹

If the lovers are guided by the philosophical elements within them, their lives on earth are blessed and harmonious; and when they die their souls take wing and soar.

But if their souls succumb to a love of honor (φιλοτίμω), they will act upon their sexual desires and so pass their days in a friendship inferior to that enjoyed by the philosophic pair; and when they die their souls will be wingless.

257a-c: **Final remarks:**

Socrates prays forgiveness for his and Phaedrus' earlier speeches.

The blame lies with Lysias, the father of the discourse (τὸν τοῦ λόγου πατέρα).⁴²

May Eros convert Lysias to philosophy so that Phaedrus, his lover (ὁ ἐραστής), will dedicate himself to love through philosophical discourse (ἐρωτα μετὰ φιλοσόφων λόγων).

257c-279c: **PART TWO: ON WRITING AND DELIVERING SPEECHES:
IS SPEECH-WRITING SHAMEFUL?**

257c-259d: **Lysias and other speech writers:**

Lysias reproached for being a speech-writer.

His love of honor (φιλοτιμία) may restrain him from competing with Socrates' speech.

Socrates: it is shameful to speak and to write shamefully and badly (αἰσχρῶς ...κακῶς), not well (καλῶς).

258e-259d: **Among the cicadas:**

If the cicadas observe the two of them conversing, they might bestow upon them their divine gift of reporting to the Muses the names of those mortals who are dedicated to them.

259e-262c: **ON RHETORIC:**

259e-261a: **Is rhetoric a τέχνη?**

To speak well and nobly (εὖ...καλῶς) one must know good and evil (ἀγαθὸν καὶ κακόν).

The art of words (ἡ τῶν λόγων τέχνη): "without me it is not possible for the man who knows reality (τῶ τὰ ὄντα εἰδότι) to persuade by expert knowledge (πείθειν τέχνη)."

Socrates hopes to convince Phaedrus that rhetoric is an artless practice (ἄτεχνος τριβή) and so persuade him to engage in philosophy.

261a-e: **The domain of rhetoric:**

Rhetoric is a soul-leading art through words (τέχνη ψυχαγωγία τις διὰ λόγων), not only in law courts and other public gatherings, but in private, concerning either small or great matters.

261e-262c: **Τέχνη and knowledge:**

⁴¹ Compare *Lysis* 214d ff.

⁴² Compare *Symposium* 177d5, where Phaedrus is called the πατήρ τοῦ λόγου.

If rhetoric is a τέχνη, it produces resemblances between all things between which they can be produced.

Therefore, he who does not know what each of the beings (τῶν ὄντων) is cannot make his hearers pass from one thing to its opposite by leading them through the intervening resemblances.

The man ignorant of the truth has some ridiculous art of words and an artless thing (λόγων...τέχνην...γελοΐαν τινά).⁴³

262c-274b: **ON THE ARTFUL AND THE ARTLESS IN SPEECHES:**

262c-d: **Preliminaries:**

Socrates' and Lysias' speeches contain examples of the way in which one who knows the truth may play with words (προσπαίζων ἐν λόγοις) and incrementally mislead his audience.

262d-264e: **Examination of Lysias' speech:**

The man developing rhetorical art must divide by method (ὁδῶ διηρηῆσθαι) the matters about which humans dispute from those about which they do not.

Lysias did not begin with a definition of love; nor did he organize his speech like a body with one part following the other according to necessity.

264e-274b: **Examination of Socrates' speeches:**

264e-265d: **From praise to blame:**

Socrates' discourse transitioned from praise to blame.

His speech was for the most part really spoken in play (τῶ ὄντι παιδιᾷ πεπαῖσθαι), but it contained two valuable principles: collection and division.

265d-266c: **Dialectic: collection and division:**

Collection: leading into one form (εἰς μίαν...ἰδέαν...ἄγειν) things that are scattered about everywhere, which produces a definition.

Division: cutting according to kinds and natural joints.

Socrates is a lover (ἐραστής) collecting and dividing.

Those who are able to collect and divide are dialecticians.

266c-274b: **Mob oratory v. the true art of words:**

There is nothing noble (καλόν) that is distinct from collection and division and that also partakes of art (τέχνη).

The famous orators teach only the preliminaries to rhetoric.

Pericles was likely the most perfect of all the rhetoricians, for he associated with Anaxagoras and understood the nature of the soul.

To possess an art of discourse (ἡ λόγων τέχνη) a man must understand the nature of the soul, its actions and affections, and the types of discourse to which different souls are susceptible.

274b-277a: **ON WRITING:**

274b-275c: **Writing, memory, and wisdom:**

What is and is not fitting (εὐπρεπείας...ἀπρεπείας) regarding writing, how it is done well and how inappropriately (καλῶς...ἀπρεπῶς).

⁴³ Note throughout the conflicting references to rhetoric as a τέχνη and as not a τέχνη. Compare *Gorgias* 462b ff and, in particular, 500a-503b.

Theuth and Thamus (aka Ammon):

Writing is a pharmakon not of memory but of reminding (οὐκ οὐκ μνήμης ἀλλ' ὑπομνήσεως φάρμακον).

It provides the appearance of wisdom, not the truth (σοφίας... δόξαν, οὐκ ἀλήθειαν).

275c-277a: **Writing and play:**

Written words are for nothing more than to remind the one who knows (τὸν εἰδότα ὑπομνήσαι) of the things the writing is about.

Better than written words is the logos with knowledge written in the soul of the learner (ὅς μετ' ἐπιστήμης γράφεται ἐν τῇ τοῦ μανθάνοντος ψυχῇ).

This is the living and ensouled logos of the one who knows (τὸν τοῦ εἰδότος λόγον... ζῶντα καὶ ἔμψυχον), of which the written logos may justly be called an image (εἶδωλον).

The man who knows the just, the good, and the beautiful will not write about these things seriously.

If he writes, it is for the sake of play (παιδιᾶς χάριν) and to store up reminders (ὑπομνήματα) for himself against the forgetfulness of old age. Much more noble than this play is to be serious about these matters, and to approach them with the art of dialectic (ἡ διαλεκτικὴ τέχνη).

The dialectician implants in a soul words accompanied by knowledge (μετ' ἐπιστήμης λόγους).

These logoi make the man who possesses them happy (εὐδαιμονεῖν) to the highest degree possible.

277a-279c: **CONCLUSIONS:**

277a-c: **On the artful and artless in speeches:**

The man who would compose the artful speech must:

- a) know the truth about his subject matter;
- b) be able to define each thing;
- c) know how to divide his subject matter by kinds (κατ' εἶδη) to the point of indivisibility;
- d) understand the nature of the soul in the same way;
- e) discover the kind of logos that suits each soul;
- f) offer intricate and harmonious logoi to intricate souls and simple ones to simple souls.

277c-278b: **Is speech-writing shameful?**

Anyone who judges writing to possess great certainty and clarity is worthy of reproach.

There is necessarily much play (παιδιᾶν) in a written logos, and to write a logos is never worthy of great seriousness.

Even the best written logoi are reminders for those who know (εἰδόντων ὑπόμνησιν).

Clarity, perfection, and serious worth can be found only in that which is really written into the soul (τῷ ὄντι γραφομένοις ἐν ψυχῇ) about just, noble, and good things.

278b-279c: **Messages for Lysias and Isocrates:**

Regarding discourse, they have played enough (πεπαίσθω μετρίως).

Socrates' message for Lysias: if a man has composed speeches knowing the truth (εἰδὼς...τὸ ἀληθές), can help them in cross examination, and can show that written words are trivial, then he should be called a philosopher.

He should not be called wise, which term is appropriate to god alone.

Socrates' prophecy (μαντεύομαι) regarding his companion/beloved (ἑταῖρον/ παιδικῶς), the beautiful (καλόν) Isocrates:

A more divine impulse (ὀρμὴ θεϊοτέρα) will lead Isocrates from the practice of rhetoric to the study of philosophy, which is innate to his mind (διανοία).⁴⁴

Prayer to Pan.

Friends hold things in common (κοινὰ...τὰ τῶν φίλων).

⁴⁴ For more on (a character who may represent) Isocrates, see *Euthydemus* 304d ff.

PHAEDRUS INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

Along with the *Lysis* and *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* is honored as a member of the trinity whose express themes concern love and intergenerational friendship among the men of Athens. Unlike the other two, though, *Phaedrus* inscribes a Socratic rescue operation; an attempt to reorient the erotic soul of a youth who is perilously close to foundering on a reef he cannot see and does not suspect. How does one accomplish such a feat? It isn't easy, and there is no guarantee that the one you save today won't paddle out too far and drown tomorrow.

It is high summer in Athens. It is summer as well in the soul of Phaedrus. Not quite a mature adult, nor yet a child, but rather bursting with the confident bloom of youth, Phaedrus exhibits an independent and impassioned nature, and is thus capable of greatness, or folly, or both.

The dialogue opens *in medias res* when Socrates runs into Phaedrus and inquires of him, "Phaedrus, my friend, where are you headed and from where have you come?"

These lines mirror the opening lines of the *Lysis* and tie their themes loosely together. In both, Socrates encounters a youth who speaks of love. But in the *Lysis*, that youth is in love, and painfully so. Phaedrus is most certainly not in love. Rather, he is intellectually considering love as an object, a topic, and a conversational opportunity. (In the *Symposium* Phaedrus, lamenting the dearth of hymns to Eros, sparks the round of adult speeches.)

To be in love or not to be. Both circumstances present their own peculiar dangers, and it is to these dangers that Socrates is most alert.

Phaedrus relates that he has spent all morning with Lysias, a well known speechwriter; and having sat all morning at his feet, he announces to Socrates what can

only be described as a half truth: he has come outside for a walk beyond the city walls to reinvigorate himself. To shore up this white lie, he reports the opinion of a common friend, Acumenus, that it is more “refreshing” than walking in the porticoes of Athens.

Yeah, Yeah. The only thing missing is the whistling.

Socrates already knows who Lysias well—by reputation, family, deme, and profession. He has been in the family’s home for the conversation depicted in the *Republic*.⁴⁵ He also knows Phaedrus somewhat better than the young man knows himself. Phaedrus has a “divine and wondrous” connection to discourses (242a7-8), and Socrates will later complain that “of those [discourses] that have been produced during your lifetime, no one more than you [except Simmias the Theban] has caused them to come to be, either by speaking them yourself or by somehow compelling others to do so” (242a8-b3). If this youth sat all morning with a famous writer, he must have been stoking his passion for words. And if now he is striking off to the silent countryside alone, he is acting out of character.

Words matter; Socrates would like to know what Phaedrus and Lysias talked about all morning long, and he openly tells Phaedrus as much. “Do you not think that I would, as Pindar says, ‘consider it a matter superior even to business’ to hear about your time with Lysias” (227b9-11)? Upon being pressed for specifics, and after meekly protesting that perhaps Socrates hasn’t the time to hear, Phaedrus relents, suddenly observing brightly that their topic was “suited to you, for the discourse that occupied us was, in a way, about love” (227c3-5). He fairly rushes now to explain that Lysias “wrote of a handsome boy being tempted, but not by a lover—and precisely here is his subtlety.

⁴⁵ This assumes, of course, that the conversation depicted in the *Republic* occurred prior to this encounter with Phaedrus. Unfortunately, the dramatic date of the *Republic* is unclear, so this cannot be determined conclusively.

For he says that one must gratify the man who does not love you rather than the man who does” (227c5-8).

So! The topic that morning concerned, not love, but sexual “gratification;” moreover, it carried the implicit assumption that the young inevitably will sexually surrender to someone or other and that the only relevant question is: who? Clever, indeed.

Note that Phaedrus does not claim the discussion was actually about love, but only that it might be construed that way. This wordy little hedge is important because it reveals that Phaedrus has not yet conflated sex and love. There may still be time.

Socrates is cool. He doesn’t stop, mid-stride, and denounce the idea. He doesn’t launch into a puritanical lecture. Instead, he parodies. “Would that noble Lysias might write that one must gratify a poor rather than a rich man, an older rather than a younger man, and whatever other qualities I and many like me possess! For truly such words would be clever and of general benefit” (227c9-d2).

Socrates vows not to leave Phaedrus until he hears the entire speech. Phaedrus demurs, protesting that he is quite incapable of “reciting from memory and doing justice to what Lysias—who is the cleverest of contemporary writers—composed over a long period of time at his leisure” (227d6-228a3). Adolescent adoration of celebrities like Lysias is one of the concerns running beneath this dialogue. Left to ferment without challenge, a clever speech, coupled with admiration for its author, could become a future wellspring for Phaedrus himself, who at least realizes and confesses that he would rather have facility with words than “to become quite wealthy” (228a4).

All this while, though, the observant Socrates has seen tucked and folded in the sleeve of his young companion a text which he realizes is a copy of Lysias’ speech; and he suspects that Phaedrus is off to the countryside for more than his health: he is going

out by himself to memorize and practice declaiming it. It turns out to be quite a speech; it would have taken all day to memorize it.

Pretending to be as enamored of this kind of discourse as his young friend, Socrates insists that Phaedrus come clean: whatchagot got up your sleeve? Why, you have the very speech up your sleeve! You are really on your way to practice it in solitude, aren't you? Well, you may as well let your old pal Socrates hear it from the horse's mouth.

Phaedrus confesses his deception without shame or apology and finally agrees to share the speech with Socrates.

The opening frame, then, portrays a youth who has not only heard, but obtained a draft of a speech he considers clever, and who tries to deflect Socrates with talk of invigorating walks and being unable to recall the speech word for word. There is buried in these small deflections both an assertion of his independence as well as a recognition that what he is doing requires a certain sort of slyness, although once he is found out, he seems truly excited to be able to share his enthusiasm.

What we don't know is whether Lysias produced his non-lover speech as part of his own little seduction, nor whether, if he did, he succeeded. Socrates doesn't ask and Phaedrus doesn't say. But the fact that Phaedrus intends to memorize it is in itself a matter of concern; for even if Lysias wrote the speech for mere amusement, rather than in an attempt to seduce Phaedrus, once the boy commits it to memory he will have it ready for his own future use. We can only wonder whether, had Socrates not happened along, Phaedrus would have made this text an anthem of his future life.

Thankfully, Socrates does happen along. And Phaedrus does not get the chance to memorize the speech; at least not this day. Before the day cools enough to return to town,

Socrates will have elicited certain promises from Phaedrus to ensure that Lysias compose a rhetorical counterpoint to these sleazy words. Small victories count.

Now that Phaedrus has agreed to share the text with him, Socrates suggests they walk along the river Ilissus and find a quiet spot to sit. What follows is a description of two barefoot men, one old and one young, outside the walls of the city, now wading a stream, now scanning the countryside, now spying a lone tree where there is shade, grass, and a little breeze.

As they trundle along, Phaedrus raises a subject quite irrelevant to the speech he has committed himself to share. “Tell me, Socrates, don’t they say that somewhere around here Boreas snatched Oreithyia from the Ilissus?” When Socrates suggests that the actual place is further down, Phaedrus asks, “do you believe this story (μυθολόγημα) is true” (229b4-c5)?

“Is it true?” Phaedrus is asking here what is most important, not just about legends, myths, history, or science, but about all speech.

Socrates’ answer is telling. He knows that their traditional myths are under scrutiny by “wise men” who would demythologize them, but he has no time for such matters. “I am not yet able to obey the Delphic inscription and ‘know myself.’ It seems ridiculous to investigate extraneous matters when I am still ignorant of this” (229e5-230a1). By this answer Socrates puts Phaedrus on notice that our investigations have an inherent priority the point of which is to help us know who and what we truly are; what we are to do; and how we are to live. The dialogue will eventually turn to these very issues, but not before Socrates confronts in himself certain temptations to engage “extraneous matters.”

As they arrive at their chosen spot, sensory joy engulfs Socrates. He openly adores the lush fragrant flowers, soft grass, perfect shade, cool waters, and chorus of

cicadas. His gratitude to Phaedrus for having brought them to the spot is sincere and sustained. His senses are filled to the brim. But his enthusiasm baffles his young friend.

So the philosopher is not insensitive to the land or its splashing delights. Phaedrus, on the other hand, is. This is a loss many of us suffer; and to deflect it, Phaedrus remarks that Socrates seems more a foreigner than a native, and passes off Socrates' enthusiasm to his so often remaining in town. Where, then, is Phaedrus' delight? Phaedrus has been outside the walls before, probably doing just what he had planned to do this morning. In his desire for words and more words, he has come to take nature's scenic gifts for granted. A person who has become insensitive to beauty will play a larger part in their conversation than either of them realize.

Socrates counters that he loves learning, and that men in the city teach him what trees in the country cannot. This is not a rejection of the charms of nature; rather the overall context implies that the love of learning need not strip a man of aesthetic appreciation. Socrates lies down under the spreading arms of the tree and brings Phaedrus to the moment of truth: "Choose whatever position you think most conducive to reading, and read" (230e3-4).

Phaedrus reads the seduction speech that Lysias has written, his enthusiasm rising as he goes, and when he is finished, he fairly pants, "Is it not extraordinary, particularly the prose" (234c6-7)? Socrates confesses he found it "daimonic" but explains that he felt the current of the youth's rising delight and caught a whiff of the worshipful attitude in his young friend; he followed Phaedrus, caught and joined his Bacchic frenzy, and vicariously participated in his energy. It wasn't the speech, then, but Phaedrus himself who electrified the place.

Phaedrus worries that Socrates is mocking him, and issues three rapid fire defenses of Lysias: Could anyone in Greece, he wonders rhetorically, compose a speech

superior to this one? The discourse omitted nothing and so left nothing for anyone to expand upon or add. Besides, “where have you heard anything better” (234e1-235c1)? Phaedrus hasn’t the least desire to examine whether there is any truth to the text; oratory is about persuasion, not truth, and clever oratory supplies all Phaedrus needs. If there is more to be said, he would like to hear it. As for its truth: the question doesn’t even occur to him. His curiosity about Boreas and Oreithyia does not apply to Lysias.

Now, Socrates is not an uncompetitive man; he parries Phaedrus’ defense on its own terms: first, he most certainly has heard better on the same theme, somewhere, sometime, from someone, and insists that he himself could probably say as much and more and better on the same subject, for Lysias’ speech wasn’t all that well organized; and he insists that even now he feels inspired to deliver a speech to equal or surpass it, though he knows the words are not his own, and he doesn’t remember from whom he has heard them. So there.

Phaedrus immediately challenges Socrates to offer as much and as good on the same theme; and to force him to agree he swears that if Socrates refuses, he will never again share with him another speech. This, then, begins Socrates’ own detour into “extraneous matters.” Such contests are not about who we are or how we should live.

Under the threat of losing young Phaedrus’ companionship, Socrates produces a rhetorical speech on the same theme—on the hazards of giving one’s sexual favors to lovers—but not without first distancing himself from what he is about to say: “I will speak after covering my head so that I can run through the speech as quickly as possible without looking at you and becoming confused from shame” (237a4-5). Upon praying aloud to the “clear toned Muses” for their assistance under compulsion, Socrates makes his speech in an effort to outdo Lysias.

Midway through this contest, though, Socrates breaks off, jumps up, throws off his head covering, and makes for the river, blaming Phaedrus for intentionally throwing him to the Nymphs. Phaedrus complains that Socrates is only half finished, but still moving across the river Socrates rejoins, “What need is there of a long speech? I have spoken enough about the two of them” (241e6-7).

Taken together, the two speeches make love out be a double-sided evil—evil for a youth and unbridled madness for a lover that inevitably leaves both parties who encounter and succumb to its carnal temptations in the lurch. These twenty-five hundred year old speeches are the common stock and stuff of our own novels, movies, and everyday lives. Who doesn't know the downside of love?

Phaedrus pleads for Socrates to come back; to wait until the day cools off before returning to town; to stay and discuss the speeches. But it is not his pleading or the promise of more discussion that make Socrates return. It is remorse.

“Good friend, when I was about to cross the river my divine sign that usually comes to me came—it always restrains me from what I am about to do—and I seemed to hear from it a voice which forbade me to leave before purifying myself for some offense against the divine” (242b8-c3). He confesses that while he was delivering his speech he felt troubled, as if he were winning honor among men by dishonoring the gods. “But now,” he says, “I clearly recognize my offense” (242c5-6).

Phaedrus wants to know what possible offense there was. (After all, it was just words.) But Socrates is no longer possessed by the poetic urge to compete with Lysias, nor vicariously embroiled in Phaedrus' enthusiasms, and he doesn't mince his words. This contest of speeches “was foolish, and nearly impious—and what could be more terrible than that” (242d7)? Moreover, “if Love is, as indeed he is, a god or something divine, he could not be bad. Yet these two speeches spoke of him as though he were. In

this way they offended against Eros, and a very clever foolishness attached to them so that although they said nothing healthy or true they affected a solemn air as if they had substance because they might deceive some worthless men and acquire a good reputation among them” (242e2-243a2). This pseudo-accomplishment is one Phaedrus would understand given his love for clever and amusing words.

But it is not enough for Socrates to be sorry. The enactment taking place here insists that atonement requires us to counter pernicious words with words that will wholly and completely eradicate them. Erase evil words with good words. In a sense, such atonements suggest that one can indeed put the cat back in the bag.

Socrates thereupon determines “to give my palinode to Eros before I suffer for doing Him wrong—and with my head bare, not covered from shame as before” (243b4-7).

Socrates’ speech of atonement begins by imagining a man of generous and humane character, who loves or has once loved another such as himself, overhearing the two speeches that castigated love. “Would he not think that he was listening to people raised among sailors who had never seen noble love; and wouldn’t he be far from assenting to the things we censured about love” (243c6-d1)? To this Phaedrus can summon no more than, “Perhaps.” Socrates is more confident. He declares that, “Since I am ashamed before this man and afraid of Eros himself, I desire to wash away the bitter sound [of the previous speeches] with a sweet logos. And I advise Lysias, too, as quickly as possible to write that...the lover should be gratified rather than the non-lover” (243d3-7).

Phaedrus promises that once he has heard Socrates out, he will compel Lysias to write the same sort of speech.

What follows is Socrates' astonishing atonement to the god of love and to anyone who loves or ever has loved. He begins by qualifying the sort of love-madness of his first speech by insisting that madness may not always be evil. Like the madness required for prophecy, Love is heaven sent. But to attain the full truth of the matter requires them to discern and envision "the nature of soul, both divine and human...its experiences and its deeds" (245c2-4).

There is probably no more visually or psychologically compelling narrative in the entire Platonic corpus, for it envisions our immortal souls, high on the rim of heaven before we are born, each of us imprinting one of the twelve Olympian deities as they tend to and care for the motions and working of the cosmos. Although souls do not have bodies, Socrates imagines that they see and feel and that heaven's beauty and bounty far surpasses any on earth. And although he knows that a thorough and true description requires "a divine and long narrative," he likens the soul to "the yoked powers of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer" (246a4-7). The souls of the gods enjoy a complete harmony between the charioteer and his team of horses, but lesser souls like ours, do not. "Our charioteer drives a pair, and of the horses one is noble and good, and of noble and good stock, but the other is from ignoble and bad stock and is bad himself. Hence, our charioteer necessarily has a difficult and unpleasant drive" (246b1-4).

While in heaven, the lesser souls like ours receive their training from following one of the Olympians, who receive their nurture from the eternal verities: truth, justice, beauty—and from the virtues themselves, temperance, modesty, and wisdom. As long as soul feeds on these, the wings of the horses and the charioteer keep the soul well aloft, in step with the god he is imprinting. But when, on specified occasions, the gods soar very high, the bad steeds of the imprinting souls render their attempts to follow their gods much more difficult.

Out on the rim of heaven, during specific revolutions, the gods soar high enough to behold the very pillars of the universe, the world of the forms and eternal perfections that sustain the universe. “The colorless and shapeless and impalpable reality that is truly real, discernable only by our soul’s governing intellect, the object of all true knowledge, abides in this place” (247c6-d1). But because the souls in the train of the gods have to wrestle with their lurching steeds, now rising and now suddenly falling, they glimpse only intermittently the reality that exists beyond the rim of heaven. Souls display “much zeal to see the Plain of Truth” because the very feathers bearing them aloft are nourished by it (248b-c).

By Necessity, Socrates says, and “by some misfortune” some souls do not get the fullest glimpse of the Plain of Truth they so desperately desire and need in order to remain heaven bound. “Filled with forgetfulness and wrongdoing,” they lose their beautiful feathers and fall to earth to be born into human bodies that soul makes to live and move.

This first fall is crucial to us. Depending on the god one’s soul was imprinting and on how perfectly it glimpsed the Plain of Truth while in heaven, nine ranks of men emerge. The first ranks, who are imprinting Zeus, have beheld the most, and they will yearn more for wisdom and beauty, loyally following the Muses throughout their lives; theirs is a struggle to recover that lost celestial vision. A soul in this condition, “abandoning human pursuits and coming near to the divine, is rebuked by the many as deranged, for they do not know he is possessed by a god” (249c8-d3). From those imprinting other gods, having seen less and forgotten more of the view from the rim of heaven, will emerge men who occupy lower ranks, and in the eighth or ninth rank will be our sophists or demagogues or tyrants who have no reverence for what is beautiful; they

will fill up their lives with shameless carnality and use their wits and wiles to accomplish selfish or evil ends.

What sorts of person will Phaedrus consider himself when he hears this part of Socrates' palinode? What sort of person do we consider ourselves?

With one exception, Socrates envisions the throng of all fallen and earthbound souls without their feathers struggling with their mortality and the temptations of everyday life for a course of rebirths of 10,000 years. For those whose glimpse of the Plain of Truth was clearest, though, and who once possessed the imprint of Zeus, life is more than anything else a constant seeking after what has been lost: beauty, wisdom, and virtue.

When those fallen men happen upon beauty they are arrested, momentarily startled, shaken to their core because they are reminded, even if only for a moment, of that effortless unchanging Beauty glimpsed from the rim of heaven. Unlike the other eternal verities, such as justice or temperance, Beauty shone the brightest. Earthly beauty, then, in whatever form, sounds an echo of transcendence in their hearts. Their response to beauty is urgent and single-minded: love. In the presence of beauty, particularly in the presence of youthful beauty, the soul's dried up quill-pores begin to itch and throb, and its feathers begin regenerate and grow. We call this condition "falling in love."

Today we worry about the injury done to women by the "Male Gaze." In Greece, though, the injury is all on the side of the male who is gazing. Socrates' description of this injury and suffering is robust and eerily familiar to anyone who has ever fallen in love (250e ff). He describes, in suggestive detail, the inspiration and reverence a lover feels for his beloved, the palpitating heart, the trembling limbs, the feverish desire, the sweating, throbbing, and swelling...He goes on and on and does not skimp on the details, which any lover or former lover will recognize in him or herself.

As each soul carries the imprints of a different Olympian deity, so each soul is looking for another whose similarity to his own is manifest. Those who were in the train of Hera, for example, “seek a royal nature” to love. Those in the train of Ares, the war god, will not scruple to shed blood in matters love. So it is that mortal people find wildly different sorts of beauty in their beloveds and struggle so desperately with love. Beauty is the ground of love and hope in the world; and our feelings and decisions when in love secretly bear the badge of soul we really are. All this, Socrates insists, in the half and unconscious hope that they can shape the beloved into the image of their lost god.

But there now arises for the one who is love-struck the question: what to do? The lover’s soul is tried and tested. The charioteer of the soul, remember, has two steeds under his control and governance: a white one who is temperate and modest, who obeys the charioteers commands; and a black one who is hubristic and difficult to control even with the whip and goad. Above all, the black steed fills with desire and in his lustfulness complains bitterly that they should possess, as fully as possible, the beloved. Charioteers must bring all their might and violence to restrain the dark, lusty steed.

We call this restraint: civilization.

As his palinode ends, Socrates prays again to Eros to forgive both himself and Phaedrus. He blames Lysias, but he prays for him too, in the hopes that one who has yet to make his own atonement will do so in order that “his lover Phaedrus here might not waver as he does now, but might give his life unreservedly to Eros and philosophical discourses” (257b4-6).

At this point many scholars of *Phaedrus* complain that the dialogue is broken or irreparably disjointed. They openly wish the dialogue had ended here and wonder how the following section can be made to fit in. For so far we have heard Lysias’ speech, Socrates’ competitive anti-speech, and finally Socrates’ atonement for the both of them.

All that is missing is a bow. Why turn now to address mundane issues like speechwriting and rhetoric as opposed to philosophy and dialectical conversation? This contemporary response links our lives to the one Phaedrus himself lived. For scholars as for Phaedrus, it is the elegance of Plato's words, not their capacity to inspire Delphic pursuits of self-knowledge, that matter.

Why turn now to a different subject? Phaedrus is the reason. The dialogue is called *Phaedrus* and everything up to now has left him to one side. Lysias' talents are not his own; Socrates' competitive display and later regrets were not his either. Everything, save his intuitional selection of the beautiful site for their exchange, has been about somebody else. It is finally, as Phaedrus suggested before, time to discuss what they have heard.

Even after all that has been said, Phaedrus is capable only of rating and comparing. He finds Socrates' speech much more beautiful than his previous one. Lysias, he fears, will be unable to match it. In fact, he might not even be willing to try. Just the other day a politician reproached Lysias for being a speech-writer. This seems to have affected the man deeply, for Phaedrus suspects that from a love of honor he might in the future refrain from writing speeches. So Phaedrus' attitude remains a kind of "compare and contrast" evaluation, which is the attitude of one who is still window shopping for the best deal, rather than appreciating the wardrobe he already has.

Socrates knows that he must engage Phaedrus dialectically, not rhetorically, if he would make the afternoon they are sharing something more than just another round of speeches to excite the word-loving youth. To what Olympian god does Phaedrus owe his love of words? Socrates suspects that it is Zeus, but that the black steed of his soul is incapable of caring whether the words belong to him or to someone else. But mustn't one

make such a distinction in order to preserve and come to know oneself? If an education is to mean anything, it must mean the liberation of one's own voice.

The rest of the dialogue, then, concerns the true art of speaking and writing, and how such an art comes to be imitated and feigned by orators, writers, politicians, performers, lecturers, speakers, and students of all kinds. Because philosophy requires a specific yearning and attitude as much as a way with words, Socrates takes pains to caution Phaedrus about distinguishing the true from the false philosopher, the true from the false speaker. Rating the eloquence of writers or speakers is not part of this equation. And complaining that Plato should have stopped the dialogue after the speech of atonement links our souls across time to the soul of young Phaedrus himself.

One of the curious cautions Socrates urges upon Phaedrus is this: when an author sets his thoughts down in writing and sends them out into the world, the readers is often beyond his reach. This is as true for Lysias as it is for the author of this essay. Phaedrus at least knows Lysias and can return to him with fresh observations. You, gentle readers, cannot.

In order for me to have written this essay, though, I must have had some idea of who you are; but it is an abstract, one-size-fits-all notion. Whatever else this writing accomplishes, then, it cannot have done it by knowing you. YOU. You are richer and more particular by far than this writing can recognize, and the inadequacy of all writing is that you do not get to question it as you could if I were speaking with you in person, directly, eye to eye, as Socrates is speaking with Phaedrus. But only in such a circumstance could I learn, because you could tell me, how far short my efforts fell, and how we might together improve our understanding of love and life and each other.

Dialectical conversational encounters are the heart and core of the Socratic method; what he says is always modified, tailored, shaped specifically by and for the

person before him. Socrates never wrote. He would never have lectured to a philosophy class even had one been available. And he never would have written an essay like this one, and sent it out to the eyes of strangers without worrying that it would miss its mark.

There are two ways to miss that mark. First, suppose what I have written is lousy, false, or detrimental, and you shut it out never to think of it again. If so, I will have failed to improve you in any way. Or second, suppose you think this the greatest of all essays, like Phaedrus admired Lysias' speech, and you set about to memorize every line of it. That, too, will have missed its mark! For my words cannot and should not be allowed to supplant, petrify, or quiet the bubbling up of your own words; for it is always and only your words that can and must be trusted to accomplish the Delphic command. Friendship and love are those particular states that prompt us to uncover and improve our thoughts as a joint enterprise. Reading and writing, and subsequent contests of evaluation or criticism, do not.

For many of us, though, reading in school is first a chore, then a habit, then a hobby, and finally a full time cheerful diversion shaping the whole of our lives. It really is sometimes thrilling to participate in the cleverness of good writing. But Socrates warns that such activities divert us in some profound way from the Delphic task to know ourselves. Only in direct conversation, eye to eye, with appropriate good will and our atonements in place, can we prosper philosophically as well as in every other way. His genuine friendship for Phaedrus, then, is the ground of Socrates' detour into the art of speaking and writing in the final section of the dialogue.

This final section has as much to say about our own modern educational system as any Platonic work, for today we submit grades to evaluate how thoroughly a student masters the texts of others. Socrates would have cringed. He would have worried that we

are turning out pint-sized copies of Phaedrus on graduation assembly lines with no end in sight. What have such practices to do with Delphi?

Make no mistake here: as much as one likes or dislikes an essay like this one, it may have been worse than a waste of your time to read it. For we only have one life to discover who and what we really are; only one life to cut short the 10,000 years of mortal struggle; and Socrates suggests that we cannot do it without the give and take founded in and with living, breathing conversational partners whom we love. The better the partners, the more they will learn from one another. One cannot accomplish the task by reading. One who writes lays obstacles, not gifts, in the path of one who reads. Clever writing and delighted reading, then, are dangerous temptations and seductions. We should read or write only to remind ourselves of what is written on our souls—not to impress, sway, wow, or control the hearts, supplant the words, and divert the souls of strangers who happen to read...an essay like this.

The Delphic command “know thyself” is the only one that Socrates represents as worthy of our whole undivided attention. Despite his own competitive temptations, the Platonic corpus shows that he lived the command among living, breathing dialectical partners. Some of his conversational partners are less gifted than others, to be sure. But Socrates tries to remember that the person standing before him is a light and winged immortal soul that has fallen from heaven by the decrees of Necessity and “some misfortune.” He tries above all to remember that all souls yearn to return to the rim of heaven. Beauty and love are a human being’s best chance of winning through to that hope. For those whose lives are unmoved by these, the course of life will be driven by the selfish ends and “extraneous matters” of the soul’s black steed.

So now, gentle reader, having read my one-size-fits-all essay, let our atonement be as follows: to participate in a living, breathing conversation wherein we struggle to

voice our hearts on “serious and beautiful things” with someone as eager as ourselves. No more reading. No more writing. At least not today.

Come, then, “clear toned Muses” as I conclude my thoughts on *Phaedrus*. Find my Platonic warnings sufficient atonement for the impediments that a writing such as this may present to me and to my readers. For it is not through the words or writings of Lysias, Plato, or any other person that we shall uncover who we are or how best to live, but only by remaining sensitive to Beauty and to Love, and through those conversations furnished us by their friendship.

SYMPOSIUM

Subject: Love (Eros).

Mode: Narrative, Apollodorus to anonymous inquirer many years after the event.

Setting: 416, the house of Agathon.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Apollodorus.

Aristodemus.

Phaedrus.

Pausanias.

Eryximachus.

Aristophanes.

Agathon.

Diotima.

Alcibiades.

SHORT OUTLINE

SYMPOSIUM SHORT OUTLINE

- 172a-178a: **Introduction:**
Apollodorus and friend(s) (172a-174a).
Apollodorus' account of Aristodemus' account (174a-178a):
Aristodemus encounters Socrates (174a-d).
The dinner (174a-176d).
Drunkenness and love (176a-178a).
- 178a-180c: **Phaedrus' speech.**
- 180c-185c: **Pausanias' speech.**
Aristophanes' hiccups (185c-e).
- 185e-188e: **Eryximachus' speech.**
Eryximachus and Aristophanes (188e-189c).
- 189c-193d: **Aristophanes' speech.**
Socrates and Agathon (193e-194e).
- 194e-107e: **Agathon's speech.**
Socrates and Agathon (198a-201c).
- 201d-212c: **Socrates' speech:**
Socrates and Diotima (201d-e).
Diotima's account (201e-212b):
The origin and nature of Eros (201e-204c).
The object of love (204d-206a).
The function of Eros (206b-207a).
The cause of Eros (207a-209e).
The ladder of love (209e-212b).
Socrates' peroration (212b-c).
Enter Alcibiades (212c-215a).
- 215a-222b: **Alcibiades' speech:**
Socrates the satyr (215a-216c).
Alcibiades attempts to seduce Socrates (216c-219e).
Socrates at war (219e-221c).
Alcibiades' peroration (221c-222b).
- 222c-223b: **The end of the evening.**

[DETAILED OUTLINE](#)

SYMPOSIUM⁴⁶
DETAILED OUTLINE

- 172a-178a: **INTRODUCTION:**
172a-174a: Apollodorus, our narrator, heard about the dinner from Aristodemus, an especially zealous lover of Socrates (ἐραστής ὢν ἐν τοῖς μάλιστα τῶν τότε).
He later confirmed some of Aristodemus' story with Socrates himself.
- 174a-178a: **Apollodorus' account of Aristodemus account:**
174a-d: **Aristodemus encounters Socrates:**
Socrates invites Aristodemus to accompany him to Agathon's dinner party.
Socrates lost in thought (τὸν...Σωκράτη ἑαυτῷ πως προσέχοντα τὸν νοῦν).
- 174d-175e: **Agathon's house:**
Aristodemus arrives alone.
Socrates is standing on a neighbor's porch unresponsive to his calls.
Socrates finally appears and pronounces his wisdom paltry (φάυλη), as dubious as a dream (ἀμφισβητήσιμος ὥσπερ ὄναρ οὔσα).
Agathon accuses Socrates of being hubristic (ὕβριστής).
Dionysus will soon be the judge of their wisdom.
- 176a-178a: **Drunkness and love:**
The guests agree to drink moderately.
Eryximachus suggests that the guests speak in praise of Eros, beginning with Phaedrus, the father of the discourse (πατήρ τοῦ λόγου).⁴⁷
Socrates understands nothing but matters of love (οὐδέν φημι ἄλλο ἐπίστασθαι ἢ τὰ ἐρωτικά).
- 178a: **Memory:**
Aristodemus did not recall all that the speakers said, and Apollodorus himself does not recall all that Aristodemus reported to him. He will relate what seemed to him most memorable.
- 178a-180c: **PHAEDRUS' SPEECH:**
Eros is a great god (μέγας θεός).
Of the gods he is (one of) the most ancient (πρεσβύτατος).
Love inspires erotic partners (ἐραστής... παιδικά) to live well, for in striving after one another's regard they perform noble deeds and avoid shameful acts.
Achilles and Patroclus.
When it comes to helping men to attain virtue and eudaimonia, Eros is the oldest, most honored, and most powerful of the gods (θεῶν καὶ πρεσβύτατον καὶ τιμιώτατον καὶ κυριώτατον).
- 180c-185c: **PAUSANIAS' SPEECH:**
Eros, like Aphrodite, is double:

⁴⁶ The word "symposium" comes from the Greek, συμπόσιον. It means, literally, a drinking-party.

⁴⁷ Compare *Phaedrus* 257b2.

One Eros attends upon Ouranian (Heavenly) Aphrodite, the motherless child of Ouranos.

The other Eros is associated with Pandemian (Common) Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus and Dione.

The love associated with Ouranian Aphrodite is directed exclusively to boys and is dedicated to virtue and honorable deeds.

This love is noble.

The love associated with Pandemian Aphrodite desires females as well as males and seeks nothing but physical gratification.

This love is base.

Athenian custom encourages the older lover in his attempts to woo his beloved while discouraging the boy from giving in.

This promotes a sort of contest whereby each man reveals whether he is devoted to Ouranian or Pandemian Eros.

The Athenians approve of any actions performed by those devoted to Ouranian Eros.

Noble lovers conduct themselves dedicate themselves to virtue.

185c-e : **Aristophanes' hiccups:**

Aristophanes, who was to speak next, is overcome by hiccups.

Eryximachus speaks in his place:

185e-188e: **ERYXIMACHUS' SPEECH:**

Love is indeed double.

Love affects all forms of life and indeed all things, human as well as divine.

Harmony between opposites is necessary for the attainment of the good in all domains.

Love has the power to produce this harmony.

Love that aims at the good accompanied by moderation and justice promotes harmonious associations among men, and between men and gods.

This Love is responsible for human happiness (εὐδαιμονία).

188e-189c: **Eryximachus and Aristophanes:**

Aristophanes and Eryximachus exchange barbs and mock threats.

189c-193d: **ARISTOPHANES' SPEECH:**

Love secures for men their greatest happiness (μεγίστη εὐδαιμονία).

Men who descend from original androgynous beings love women.

Women who descend from the double-female types love other women.

Men who descend from the double-male types love other men.

From this last type come the best and most courageous

(βέλτιστοι... ἀνδρειότατοι) boys and adolescents.

Therefore, we should encourage all men to make Eros their guide and commander (ἡγεμῶν καὶ στρατηγός).

The human race will be happy (τὸ γένος εὐδαιμον) if men and women locate their lovers and restore their original nature.

Therefore, we must revere the gods in the hope that Eros will heal our original nature and make us blessed and happy (μακαρίους καὶ εὐδαίμονας).

- 193e-194e: **Socrates and Agathon:**
Eryximachus pronounces Agathon and Socrates experts in matters of love (δεινοῖς οὔσι περὶ τὰ ἐρωτικά).
Socrates worries about speaking after Agathon.
Agathon accuses Socrates of trying to bewitch and disturb him before he speaks (φαρμάττειν βούλει με...ἵνα θορυβηθῶ).
- 194e-197e: **AGATHON'S SPEECH:**
Eros is the happiest, noblest, and best of the gods (εὐδαιμονέστατον...κάλλιστον...καὶ ἄριστον).
Eros is the youngest of the gods, beautiful, and virtuous.
Because of Eros and the love of beauty all good things come to men and gods.
Eros is, in short, our best captain, guide, protector, and savior.
- 198a-201c: **Socrates and Agathon:**
Socrates thought the proper mode of speech should involve telling the truth about one's subject.
Now he realizes that the object is to deliver a eulogy in which style takes precedence over truth.
Nevertheless, he must speak according to the truth as he understands it.
- 199b-201c: Socrates establishes a few preliminary points by interrogating Agathon:
Love is always love *of* something.
That which one loves one also desires.
One lacks that which one loves and desires.
Therefore, we may infer from Agathon's claim that among the gods there is no love of the ugly (from which we may infer that Eros loves beauty) that Eros lacks beauty.
Moreover, since good things are beautiful Eros lacks goods as well.
- 201d-212c: **SOCRATES' SPEECH:**
- 201d-e: **Socrates and Diotima:**
Diotima taught Socrates about love (τὰ ἐρωτικά).
- 201e-212b: **Diotima's account:**
- 201e-204c: **The origin and nature of Eros:**
Eros is neither good, nor beautiful, nor a great god (μέγας θεός).
Eros, the child of Need (πενία) and Bounty (πόρος), is a great spirit (δαίμων μέγας); He is a philosopher, a devious enchanter, a medicine man, and a sophist (φιλοσοφῶν διὰ παντὸς τοῦ βιοῦ δεινὸς γόης καὶ φαρμακεὺς καὶ σοφιστής).
Eros seeks wisdom, for wisdom is the most beautiful of things and Eros loves beauty.
Eros is necessarily a philosopher (ἀναγκαῖον ἔρωτα φιλόσοφον εἶναι).
- 204d-206a: **The object of love:**
Lovers desire good things.

- The possession of good things makes one happy (εὐδαίμων).
 All men desire to be happy always.
 Therefore, love is the desire to possess the good forever.
- 206b-207a: **The function of Eros:**
 Love's function is physical and spiritual birth in beauty (τόκος ἐν καλῷ καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψύχην).
 Generation is a mortal's source of immortality.
 Therefore, love is our desire to be immortal.
- 207a-209e: **The cause of Eros:**
 Everything mortal is impermanent.
 Mortal beings approach permanence and continued existence through their offspring.
 Men who are physically pregnant desire women and physical offspring.
 Men who are pregnant in their souls desire to give birth to wisdom and the other virtues (φρόνησιν τε καὶ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρετήν).
 The greatest and noblest form of wisdom (μεγίστη...καλλίστη τῆς φρονήσεως) concerns the regulation of cities and households and is called moderation and justice (σοφρώσυνη τε καὶ δικαιοσύνη).
 Whoever is pregnant with these virtues seeks out a boy who is beautiful in body and soul in order to teach him about virtue and the nature and practices of a good man. His lessons are his offspring.
- 209e-212b: **The Ladder of Love:**
 The mysteries and initiatory rites of Eros (τὰ τέλεα καὶ εποπτικά):
 1) love of a single body;
 2) love of all beautiful bodies;
 3) love of beautiful souls, ways of life, and laws;
 4) love of the various branches of knowledge.
 He who contemplates this broad sea of beauty will give birth to many beautiful and magnificent discourses and thoughts in bounteous philosophy (καλοὺς λόγους καὶ μεγαλοπρεπεῖς τίκτη καὶ διανοήματα ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ ἀφθόνῳ).
 5) love the beautiful itself, the singular and eternal source of every manifestation of beauty (αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ μεθ' αὐτοῦ μονοειδὲς αἰὲ ὄν, τὰ δὲ ἄλλα πάντα καλὰ ἐκείνου μετέχοντα).
 The vision of this beauty enables a man to give birth to true virtue rather than to mere images of virtue (οὐκ εἶδωλα ἀρετῆς...ἀλλὰ ἀληθῆ).
 He becomes beloved of the gods (θεοφιλεῖ) and, to the extent that this is possible for a human, immortal.
- 212b-c: **Socrates' peroration:**
 Socrates was persuaded by Diotima's lessons, and from that day he has tried to persuade others that nothing is better for humans than Eros.
- 212c-215a: **Enter Alcibiades:**
 Alcibiades arrives drunk, shouting, and crowned with ivy and ribbons.
 After exchanging words with Agathon and Socrates, and crowning them both, he accepts Eryximachus' proposal to praise Socrates.
- 215a-222b: **ALCIBIADES' SPEECH:**
- 215a-216c: **Socrates the satyr:**

Socrates is like a statue of Silenus, a small figure depicting the famous satyr holding a musical instrument, which when opened to reveals an image of one of the gods (ἀγάλματα...θεῶν).

Socrates is hubristic (ὕβριστης).

Socrates charms (ἐκῆλει) men, causing them to be possessed (κατέχεσθαι) and revealing their need of gods and the mysteries (τῶν θεῶν τε καὶ τελετῶν).

Socrates alone of all men makes Alcibiades believe that his life is a waste and not worth living.

216c-219e: **Alcibiades attempts to seduce Socrates:**

Socrates' erotic passion for beautiful young men (ἐρωτικῶς δικάκειται τῶν καλῶν) is an ironic pose (εἰρωνευόμενος).

Alcibiades once peered inside the philosopher, and what he saw was divine, golden, beautiful, and amazing (θεῖα καὶ χρυσᾶ...πάγκαλα καὶ θαυμαστά).

Alcibiades tells of his many unsuccessful attempts to seduce Socrates and of his admiration of the philosopher's moderation and courage.

219e-221c: **Socrates at war:**

Alcibiades and Socrates at Potidaea:

Socrates impervious to hunger, intoxicating drinks, and cold weather.

On Socrates' amazing powers of concentration: once when pondering something he stood in one spot and did not budge from dawn until the following morning.

On Socrates' extraordinary bravery during battle: he saved Alcibiades' life at Potidaea and exhibited amazing courage during the Athenians' retreat from Delium.⁴⁸

221c-222b: **Alcibiades' peroration:**

Socrates is like nothing so much as a satyr: his discourses are like the statues of Silenus mentioned previously: at first they sound ridiculous, but on reflection they reveal the most divine images of virtue. They are indispensable to anyone who hopes to become a gentleman (καλῶ κάγαθῶ).

Socrates deceives men into believing that he loves them: in the end it is he who is the object of their love.

222c-223b: **THE END OF THE EVENING:**

Socrates, Agathon, and Alcibiades argue about seating arrangements. A noisy band of revelers enters the room and the party gradually winds down

At dawn Aristodemus awakes to overhear Socrates compelling (προσαναγκάζειν) Agathon and Aristophanes to admit that knowledge of comedy and tragedy is the function of one and the same man.

Eventually Aristophanes and Agathon both fall asleep.

Socrates leaves and passes the rest of the day in his usual manner.

⁴⁸ Laches recalls this retreat at *Laches* 181b. For more on Socrates' military career see "[Socrates as Hoplite](#)."

SYMPOSIUM INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

In her incredible prefatory remarks to the *Symposium* included in her edition of Plato's collected works, Edith Hamilton writes confidently, "There is little need for any introduction to it and no need for any explanation. It presents no difficulties" (p. 526).⁴⁹ With all due respect, even Leo Strauss felt compelled to observe for his classes that the *Symposium* is the only dialogue of the Platonic corpus commemorating "an occasion" and that it is the highest star in the trinity of dialogues concerning love and friendship. The other two are the *Phaedrus* and the *Lysis*. More to the point, however, is this: every Platonic dialogue is richer than a reader suspects. The *Symposium* is no exception.

The *Symposium* needs an introduction more than most Platonic dialogues because the average reader today has little knowledge of its complex historical layering. The dramatic frame of the dialogue looks to the Athenian past even as it simultaneously gestures toward future events that will have become part of Athenian history by the time Plato publishes it. Moreover, a wide and stormy gulf separates the moral attitudes of the modern reader from those prominent men portrayed by Plato in the dialogue. Athens venerated friendship among men, but our cultural practices have shrunk the acceptable forms male relationships can take; we heap everything from suspicion to taboo on whatever falls outside the accepted norm. A teaspoon of both Athenian history and culture will enable us to better appreciate the significance of both the frame and the friendships displayed in the dialogue.

Let us begin with teaspoon of Greek history first; then, a teaspoon of Athenian culture.

⁴⁹ *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: 1961).

The opening frame situates this dialogue within a significant historical context. Even if the gathering did not occur, or not exactly as Plato depicts it, the dialogue presents us with a dramatic reenactment of events that surely did occur in the homes of talented and educated Athenian men who were concerned for their friendships, their youth, and their city. Most of those who speak in the dialogue were actual, living breathing people known by reputation to the larger populace of Athens. Aristophanes, Eryximachus, Agathon, Alcibiades, Pausanias, Phaedrus, and of course, Socrates: these were actual people. Part of the force of this dialogue concerns what happened to these men.

Dramatically speaking, the gathering occurs in the year 416 at the home of the poet Agathon on the night following his first prize award for the best performed tragedy at the Lenaea, a winter religious festival honoring the god Dionysus. Agathon's celebratory dinner party provides the setting. The dinner is an intimate, but (mostly) sober, encore of a wild and drunken celebration that followed his victory the night before. Those who reconvened at Agathon's home on that second night are prominent men with strong ties of friendship and with deep roots in the Athenian way of life.

Yet between the following year, 415, and 411 several of the convivial guests present at that party will have become *personae non gratae* in Athens; others will have been dragged through the courts charged with impiety; some will be dead; the glorious Alcibiades will have been denounced and exiled as a traitor. Agathon himself will leave Athens a few years later. People who formerly knew and admired these men will have deserted them. People will talk about them in whispers.

Almost a decade passes...

Then, in 407, the capricious Athenians re-embrace the most illustrious and notorious of the former party guests, Alcibiades. They recall him to Athens, elect him

general, and he returns to open arms and cheering mobs. Famously, he leads the great religious procession to Eleusis. His name is on everyone's lips.

But the reconciliation does not last. Scant months later, the Athenians relieve Alcibiades of his duties and he abandons the city to her fate. A few years later still, at the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War, he is murdered.

The frame of the *Symposium* is set around 400. It is set against the historical gee and haw of Athenian affection for Alcibiades, his murder, and the need to understand how the events that followed from 416 actually unfolded. Those with the keenest interest in such matters would likely be those for whom rumor, innuendo, and gossip were the primary source material: the youth.

The dialogue's opening lines introduce us to young Athenian men who were mere babies when Agathon's victory party took place. These young men have grown up hearing snatches of conversation about those present at the party, especially Alcibiades, infamous for his alleged impiety, political treason, and later triumphant return. His untimely murder increases their interest. As Athenians they are trying to understand their city; whatever the symposiasts did is relevant to that endeavor. The opening lines of the dialogue, then, reveal a deep curiosity and interest in the fortunes of this older generation.

Our speaker is the young Apollodorus, a second generation, but thoroughly devoted, follower of Socrates. He has been asked by a peer what he knows about Agathon's party at which the famous guests spoke of love. Apollodorus doesn't seem the least bit surprised to be asked, even though he has only just been asked the very same question the day before by another young man, Glaucon. We should note at once this collective curiosity and the lengths to which these young men will go in order to piece together information about their famous elders. Glaucon had received sketchy and incomplete information from someone else, who had gathered what he knew from

someone named Phoenix, who had heard something about it from Aristodemus, who had been present for the party in his youth as a spur of the moment, but otherwise uninvited, guest of Socrates. Apollodorus complains to his companion that he had to set Glaucon straight about the historical timeline. It was not a recent party.

Young Apollodorus confides that he first heard about the party from an uninvited eyewitness who had tagged along with Socrates that night: Aristodemus. It was probably through Aristodemus that young Apollodorus met Socrates. That personal introduction afforded him the opportunity to verify the details with Socrates himself. We know that Apollodorus has only been a follower of Socrates for less than three years. By implication, though, Aristodemus has maintained his friendship with Socrates for over 16 years; their friendship may have solidified through the speeches at the party and the turbulent events that followed. Male friendships in Athens forged intergenerational webs and circular bonds: Socrates to young Aristodemus; mature Aristodemus to our young speaker Apollodorus; young Apollodorus to an aging Socrates. A brief year from now, Apollodorus will be among those weeping in Socrates' cell at sunset when the philosopher drinks the poison. But Apollodorus doesn't know that of course.

There were no newspapers or history books for the youth to consult for reliable information. Athenian adults were starkly divided in their opinions concerning the previous decade and the men involved, both on ideological grounds and because the years in question coincided with the tumultuous Peloponnesian War. This long war caused ruptures in the Athenian's sense of his city's past and greatly increased his anxiety for her future. His city's inexplicable attitude toward these men together with recent events would perplex any youth trying to discover how to establish and take up a viable place in the city. This is an important educational concern and it runs deep in the dialogue we are about to consider.

Finally, Plato did not begin to write dialogues until after Socrates' death in 399. The historical leverage of the *Symposium* must have been emotionally significant, for when the Athenians nested this dialogue within their collective memory, it presented them with a vivid and compelling image of their city's mercurial character over time. Agathon has fled; Alcibiades has been murdered; Socrates has been executed. Many of the others present at Agathon's home in 416 have been treated shabbily indeed. Plato's dialogue must have forced his readers to judge whether men capable of these speeches deserved such treatment.

Alcibiades' case is particularly acute. Ward of the great man Pericles and the most beautiful youth of his day, he was not yet fifty years old when he was murdered. That puts him in his thirties, beautiful and powerful, on the night he crashed the party at Agathon's home. His drunken speech at the otherwise sober party is his stirring confession that Socrates was the first true love of his life. Moreover, his words thoroughly vindicate Socrates from any sexual innuendos attending the charge that he corrupted the youth. They also vindicate Socratic piety and celebrate his bravery and temperance.

As the astute Athenian reads between the lines of this dialogue, then, his own attitudes toward each of these men, as well as toward the events of the past, will shift in him uncomfortably. Shame over his city's caprice will work its way to consciousness.

Plato's *Symposium* serves up a clever rebuke to the Athenian conscience.

Now, a teaspoon of Athenian culture:

Some hear the word "homo-erotic" in connection with the *Symposium* and erroneously take it to mean "homosexual." Without passing judgment on our present kaleidoscope of opinions concerning homosexuality, I believe that any reader of Plato

who is ignorant of the Greek educational system cannot understand the term “homosexual” as Athenians understood it.

Athenian mothers and other women of the *oikos* reared the city’s girls in the home where special quarters were set aside for women. Young Athenian girls learned how to manage the estate, direct servants, weave, cook, and perform other domestic skills and religious duties. They learned their function in the life of the city. Correlatively, Athenian men played complex and collective roles in the education and training of young boys. Fathers were not enough: they might be statesmen, or seamen, or men whose business took them out of Athens for long stretches of time. Thus the general education of male children was every adult man’s civic responsibility; such an education attached a boy first to his extended male relatives, then spread out and fixed his attachments and acquaintances through the deme structure, and then more broadly fanned them out through a series of male tutors and schools run by Athenian men for the benefit of the boys.

Throughout adolescence, the young men were kept well apart from the young women they would eventually wed, for what should be obvious reasons. But these young boys had the same level of testosterone that any adolescent male today has. What did they do with it? The adult males of Athens were charged to help the boys through these painful and crazy years by supervising and channeling their emotional energy and physical drives into productive, healthy relationships that would eventually position them to assume their roles of political and cultural leadership. Because such development does not occur spontaneously, Athenian boys were not left to their own devices. Unattended, undisciplined boys would have been unable to reach the cultural aspirations of courage, honor, and integrity the city prided itself on producing in the youth. Unsupervised packs of idle youth would have screamed adult indifference and would have been seen as the

equivalent of letting the blind lead the blind through a cultural vacuum. Therefore, wherever the boys went—whether passing through sweaty locker rooms or lingering outside a palaestra—they confronted men concerned with their lives, men who did not mind associating with them. It was part of adult male responsibility to be concerned and attentive.⁵⁰ Young Athenian boys had easy and constant contact with a wide assortment of older men who engaged and mentored their progress through life. These men ran the gamut from true teachers to false.

Ideally, young Athenian males were surrounded and tutored by older men who made it their business to know the boys' family lineages, who nurtured their talents, who befriended them, took them under their wings, and supervised their maturation. In the best cases, their developing friendships were layered year over year; they acquired a more nuanced structure than that provided by so called "male-bonding" exercises of the sort the American poet Robert Bly has advocated for American men. Bly envisions groups of men and boys romping off into the woods for a weekend, playing tom toms and howling at the moon for a night or two. A genuine commitment to male maturation, *pace* Mr. Bly, manifests itself over a lifetime, not through one or two nights in the woods.

Athenian men were constantly attentive to the religious, social, artistic, musical, military, moral, and physical training of their youth. They encouraged the boys' natural gifts whenever and wherever they found them. They experienced affection, pride, and excitement in the progress of their young protégés, who felt in turn gratitude, affection, and admiration for the men who guided them. That sometimes these close relationships became erotically or sexually charged is due both to male social interdependence and to the admiration and affection they felt for each other. But for most men, such erotic

⁵⁰ See, for example, the opening lines of the *Theaetetus*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Euthydemus*, and *Lysis*

affections were culturally understood as temporary, if necessary, steps in the maturation process of the youth.

Did erotic encounters, however frequent or widespread, between the youth and the men make them all a bunch of homosexual deviants? Of course not. Upon reaching a suitable age, young men were expected to, and certainly did, marry the girls of Athens, just as their adult counterparts had done before them. The marriages produced children, grandchildren, and extended lasting families that secured the next generation of Athenian citizens and Athenian culture.

The average age of marriage for a young girl was 16 years old; her husband was probably in his early 30s—and if Plato had had his way, it would have been set by law between 30 and 35 (*Laws*, 721b). This huge age difference seems incredible to us, but it helped ensure that the groom was an adult in all significant ways and that he was, biologically at least, well past the age of experiencing uncontrollable or impulsive sexual desires. The educational arrangements would have also ensured that the groom's talents and virtues would have had time to develop and mature; he would have been able to marshal evidence of these talents. His mentors would have been able to attest to his maturity and reliability as a husband. Potential brides could have relied on a secure and protected future. Nothing approaching such widespread confidence attends our marriages today.

In sum, then, by undertaking the education of the boys, the men of Athens tried to prevent the emotional angst or phony bravado that today distorts relations between teenage girls and boys. Their early and long participation in the life of the boys helped to preserve the peace and sanity of the domestic sphere. By the time the young man was of proper age to marry, his teenage fiancée and her family had good reason to trust that he had learned both self control and respect for his duties to family and city. The evidence

securing this trust derived from the male educational system. Through it, the youth had earned the appropriate credentials: he understood full well that his young wife was due his respect and protection, and that everyone expected him to perform his civic duties to the future sons and daughters born of the marriage. As a man and husband, he would have made himself available to the rising youth in much the same way that mentoring adults had formerly made themselves available to him when he was growing up.

All this is not to say, however, that every encounter between adult males and their young protégés always ran true, or that the mentors were always successful guardians of these Athenian ideals and hopes. There was a subterranean stream of continuing concern and tacit acknowledgement that pedophilia or other erotic abuses of their educational customs could occur and that these abuses could sully or warp the ideal. Athenian men were fully aware that other cultures either didn't care about such sexual license or stigmatized it to the point of driving it underground. (Our own culture does both of these things at the same time.) The male adult speakers in the *Symposium* know and appreciate the tightrope they are walking. They know that unbridled sexual gratification is a temptation that must be resisted, restrained, and trained to useful ends.

But how?

The *Symposium* as whole suggests that male erotic attachments require a reasoned *logos* in order to earn cultural sanction and approval; erotic attachments that lack this sanction are apt to become iniquitous, damaging, and culturally explosive. The explicit purpose of the *Symposium* is to praise Eros, but by implication the praise defends and justifies the male-male Athenian educational system and the erotic restraint it urges. The speeches distinguish and defend the Athenian educational and cultural practices from criticism of other cultures, including, by implication, our own.

The lingering question for us is whether our methods of managing the eroticism of youth have any of the reasoned, articulate aspirations presented by the speakers in the *Symposium*. I think not. In our culture we issue stern admonitions and then throw our teenage girls and boys together with little supervision—and we are dismayed to find that this simply does not work. When our boys and girls grow up and have their own children, they repeat their parents' mistakes. Ours is a slipshod method; we mismanage eros; and generation after generation we pay a civic as well as a personal price for that error. The teeming offices of therapists and the stacks of self-help books testify to our continuing and widespread incompetence.

Reading the *Symposium* against our cultural background of absent or distracted fathers and single or divorced mothers and saturated by a pervasive hyper-sexualized climate, we may misconstrue the cultural fabric supporting the efforts of the dialogue's speakers. These symposiasts are men, products of the Athenian educational system themselves, submitting their erotic and cultural practices to reflective scrutiny in the presence of their young charges and hearing from them in turn. Their shared goal is to examine and arrive at some understanding of their own honored attachments within a cultural practice saturated with ideals that are largely foreign to us. One can barely imagine an American teenager listening to respected adults converse about love, sex, and friendship at a dinner table. Most of our teenagers would rather die than be subjected to such a discourse, much less participate in it. This gulf of silence separating our generations is one reason a good Athenian might question our cultural traditions. We say that love and friendship are among the supreme blessings of life, but we do little to teach or engage the youth in their accomplishment. It happens, if it does, by some sort of chance, miracle, or magic.

The willingness of the adults at Agathon's table to scrutinize eros fits them well within the cultural aspirations of their city. Each speaker, in his own way, is aware of his duty and is trying to be responsible to the gods, to the city, to his friends at the table, and to the young men present. None of the speakers envisions that theirs is some sort of perverted sex club. Raw sexual encounters, after all, do not require cultural sanction and cannot maintain a *logos*: our being animals with animal drives would suffice if that were the case; and we wouldn't have the dialogue in the first place if the Athenians had thought about the erotic in that way. Every man at Agathon's table who praises eros either expressly or by implication denounces unbridled, merely animal sexual activities—not because they were sexual puritans, but because such activities would have been a confession of their utter failure to perform their primary social and educational duties to the next generation of young men.

Unlike today's male ethos, men made men in Athens. To be a good man, one had to learn to put his sexual life in the same sort of harmony and order as his political, financial, or domestic life for the good of the city. The task was to become and remain a flourishing adult. Each speaker, save Alcibiades, attempts to provide an ethical, theoretical, and metaphysical ground for the value of eros and the part it plays in Athenian customs and success, knowing that such success cannot be treated as a foregone conclusion. Even Alcibiades recognizes the value of the cultural task, however much his speech provides a dramatic illustration of erotic attachments gone awry.

Raising boys wasn't easy then and it isn't easy now. But Athenian men believed that theirs was a system that protected young men from dissolution and protected their daughters' futures as well; they knew their custom was not without risks for the particular parties involved, but it was worth the risks. They also knew other cultural practices existed in other cities; but after considered judgment, they believed that their system

nourished the promise of each boy and protected each girl in such a way that together they might become productive citizens. In this endeavor, they honored the god of love, not simply in speech, but in practice.

Readers of the *Symposium* err badly if they think they think they are discovering a buried declaration of gay rights; they err even more egregiously if they construe the speeches as the dark Freudian confessions of self-deluded men who are trying to wash their hands of sexual shame. Such shallow interpretations say much more about us and our paltry understanding of friendship and eros than it could ever say about the *Symposium*. Charity and reason require us to read these speeches as the Athenian attempt to submit erotic attachments to reasoned reflection without either hubris or shame. The men correct, elaborate, and attempt to improve each other's accounts. In this way each speech becomes a speaker's attempt to match his words to his deeds and match them both to Athenian aspirations.

Now:

With these initial remarks behind us, we can begin to agree with Edith Hamilton. The dialogue reads easily because the speakers take turns presenting their praise as well as their unique views of Eros. Much that the men say actually echoes our own deep beliefs, which is uncanny given the span of time and cultural distance separating us from fifth-century Athens. Dramatically, however, there are important symbolic and semi-religious themes unique to Athens that attend the evening as well; it is to these we now turn.

Agathon has won a tremendous victory at the festival of Dionysus. In keeping with the customs attending that god's gifts to men, the poet and his friends celebrate by becoming raucously and thoroughly drunk. Understandably, they want this shining

moment to last. The celebrants agree to gather at Agathon's home for dinner the following evening to attempt to preserve a fleeting moment of shared jubilation.

Socrates was not present for the first night's revelry, but he arrives for the encore having washed and donned his fanciest footwear. With him is the youth Aristodemus, whom he encountered on the road and spontaneously invited to accompany him. When Socrates finally enters the gathering, having kept everyone waiting while he meditated outside, he and Agathon argue amicably about the nature of wisdom. Agathon finally jokes that Dionysus will have to adjudicate the matter. The rest of the company complains of being a bit hung over from the night before and so they agree to remain sober and to pass the night in conversation.

Eryximachus informs the others of his young friend Phaedrus' frequent complaints that no one speaks or sings hymns to the god Eros. To deflect perplexity in one's friends is part of the fabric of friendship. But in this case it is the friendship of a youth with an older male that supplies a slight urgency to that perplexity. Note that Eryximachus did not skirt Phaedrus' question. He did not tell Phaedrus that this was just the way we do things here in Athens; nor did he keep it a private worry between themselves. Rather, he shares his young friend's dissatisfaction with others and suggests that they try to remedy their inattention by eulogizing Eros in turn.

It is not lost on the adult men at the table that all the gods require their devotion and attention. If Phaedrus is right, they have unwittingly dishonored Eros. So even though the official sponsor of Agathon's victory and gathering is Dionysus, god of wine, the company decides to praise the god of love.

The men settle on an obvious order for speakers around the table, beginning with Phaedrus, whose wonder their conversation will attempt to address. Socrates is thrilled by the selected subject but a bit apprehensive about the order, which requires him to speak

last. He nervously protests that even though this is the one god about whom he knows much, the order of the speeches is such that he will have nothing new to say by the time his turn arrives.

When his time finally arrives, though, Socrates all but accuses the others of having lied in their accounts; he protests that he does not know how to praise Eros given their web of rhetorical flattery. To fulfill his obligation, though, and to instruct the young men sitting beside them, he offers to repeat what he learned of love from a wise and powerful Mantinean woman, Diotima.

This speech-within-a-speech is often referred to as the “Ladder of Love.” It portrays a female articulation of the Athenian hope that male sexual ardor can be transformed, step by step, from love between individual men, into a love of civic wholesomeness, and finally into broad metaphysical enlightenment and devotion. It is not without irony that it is a woman’s voice that instructs the men at the table through Socrates, nor that their well-intentioned *logoi* have fallen short of articulating the tie between eros and Athenian cultural ideals. Socrates’ speech defends and honors the pedagogical aspect of homo-erotic love in so far as it leads to a realized cultural and religious goodness. Love is always love of the good.

Just as his friends at the party are beginning to consider Socrates’ account, a second uninvited guest appears in the courtyard attended by flutes and laughter. The men inside recognize the shouting, singing, joyful, drunken voice of Alcibiades. The beautiful, unpredictable Alcibiades has arrived in the yard demanding to see Agathon immediately. And suddenly “he stood in the doorway crowned with a thick wreath of ivy and violets and ribbons upon his head (212d7-e2).

Like the uninvited Aristodemus, Alcibiades is, or anyway was, a close associate of Socrates. We should pause to consider the subtle dramatic contrast that will have

emerged between the life of Alcibiades as compared to the life of Aristodemus. Both were friends of Socrates. How differently their lives turned out.

Alcibiades' entrance is the arrival of Dionysus himself. True to Agathon's earlier prophecy to Socrates that the god would decide the question between them, Alcibiades removes from his head his enormous wreath of ivy and violets, streaming gloriously with ribbons, intending to place it on Agathon's head like a crown. But upon seeing Socrates he removes some of the ribbons and crowns Socrates, too. Even as Alcibiades settles himself between the two men, the erotic banter and tension between the mentor and his former associate is palpable.

When Alcibiades learns that the men have been eulogizing Eros, he confesses uninhibitedly that he has never been able to praise either gods or men in the presence of Socrates. At this, the men give Alcibiades their good natured permission to eulogize Socrates instead. Thus begins Alcibiades' account of his personal experience of the erotic nature of the Athenian system. He dares Socrates to contradict a single word, but Socrates remains silent throughout.

Unlike the previous theoretical, universalized, and metaphysical accounts offered by Socrates and the others in the room, Alcibiades' account reminds the men that their fine theories of erotic love always miss, or dismiss, what is personally experienced as a bewitching, frustrating, heartfelt encounter. Eros turns one's soul and life upside down. In Alcibiades we finally confront an unflinching devotion to the concrete that rejects the theoretical and embraces the particular. Eros finally grows roots into real life.

Love always possesses a distinct, particular personality, color, and hue that defy abstraction; friendship is never a one-size-fits-all proposition. Alcibiades' stance implies a rejection of any theory or *logos* of love that denies its full immediacy. Only particulars matter to him. Only specific opportunities and challenges, only specific moments of joy

or pain truly exist. This is the confession of the immediate man whose first small step onto the Ladder of Love has haunted him for life. He took that step with Socrates. In his way, then, Alcibiades exposes the honest dangers all love and friendship carry with them.

In fully personal terms, he announces the grounds of his admiration for Socrates' nobility, bravery, intelligence, and temperance. He remembers and confesses that as his appreciation of Socrates grew, so did his erotic desire and shame before him. He recalls how the philosopher rebuffed his advances and dashed his hopes of erotic seduction. He finally confesses that it was only in the presence of Socrates that he ever felt his life held worth and meaning; but given Socrates' erotic reserve, their friendship was not enough to satisfy his ambitions. Such memories must have been painful; we are meant to be glad that Alcibiades is drunk.

Like so many other aristocratic young men, Alcibiades craved honor and esteem. He felt he had to make a concrete choice and he chose the path of honor, war, and erotic gratification. Time would eventually reveal the tragic consequences of that choice. Socrates had tried to urge Alcibiades up the ladder of love toward a life of philosophic love and virtue. He failed.

Moments after Alcibiades concludes his recollections, a group of riotous revelers appears in the courtyard and barges into the room disrupting what is left of the calm sobriety of the gathering. The conversation is suspended and Agathon's home turns quickly into party central—just as Dionysus himself would have demanded.

Hours later, near daybreak, Aristodemus groggily awakes to the murmuring voices of Socrates, Aristophanes, and Agathon still in conversation. Socrates was insisting to the sleepy poets that a talented author should be able to write comedy as well as tragedy. As the two poets nod off, Socrates gently tucks them in and takes his leave to begin another day. The significance of Socrates' assertion is self-reflexive. The

Symposium may be just the sort of encomium to love that Socrates was urging on the two sleepy poets as the sun rose that morning: an encomium rich in both comedy and tragedy.

The *Symposium* examines the theory as it enacts the practice that attended the erotic education of young men. Socrates' speech develops a fuller and more abstract understanding of love than his friends were able to articulate. But set against them all, Alcibiades warns that a *logos* of the erotic is bound to fail if it ignores the concrete, actual individuals involved. Any true account of love, then, must embrace extremes: theory and practice, success and failure, and the comedy as well as the tragedy that erotic love generates. This dialogue is a dramatic enactment of the noble aspirations, the surprising disruptions, the exhilarating joys, and the lingering pains that accompany friendship and love. Despite these extremes, the *Symposium* firmly endorses the sticky, silvery, beautiful, and painful threads of intergenerational devotion in all of its comic and tragic complexity.

ION

Subject: Poetry and knowledge.

Mode: Dramatic.

Setting: 413, Athens.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Ion.

SHORT OUTLINE

ION SHORT OUTLINE

- 530a-531a: **Ion the rhapsode:**
Socrates and Ion (530a-b).
Socrates flatters Ion (530b-531a).
- 531a-535a: **Knowledge versus divine inspiration:**
Ion and Homer (531a-532b).
Ion lacks knowledge (532c-533c).
Ion and the divine (the magnet) (533c-535a).
- 535b-536a: **Divine Possession:**
Ion possessed (535b-536d).
Ion denies possession (536d-e).
- 536e-540d: **Knowing and speaking:**
We speak well about what we know (536e-538a).
Ion does not know much (538b-539d).
Ion claims to know what is fitting to say (539d-540b).
Ion does not know this (540b-d).
- 540d-541e: **Ion the general:**
Ion claims that a good rhapsode is a good general (540d-541b).
Ion claims to be the best general in Greece (541b-e).
- 541e-542b: **Ion the divine.**

[DETAILED OUTLINE](#)

ION DETAILED OUTLINE

- 530a-531a: **ION THE RHAPSODE:**
530a-b: **Socrates and Ion:**
Socrates encounters Ion the rhapsode, who has arrived in Athens after having won first prize at the festival of Asclepius in Epidaurus.
- 530b-531a: **Socrates flatters Ion:**
Socrates envies (ἐζήλωσα) rhapsodes' beautiful appearance and their association with Homer, "the best and most divine of the poets."
Rhapsodes must understand and interpret Homer's thought (διάνοιαν ἐκμανθάνειν...ἐρμηνεῖα δεῖ τοῦ ποιητοῦ τῆς διανοίας γίγνεσθαι).
Ion claims that of all the rhapsodes who have ever lived, he has the finest things to say about Homer (κάλλιστα ἀνθρώπων λέγειν).
- 531a-535a: **KNOWLEDGE VERSUS DIVINE INSPIRATION:**
531a-532b: **Ion and Homer:**
Ion speaks well about Homer; but he has nothing significant to say about any other poet.
But if another poet speaks about a subject that Homer has addressed, then Ion should speak just as well about that poet as about Homer.
Socrates' general principle: when several men address a given subject, the man who possesses the relevant expertise (τέχνη) can determine who among them speaks well and who speaks poorly (εὖ λέγει...κακῶς).⁵¹
- 532c-533c: **Ion lacks knowledge:**
He who can talk from expertise about some one practitioner of painting, music, or sculpture can talk equally well about other practitioners of the same discipline.
Therefore, Ion's ability to speak about Homer is not the result of expertise or knowledge (τέχνη...ἐπιστήμη, 532c6).
- 533c-535a: **Ion and the divine (the magnet):**
Ion's speaking ability is the result of a divine power (θεία...δύναμις, 533d3).
The magnet: the Muses enable men filled with inspiration (ἔνθεοι) to inspire others in turn.
Poets and prophets speak according to the divine that has filled them up; their words are revelations from the divine.
Poets are interpreters of the divine.
The rhapsode is an interpreter of interpreters (ἐρμηνέων ἐρμηνῆς, 535a9).
- 535b-536e: **DIVINE POSSESSION:**
535b-536d: **Ion possessed:**
Ion feels outside of himself (ἔξω σαυτοῦ) while delivering his recitations, and he produces the same effect in his audience.
The audience is the final link in the magnetic chain of divine possession.
The rhapsode is the middle link and the poet is the first.

⁵¹ Implicit in this section are the conclusions reached at 537c ff.

- The deity is like the original magnet: he imparts the force that binds the chain together.
This relationship is a type of possession (κατέχεται...κατοκωχή).
- 536d-e: **Ion not possessed:**
Ion denies that he is possessed and mad (κατεχόμενος καὶ μαινόμενος) when he praises Homer.
- 536e-540d: **KNOWING AND SPEAKING:**
536e-538a: **We speak well about what we know:**
Each expertise (τέχνη) has knowledge of a specific function (ἔργον).
Therefore, different areas of expertise produce distinct types of knowledge.
Therefore, he who lacks a specific expertise will not know well (καλῶς γιγνώσκειν) the matters to which the expertise pertains.
- 538b-539d: **Ion does not know much:**
Therefore, charioteers, doctors, fishermen, and diviners will know better than Ion those Homeric passages that address their specific areas of expertise.
- 539d-540b: **Ion claims to know what is fitting to say:**
Though the rhapsode may lack this sort of knowledge, he will know what on each occasion is fitting for someone to say (ἄν πρέπει...εἰπεῖν).
- 540b-d: **Ion does not know this:**
A pilot will know better than a rhapsode what a ruler of a ship should say when caught in a storm at sea.
A cowherd will know better than a rhapsode what a slave should say to deal with an unruly herd.
And so on for similar cases.
- 540d-541e: **ION THE GENERAL:**
540d-541b: **Ion claims that a good rhapsode is a good general:**
The rhapsode will know what a general should say when encouraging his men.
The expertise of the rhapsode and the expertise of the general are one and the same.
Therefore, the good rhapsode will also be a good general.
But the good general will not necessarily be a good rhapsode.
- 541b-e: **Ion claims to the best general in Greece:**
Ion is the best rhapsode in Greece.
Therefore, he is also the best general in Greece.
- 541e-542b: **ION THE DIVINE:**
Socrates complains that Ion has yet to demonstrate his ability to speak well about Homer.⁵²
If Ion possess expertise and knowledge concerning Homer, but deceptively promised to display his skills, then he is unjust (ἄδικος).
If, on the other hand, he knows nothing but speaks through divine inspiration, he is not unjust.

⁵² But Socrates twice postponed hearing Ion display his talent (at 530d-531a and 536d-e).

Ion must choose whether they should consider him unjust or divine (θεῖον).

Ion considers it finer (κάλλιον) to be thought divine.

Thus Ion praises Homer not as an expert but as one who is divine.

ION INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

Popular culture has a stake in this little dialogue. Think of Shea stadium filled to capacity with screaming Beatles fans; or the baseball fans who stand for hours in line to watch the Boston Red Sox break Babe's curse; or dead-headers who devoted their lives to following the Grateful Dead; or the red carpet on Oscar night where people strain to glimpse their favorite celebrity arriving by limousine; or the lines of mourners at Graceland who gather each August to pay homage to The King.

Our affections for our favorites are exclusive: there are people who know every word of every song on U2's *Joshua Tree*, but nothing of Van Halen. There are readers who adore Mark Helprin or Pat Conroy, but snore if the subject is Borges or Calvino. For and Against mark the passions of a fan. We all have our idols.

What comes over us when we give ourselves up to such frenzy? What makes a fan possible?

Perhaps it began with Homer, the first poet laureate of Western Civilization. Generation after generation of educated Greeks memorized, chanted, and lived by the words of Homer. His *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the longest running shows in Western Civilization. And while these two great epics remain staples of a fine education today, in 413 BCE they were the most familiar works of the time. Homeric idioms and allusions peppered the everyday conversations of the Greeks just as Shakespeare's words and phrases lace our own. Homer was the curriculum of Greek culture. There was no gathering or festival in the Classical age in which Homer's influence was unfelt. Rhapsodes competed for prizes in festivals all over Greece for their recitations of his brilliant words. The Greek festivals included days of live performances of dramas that

drew inspiration from the Homeric virtues and the legacy of Homer's work. Those who could capture the force and color of Homer's great epics might win fame and honor.

When Rome conquered the Greeks, it imbibed Greek culture like a thirsty animal. The depth of admiration and imitation of the Greek arts and letters by Rome raised the notion of "fan" to international import, for Rome transmitted the cultural legacy of Homer throughout its dominions. Those of us in the United States at the present moment are just the current tip of the tail of the still dying mammoth that was the Roman Empire. In our own veins there runs a Homeric bloodline, even if we have never read, and never intend to read, Homer. Homer's legacy is a long, living, and unbroken strand of our cultural DNA.

The *Ion* is a short dialogue, but the lens through which we read it is 2500 years long.

From Socrates' greeting it is evident that he and Ion have been acquainted for some time. Socrates is both delighted and surprised to see the itinerant poet; he inquires of Ephesus, Ion's birthplace and home. Ion quickly deflects Socrates' talk about home. He has just arrived in Athens flush with a first place victory at Epidaurus where he competed with others dramatically reciting Homer at a new festival honoring Asclepius, the god of healing. Socrates has heard nothing about this new festival. The proliferation of such festivals is such that Socrates cannot keep up with all of them. Ion has come to Athens to compete in the time-honored Panathenaia and Socrates wishes him the best of luck.

The opening lines suggest that theirs is not the sort of friendship that will allow the two men much time together. Ion has a busy schedule, and he will be off to another city as soon as the festival competitions in Athens are over. Ion is on tour. Places to go,

people to impress. In an age without jets or plush tour buses, his had to be a punishing schedule.

Amazingly, Socrates resists the offer to hear Ion recite. It is a bit like refusing an invitation to listen to Elvis sing in a private performance or Tiger Woods' offer to show one his swing. Maybe later, Elvis. Not right now, Tiger. Unlike many of us, in Socrates' mind one is always a man first and the measure of a man lies in the quality of his soul, not in his claims to fame or the size of his fan base.

The two men must have made quite a sight. Some Platonic dialogues have carefully prepared settings. Here, though, Ion himself is the setting. He is shining, gloriously attired, coiffed, and arrayed in the latest finery, as befits a star. If we recall that Socrates is short, snub-nosed, shoeless, and poor, we notice the sharp contrast between them. Imagine the physical contrast between Marilyn Monroe and Mother Teresa. That is not unlike the contrast we have here in these two men. The symbolic difference is even greater. Still, they know and like each other.

The conversation that occurs is gentle, comic, and it leaves both men in much the same condition as we find them in the opening lines. This dialogue, then, does not display Socratic dialectical triumphs. Rather, the focus is upon the creeping menace of star power in Greece. Ironically, star power dissipates the Homeric virtues that rhapsodes like Ion celebrate. Worse, then as now, stars inflame the passions of large crowds and spur them to weeping, riot, and frenzy.

We know about this sort of frenzy first hand. We are post-Woodstock after all. We honor great singers, actors, novelists, playwrights, musicians, tennis and basketball icons, and other bigger-than-life people with the encomium "artist." They appear like sudden meteor showers, steam across the sky, lighting up the night for moments, hours, or even years until they drop from view and then from memory. While riding high, their

fans gaze at them, reporters hound them, strangers ask for their autographs; their glamour and riches make them the wonder and envy of many.

Ion has flung himself into the dark sky hoping to become the next big thing.

Like most stars, Ion occupies a niche he is eagerly defending. To Socrates' question, "Does your cleverness apply to Homer only, or also to Hesiod and Archilochus?" (531a1-2) Ion replies that he knows nothing of other poets besides Homer, and nothing of poetry as a discipline or a craft. Just as the standard Elvis impersonator sings only Elvis, Ion's claim to fame is that he recites Homer better than anyone. He brags that he knows every line and nuance in Homer. But Socrates wonders whether a person acquainted with a discipline or an art can be an adequate judge of the merits of a work if he knows only the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Mustn't artists have at least some familiarity with the entire field of poets to judge well which is best? Ion may not be an expert even of Homer if he has no basis for comparison. Moreover, without some knowledge of other poets, he has no basis for his admiration. Ion's field of vision is too narrow to support his proud claim to Homeric expertise.

Astonished by this revelation, Ion wonders aloud: "Whatever is the reason that whenever someone speaks about another poet I pay no attention and am unable to add anything of value—I absolutely fall asleep; but when someone mentions Homer I wake up immediately, pay attention, and am full of words" (532b8-c4)?

They agree that it is "not by art or knowledge" that Ion speaks so powerfully of Homer. Before deciding how it happens, though, Socrates asks Ion a formidable question. What did Homer, or any of the great poets, themselves know? Do any of them contribute to the general store of knowledge? Homer's two epics tell us about war, chariots, horses, omens, shields, ships, storms, and gods. But does the poet know more about war than field generals? More about chariots than a charioteer? More about horses than an

equestrian? More about omens than diviners? More about shields or ships than bronze forgers or shipbuilders? Did Homer know more about the storms or the mind of Poseidon than the god himself?

Ion confesses that Homer could not have forged a spear-tip or repaired the broken axle on a chariot even though he spoke of spears and chariots as though they were the simplest things on Earth. He was not an expert in any of the arenas his poems take for granted. It seems that Homer, like Ion, has no specialty or expertise at all.

Ion is baffled. How did Homer—how does any poet or writer—accomplish his work if he knows next to nothing about the matters addressed in his writing?

Socrates' answer has held the Western imagination in thrall for 2500 years: *divine inspiration*. Socrates is certain that the Muses, each a goddess of a special domain, select a few men and women as their emissaries on earth. These few become the Homers, Beethovens, Leonardos or Shakespeares of their age. The capricious favor of the Muses creates a magnetic field around the chosen ones, directing their words, their thoughts, and setting their activities upon the path to greatness and fame. As their god-given talents blossom, their deeds, words, and thoughts magnetize and attract others, like Ion, to imitate and perform their works before massive crowds, who in their turn are magnetized and hypnotized by the divine aura of the performance. The magnetic rings fashioned by the Muses generate both the original talent and the resulting fan frenzy. The whole process is as contagious and uncontrollable as a spark in a forest of dry tinder.

Perhaps, Socrates admits, some rhapsodes like Ion are better performers than others, just as some performances of Wagner are better than others. But “better” here just means that the audience is more involved, more impassioned, more thoroughly electrified. It does not mean anyone has actually learned anything.

Ion admits that he is often overcome in his performances. “When I say something pitiful my eyes are full of tears; and when I say something fearful or terrible my hairs stand straight up from fear and my heart leaps (535c5-8). Our term for this is “method acting.” Nevertheless, Ion knows he must constantly and closely attend to the emotions and responses of his audience if he is to produce the same effects in them, and thus carry off the prize he seeks. “I must pay very close attention to them—for if I make them cry, I will take their money and laugh; but if I make them laugh, I will lose the money and cry” (535e3-6).

Socrates stresses that the mystery of all great artists is that they cannot call up their talent at will, nor can they pass it on to others. Unlike knowledge, which is shareable, the artist is alone in the grip of something greater than himself that he cannot control and cannot understand. By force of the divine, the poet becomes the primary magnetic ring, while his imitators such as Ion are just the “middle ring” through whom the Muse “drags the soul of human beings wherever she wants, transmitting the power by hanging it upon each successive member of the chain. And as if hanging from the loadstone a great chain of choral dancers, teachers, and subordinates are hung from the sides of the rings which hang from the Muse. And one poet hangs from one Muse, another hangs from another—we call this being possessed (κατέχεταί), and this is close, for he is held (ἔχεταί). From these first rings, the poets, some are hung from and inspired by others, others by others still—some from Orpheus, some from Musaeus. Many of them are possessed and held by Homer” (536a1-b4). This serves as Socrates’ explanation for Ion’s dozing through discussions of any other poets. But it is the audience member, the fan, who becomes the last ring in the magnetized chain. He, too, finds himself drawn in by the power of this or that Muse. He becomes transfixed by this or that celebrity, awed and pressed to favor him, look to him, to seek his company and counsel as though

the star knows whence his talent and fan affection arise. For a while, as Socrates notes, it is as though men like Ion become divine. Ion agrees that “to be thought divine is far more noble (κάλλιον)” than to be considered a master of knowledge or expertise (542a-b).

But when the bright light burns out, as it will and must, the star and his fans will be left as much in the dark as they were before he shot across their night sky. Throughout that heady time, though, other pressing matters—of education, goodness, justice, and governance—must be left on the back burners of life. Such is the danger of a culture of celebrity, however unavoidable it is.

One gets the sense from the *Ion* that Plato is trying to identify and activate some basic element within the human psyche to serve as a talisman against the inherent danger of such encounters. For although it makes all the difference to humankind who the magnetic man on stage is—Billy Graham, Mahatma Gandhi, or Adolph Hitler—every inspired man must have Ion’s sharp awareness of his incredible power to make us forget ourselves utterly. He will continue to glow in the night sky only so long as he succeeds in honing that power. How he succeeds or why, he has no clue. How he was chosen, or why, he cannot say. He is flying intoxicated toward a horizon he cannot see, dragging his fans with him, and he and they neither need nor want an explanation. The glory, fame, and the seductive glamour provide all the fuel he and his fans require.

Perhaps Socrates is right: perhaps it is his divine and unavoidable fate. But we participate in his journey at our peril, whatever his message, whatever his song.

LYSIS

Subject: Friendship.

Mode: Narrative, Socrates to anonymous friend.

Setting: ca. 409, a palaestra somewhere between the Academy and the Lyceum.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Hippothales.

Ctesippus.

Lysis.

Menexenus.

SHORT OUTLINE

LYSIS SHORT OUTLINE

- 203a-207d: **Socrates colludes with Hippothales:**
Hippothales in love (203a-206d).
The conversation begins (206d-207d).
- 207d-211a: **Socrates humbles Lysis:**
Lysis' parents restrict his activities (207d-209a).
Lysis lacks knowledge (209a-210c).
Lysis is not loveable (210c-211a).
- 211a-213d: **Socrates colludes with Lysis:**
Menexenus returns (211a-d).
Who is a friend to whom? (Menexenus' elenchus) (211d-213d).
- 213d-215c: **Socrates and Lysis:**
Like is a friend to like (213e-214b).
Socrates' objections (214b-215c).
- 215c-222d: **Socrates, Menexenus, and Lysis:**
Unlike is a friend to unlike (215c-216a).
Socrates' objection (216a-b).
That which is neither good nor bad is a friend to the good (216c-218c).
Socrates' objection (218c-220e).
A thing is a friend to that which belongs to it (220e-222b).
Socrates' objection (222b-d).
- 222e-223a: **Aporia.**

DETAILED OUTLINE

LYSIS DETAILED OUTLINE

- 203a-207d: **SOCRATES COLLUDES WITH HIPPOTHALES:**
203a-206d: **Hippothales in love:**
God has given Socrates the power to recognize a lover and his beloved (ἐρῶντά τε καὶ ἐρώμενον).
Hippothales is in love (ἐρᾶς) with Lysis.
Socrates will demonstrate for Hippothales the proper way to address his beloved and so become dear to him (προσφιλής παιδικοῖς γένοιτο).
- 206d-207d: **The conversation begins:**
Lysis and Menexenus sit with Socrates while Hippothales hides.
Socrates asks Menexenus a series of questions that require him to compare himself to Lysis.
Menexenus departs.
- 207d-211a: **SOCRATES HUMBLER LYSIS:**
207d-209a: **Lysis' parents restrict his activities:**
Lysis' parents love him (φιλεῖ) and want him to be happy (εὐδαίμονα).
But they do not allow him to do whatever he desires (ἃ βούλει ποιεῖν).
They do not even allow him to rule (ἄρχειν) himself.
- 209a-210c: **Lysis lacks knowledge:**
Everyone permits us to act as we please (βουλώμεθα) regarding matters about which we are knowledgeable (φρόνιμοι).
Everyone hinders us from acting as we please regarding matters about which we know nothing (ἄν νοῦν μὴ κτησώμεθα), for from them we derive no advantage (οὐδὲν...ονησώμεθα).
- 210c-211a: **Lysis is not lovable:**
No one will befriend or love (φίλοι...φιλήσει) us respecting matters for which we are no use (ἄνωφελεῖς).
It is impossible to regard oneself highly (μέγα φρονεῖν) in relation to things one does not understand (μῆπω φρονεῖ).
Therefore, since Lysis lacks understanding he cannot regard himself highly (μεγαλόφρων).
- 211a-213d: **SOCRATES COLLUDES WITH LYSIS:**
211a-d: **Menexenus returns:**
Lysis asks Socrates to chastise (κολάσης) Menexenus.
- 211d-213d: **Who is a friend to whom? (Menexenus' elenchus):**
Who is a friend to whom when someone loves another (τίς τινα φιλήῃ)?
Each is a friend to each.
But a lover may be hated by the object of his affection.
Therefore, when only one loves neither is a friend to the other.
This implies that no man is a friend to his horse or dog, nor is anyone a friend to wisdom (φιλόσοφοι), which cannot return affection.
But Solon refers to horses and dogs as a man's friend.
So: the object of affection is a friend to his lover, whether he love or hate him in return.
Similarly, the object of hatred is an enemy.

But this implies that one may be a friend to one's enemy and vice versa—for if I love someone, then he is my friend; but if he hates me in return, I am his enemy.

The same situation results if we designate the lover or the hater as the friend or the enemy.

Therefore, neither the lover nor the beloved is a friend.

213d-215c: **SOCRATES AND LYSIS:**

Socrates delights in Lysis' love of wisdom (ἡσθεῖς τῆ φιλοσοφία).

213e-214b: **Like is a friend to like:**

A line from Homer's *Odyssey* suggests that god leads like to like.

214b-215c: **Socrates' objections:**

(a) Two wicked men (πονηροί) are alike but are hostile to each other.

So perhaps good men are friends to one another.

(b) A thing cannot benefit a thing just like it, for whatever power the one has the other has as well.

But things that derive no benefit from each other cannot be cherished (ἀγαπηθείη) by one another and so cannot be friends.

(c) Similarly, a good man, in so far as he is good, is self-sufficient, and a self-sufficient man has no needs.

But a man cannot cherish that of which he has no need, and he cannot be a friend to what he does not cherish.

Therefore, good men cannot be friends.

Therefore, like is not a friend to like.

215c-222d: **SOCRATES, MENEXENUS, AND LYSIS:**

215c-216a: **Unlike is a friend to unlike:**

Friendship develops between men who are most dissimilar.

216a-b: **Socrates' objection:**

But then a friend will be a friend to the enemy and the just a friend to the unjust.

Therefore, the unlike is not a friend to the unlike.

216c-218c: **That which is neither good nor bad is a friend to the good:**

Conclusions reached so far: the good is not a friend to the good, the bad is not a friend to the bad, nor are the good and the bad friends to each other.

But that which is neither good nor bad cannot be a friend to the bad, for the bad can have no friends; nor can it be a friend to another thing which is neither good nor bad, for like cannot be a friend to like.

Therefore, only one option remains: that which is neither good nor bad is a friend to the good.

It is a friend to the good because of the presence of the bad.

But if the bad is present in such a way that that which is neither good nor bad becomes bad itself, it will not be a friend to the good, for the bad cannot be a friend to the good.

Therefore, that which is neither good nor bad is a friend to the good if it possesses the bad in such a way that it is not bad itself.

218c-220e: **Socrates' first objection:**

A thing is a friend to that (health, for example) for the sake of which it is a friend to something else (the medical art).

But for the sake of what is it a friend to the first thing?

This line of questioning will proceed ad infinitum.

Therefore, we must identify that for the sake of which all other things that are loved are loved.

We are friends to the good only on account of the bad.

Therefore, the good is not the ultimate that-for-the-sake-of-which.⁵³

220e-221c: **Socrates' second objection:**

Desires (ἐπιθυμία) are not bad (i.e., painful) in every case.

Therefore, desires would exist even in a world without the bad.

A man is a friend to that which he desires.

Therefore, a man could be a friend even if the bad did not exist.

But this would not be possible if the bad were the cause of our being a friend.

Therefore, it cannot be the case that that which is neither good nor bad is a friend to the good on account of the bad.

221c-222b: **A thing is a friend to that which belongs to it:**

A thing is a friend to that which it desires on account of the desire.

But that which desires desires that which it lacks (ἐνδεές).

A thing lacks that of which it has been deprived (ἀφαιρηται).

Therefore, a man experiences love, friendship, and desire (ὁ τε ἔρωσ καὶ ἡ φιλία καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία) for that which belongs to him (τοῦ οἰκείου).

Therefore, if Lysis and Menexenus are friends, they must belong to each other by nature (φύσει).

Moreover, he who desires or loves another must belong to his beloved with respect to his body or the character or form of his soul (τι τῆς ψυχῆς ἢ θοσ ἢ τρόπους ἢ εἶδος).

Therefore, we necessarily (ἀναγκάων) love that which belongs to us by nature.

Therefore, it is also necessary that the genuine lover (τῶ γνησίῳ ἐραστῆ) be loved by his beloved (παδικῶν).

222b-d: **Socrates' objection:**

This account is sound only if that which belongs to us differs from that which is like—for they have already concluded that like is not a friend to like.

The good belong to the good, the bad to the bad, and that which is neither good nor bad to that which is itself neither good nor bad.

But if a thing is a friend to that which belongs to it, and the good belongs to the good and the bad to the bad, then the good will be a friend to the good and the bad will be a friend to the bad.

But they have already eliminated these possibilities.

The same problem will arise if the good is identical to that which belongs to a thing.

222e-223a: **APORIA:**

⁵³ Is Socrates' reasoning here legitimate? He himself has carefully distinguished the two relations, that-on-account-of-which and that-for-the-sake-of-which. Yet here he dismisses a candidate for the latter relation (the good is that for the sake of which we are friends to everything) based upon the former (we are friends to the good on account of the bad).

None of the accounts has successfully explained the nature of friendship. Suddenly, like some divinities (δαίμονες τινες), the attendants of Lysis and Menexenus come to take the boys home. Socrates remarks that they must appear ridiculous, for they think themselves friends even though they have been unable to discover what a friend is.

LYSIS INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

The *Lysis* is one of the most engaging, life-like dialogues in the Platonic corpus. It is also one of least studied. The *logos* concerns friendship, as does the dramatic interplay of the participants. It depicts Socrates engaging the practical matter of falling in love and making friends, and in doing so it reveals how philosophic conversations about serious and beautiful things advance our universal hopes to secure friendship and love in our lives.

There is little adult supervision or conversation about erotic attraction and developing friendships in our culture today. We tend to arrange things for our children from the time they are six to ensure that they participate in school activities and after-school programs with children of similar age, and we simply assume that they will feel their way toward the inevitable business of making friends and peer socialization. Most adults feel unprepared to address or treat the insecurities of growing up, and the school system turns the matter over to guidance counselors who often find themselves addressing crises, rather than helping to foster friendships. Youthful ardor is dismissively labeled as “having a crush” or “being snowed.” If and when youthful heartbreaks occur, it was just “puppy love” after all. Something we all go through. Welcome to the human race.

Most adults and therapists don’t want to remember, much less rehearse with children, their own disappointments and humiliations in this arena; no one helped them much, after all. What advice can they offer beyond the inadequate advice they themselves received when they were young? Erotic insecurity is something we all must accept and try to work through on our own. Buck up. You’ll get over it. We are Polonius to Laertes, generation after generation.

By such neglect, adults pass on to children the same disappointments and frustrations they themselves encountered, as well as their own inability to converse meaningfully about this most important thread in the fabric of human life: how to make and keep friends. The self-help shelves at the bookstores are not for middle school kids. They are for adults whose youthful erotic fancies and forays were mismanaged by their elders in some deep and enduring way.

Making friends, finding acceptance, falling in love, and becoming loveable present real and lifelong challenges for human beings in every culture. The Greeks of the fifth century were more honest and intentional than we are. Friendship was a philosophic problem for them because they recognized that a man or a woman without friends, real friends, is incapable of the fullest flourishing. Such people will always just miss capturing the deepest sort of happiness. Socrates cared about the education of youth. He believed the time to address youthful eroticism was before the wounds of rejection and insecurity become lasting scars.

The *Lysis* begins in the dramatic present with Socrates recounting to an unnamed listener a past event. I have often wondered about this frame. Why would someone tell this story to another person?

Socrates recalls a chance encounter. He was, he says, “proceeding from the Lyceum to the Academy,” although he does not say why. We do know that he had a fixed destination, that he had somewhere to be. Here is an adult who had his own plans for that day. He describes the path he was taking as if to mark his urgency, as if it were a short cut. All of sudden, though, voices call out to him. In his path there stands a group of young boys hanging around outside a little known palaestra. They initiate the encounter with Socrates and playfully entreat him to put off his plans and to stay with them. Though

he tells them he is on his way elsewhere, Socrates suddenly realizes that one of the boys is suffering. A little prying uncovers the problem.

Hippothales, blushing Hippothales, is in love with another youth, Lysis, who doesn't even know he exists. No, he hasn't even spoken to him. The very idea makes him uncomfortable. But needing to speak the name of his beloved, he has made the mistake of suffering aloud and confiding his agony to his other friends. Now he is butt of their jokes and ridicule. Because he does not know how to manage his longing, he has written poems to and paeans about Lysis and shared them with his peers; he has gotten drunk; and he has generally bored his friends to tears while making himself miserable. Erotic energy has to go somewhere.

Rather than attending to his pressing business, Socrates puts on the brakes and alters his plans. He stays; he listens. He hears the whole sorry tale and rather than comfort Hippothales, or pass it off as just one of those childhood crushes, he roundly rebukes him for a failure of will. The problem is weighty enough to address and now is the time to address it. The philosopher cares deeply about the youth who is in love.

Socrates insists to the group that there is a conversational art and skill to making friends. Although he admits he cannot tell Hippothales what to say, he thinks he can show him by demonstration how he ought to behave when approaching one's love interest for the first time. They decide to ease themselves into the palaestra where Lysis is likely to be so that Socrates can show Hippothales and the other boys how one ought to approach one's heart's desire.

On one level of the dialogue, then, all that follows is a Socratic demonstration that is meant to redirect erotic energies and educate Hippothales and his friends. Learning to converse philosophically is a cure for erotic agony. If Hippothales cannot learn to converse with Lysis, he will never make him his friend. If we cannot learn to converse

with others, we will never have real friends. If adults are too busy to take a hand in such matters when they can, the youth will suffer. They will grow up, reenact the same ineptitude with their own kids, and spend their time browsing the self-help stacks of bookstores. The message is clear: philosophers are adults who should care about youths and their ability to channel eros to its proper end: making friends.

The second level of the dialogue is less obvious, but just as important. Socrates converses with Lysis for Hippothales' benefit. During the course of this conversation, while Hippothales hides but remains just within earshot, a new friendship takes root and sprouts among Socrates, Lysis, and Lysis' cousin Menexenus. These three spend a wonderful afternoon talking about friendship, about how it arises, about what governs its growth and flowering, and how little the highly regarded poets are able to inform us of the true origins of friendship. So even though on one level the conversation instructs Hippothales, on another level it engenders affection among the participants. The closing lines of dialogue bear this out. Socrates knows he has become friends with his dialectical partners that afternoon. No earnest conversation is merely a demonstration. It is always an opportunity to develop deeper connections with others.

Now, why should Socrates tell someone about this engagement? I think his unnamed listener has asked him a question. What question? "Socrates, how did you become friends with Lysis?" And this dialogue is Socrates' answer to that question. In answering it, Socrates reveals for his listener the sort of man he is. The candor of Socrates' account is likely to help ensure that he and his auditor become better friends as well. For Socrates discloses four important character traits about himself: First, Socrates has certain priorities which may call for sudden changes of plan. Second, Socrates is not above practicing a little deception in the furtherance of erotic attachments—Lysis and Menexenus, after all, have no idea that the impetus for their afternoon conversation with

Socrates was Hippothales' education. Third, Socrates knows that there is no ready formula or recipe for conversation—He can't tell another what to say to make friends; he can only show him, by topic and tone, the comportment one must have to succeed. Finally, strengthening friendship is something one can accomplish by telling someone how one first made friends with another. For Socrates' confession surely reveals him to his auditor in an endearing way. The fact that the trio failed to discover the origin of friendship does not entail their failure to become friends. Philosophy can fail on one level and succeed on another. This is one reason that Socrates cannot tell Hippothales what to say. Philosophy is an activity, not a topic.

The *logos* or spoken discussion the participants engage in concerns the origin of friendship. The participants first examine what poets and others have taught to be the basis of friendship. "Birds of feather flock together" and "opposites attract" were as common in Athens as they are today. "The beautiful as friend" and "Kin as friend" are less familiar proverbs to our ears, but they are certainly borne out in real life. They might have said, as we do: "It is chemistry," if they had ever heard of chemistry. But Socrates is not interested in these types or instances of friendship. He is looking for the origin of all the species of friendship. As in other aporetic dialogues, Socrates is searching for the Form of Friendship that unifies all its disparate instances. He investigates proverbs bequeathed by the poets. Aristotle noted that there are typically three types of friendship: benefit, pleasure, and virtue friendship (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.3). But however poets or philosophers classify the varieties of friendship, making friends and participating in friendships requires that we reveal ourselves to others in discourse and allow them to reveal themselves to us as well.

The *Lysis* is a multi-layered demonstration of the power adults can exercise on behalf of youth in the matter of friendship. In it Socrates helps educate Hippothales. He

has a crazy conversation and in the process he makes new friends of Lysis and his cousin.

All in all, the time flew by and he had a great day. To hell with going to the Lyceum.

EUTHYDEMUS

Subject: Virtue and eristics.

Mode: Narrative, Socrates to Crito the day following the event.

Setting: ca. 407, the Lyceum.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Crito.

Euthydemus and Dionysodorus

Clinias.

Ctesippus.

The stranger.

SHORT OUTLINE

EUTHYDEMUS SHORT OUTLINE

- 271a-272d: **Socrates and Crito.**
272d-275c: **Socrates sets the scene:**
 In the Lyceum (272d-273b).
 Introducing Euthydemus and Dionysodorus (273c-275c).
- 275c-d: **Socrates and Crito.**
275d-282e: **Round one:**
 Two sophistical arguments (275d-277c).
 Socrates intervenes (277d-278e).
 Socrates' exhortation to Clinias (278e-282e).
- 283a-b: **Socrates and Crito.**
283b-290d: **Round two:**
 More sophistical arguments (283b-285a).
 Socrates intervenes (285a-d).
 Another sophistical argument (285d-286b).
 Socrates' counter-argument (286b-287c).
 Yet another sophistical argument (287c-e).
 Socrates' reply (287e-288d).
 Socrates' second exhortation to Clinias (288d-290d).
- 290e-293a: **Socrates and Crito.**
293b-303a: **Round three:**
 Many sophistical arguments (293b-303a).
- 303b-307c: **Socrates and Crito:**
 Socrates' ironical evaluation of the brothers' performance (303b-304b).
 Crito on the brothers (304b-d).
 The stranger (304d-306d).
 Education (306d-307c).

[DETAILED OUTLINE](#)

EUTHYDEMUS DETAILED OUTLINE

- 271a-272d: **SOCRATES AND CRITO:**
The omniscient (πάσσοφοι) brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, whom Socrates has known to fight in armor and in the law courts (through speech writing), yesterday exhibited their marvelous accomplishments fighting in argument.
They can refute anything anyone says, whether it be true or false.
- 272d-275c: **SOCRATES SETS THE SCENE:**
272d-273b: **In the Lyceum:**
Socrates' divine sign (δαίμόνιον).
Socrates is joined by the handsome young Clinias, the brash Ctesippus, Euthydemus, Dionysodorus, and many others.
- 273c-275c: **Introducing Euthydemus and Dionysodorus:**
Euthydemus and Dionysodorus have become teachers of virtue (ἀρετή). Of their contemporaries they are the best at exhorting men to philosophy and the practice (ἐπιμέλειαν) of virtue.
Socrates requests that they exhort Clinias to love wisdom and virtue.
- 275c-d: **SOCRATES AND CRITO:**
After invoking the Muses and Memory for assistance, Socrates recounts the conversation.
- 275d-282e: **ROUND ONE:**
275d-277c: **Two sophistic arguments:**
1a) Euthydemus: not the wise but the ignorant learn (275d-276b).
1b) Dionysodorus: not the ignorant but the wise learn (276c).
2a) Euthydemus: those who learn learn not what they do not know but what they know (276d-277b).
2b) Dionysodorus: those who learn learn not what they know but what they do not know (277b-c).
- 277d-278e: **Socrates intervenes:**
The brothers are initiating Clinias into the sophistic mysteries (τῶν ἱερῶν... τῶν σοφιστικῶν) by manipulating the meanings of words. This practice is mere play (παιδιά... προσπαίξειν) and has nothing to do with the acquisition of true wisdom.
- 278e-282e **Socrates' exhortation to Clinias:**
Everyone wishes to do well (εὖ πράττειν).
We do well through having many good things (πολλὰ κάγαθὰ).
The possession of good things will produce happiness (εὐδαιμονία) only if we use them correctly.
Only knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) enables us to use our possessions correctly. Therefore, the possession of good things produces happiness only if accompanied by knowledge.
In fact, the so called "goods" are neither good nor bad in themselves, but bad (κακά) if guided by ignorance (ἀμαθία) and good if guided by

wisdom (φρόνησις τε καὶ σοφία).

In sum: since everyone desires to do well, and since this is impossible without wisdom, everyone should love wisdom (φιλοσοφεῖν).

But this is true *only if* wisdom can be taught.

282d-e: Socrates invites the brothers to say whether a man's happiness and goodness (εὐδαιμονεῖν...ἀγαθὸν εἶναι) depends upon many types of knowledge (ἐπιστήμην) or only one, and what they (or it) might be.⁵⁴

283a-b: **SOCRATES AND CRITO:**

Dionysodorus' discourse was indeed an exhortation to virtue (παρακελευστικός...ἐπ' ἀρετήν).

283b-290d: **ROUND TWO:**

283b-285a: **More sophisticated arguments:**

1) Dionysodorus to Socrates: Socrates and the rest of Clinias' friends wish for the young man's death (283b-d).

2) Euthydemus to Ctesippus: it is impossible to tell lies (283e-284c).

3) Dionysodorus to Ctesippus: in support of Euthydemus' position (284c-285a).

Dionysodorus and Ctesippus are getting angry.

285a-d: **Socrates intervenes:**

Let the brothers speak however they like.

If they want to call the process of making a bad man good "killing him," let them—so long as they improve him.

285d-286b: **Another sophisticated argument:**

Dionysodorus to Ctesippus: contradiction is not possible.

286b-287c: **Socrates' counter-argument:**

If it is impossible to speak or think falsely, there can be no such thing as false opinion or ignorance.

If neither false opinion nor ignorance exist, it is impossible to be mistaken in word or deed.

But if no one can be mistaken in word or deed, then no one has anything to learn from Euthydemus and Dionysodorus.

Dionysodorus: Socrates is being evasive because he is unable to handle the argument.

Socrates: "unable to handle" must mean "unable to refute" (ἐξελέγχει).

But if no one speaks falsely, there can be no such thing as refutation.

287c-e: **Yet another sophisticated argument:**

Dionysodorus: the sense of his phrase "unable to handle" could not be "unable to refute" because phrases, lacking soul, lack sense (287d-e).

287e-288d: **Socrates' reply:**

If Socrates has made no mistake, then Dionysodorus will not be able to refute him.

If Socrates has made a mistake, then Dionysodorus was wrong to declare mistakes impossible.

Thus do the brothers' arguments turn against themselves.

⁵⁴ In fact, the brothers do not address the topic. Socrates takes it up himself beginning at 288d. His investigation, however, fails, at which point he again asks Euthydemus and Dionysodorus for assistance.

- 288d-290d: **Socrates' second exhortation to Clinias:**⁵⁵
 All men must love wisdom.
 The love of wisdom is the possession of knowledge (ἡ...φιλοσοφία κτήσις ἐπιστήμης).
 We must seek knowledge that benefits us (ὀνήσει).
 Beneficial knowledge is knowledge of how to produce a thing and of how to put the product to use.
 The art of speech writing (λογοποιικὴν τέχνην) does not qualify.
 Ctesippus: the art of generalship (ἡ στρατηγική) does not qualify, for it is comparable to the art of hunting men. But the hunter does not necessarily know how to use his prey properly—he turns the prey over to the statesman.
- 290e-293a: **SOCRATES AND CRITO:**
 290e-291a: Ctesippus' words are astonishing.
 Some superior being (τις τῶν κρείττωνων) must have uttered them.
- 291a-292e: **The next phase of the conversation:**
 The art of the king (ἡ βασιλικὴ τέχνη) and the art of the statesman (ἡ πολιτικὴ τέχνη) are the same, and it is to this art that the general submits his prey for proper use.
 What does the royal art produce?
 It must be something useful (ὠφέλιμον) and something good.
 But nothing is good but knowledge (ἐπιστήμη).
 Therefore, the statesman will make his citizens happy (εὐδαίμονας) only if he provides them with knowledge.
 Therefore, the royal art must produce knowledge.
 But what sort of knowledge?
 Perhaps the knowledge to make others good.
 But in what will they be good, and in what respect useful?
 Again, the only good is knowledge.
- 292e-293a: Now they were repeating themselves and Socrates was at a loss (ἐν...ἀπορίᾳ).
 Socrates appealed yet again to the brothers to identify the knowledge with which one will live well (καλῶς).⁵⁶
- 293b-303a: **ROUND THREE:**
 293b-303a: **Many sophisticated arguments:**
 1) Euthydemus: Socrates knows everything or nothing (293b-e).
 2) Dionysodorus: everyone who knows anything also knows everything (293e-295a).
 3) Euthydemus: Socrates knows all things and always has (295a-296e).
Socrates wonders whether he knows that the good are unjust. Where did he learn that (296e-297a)?
Euthydemus rebukes Dionysodorus for his reply of “nowhere,” which implies that Socrates is not knowing, and hence knowing and not

⁵⁵ This takes up where his previous exhortation left off (at 282e).

⁵⁶ In this section (at 293a3) Socrates requests the brothers to save them from the “third wave of the argument” (σῶσαι ἡμᾶς...ἐκ τῆς τρικυμίας τοῦ λόγου). Compare *Republic* 472a4.

knowing simultaneously.

Socrates prods Euthydemus: is Dionysodorus making a mistake (297ab)?

4) Dionysodorus: Socrates' brother both is and is not his brother. (297b-e)

5) Euthydemus: Socrates' father is not his father (297e-298b).

Ctesippus notes that Euthydemus is in the same position with respect to his father (298b).

6) Euthydemus: **(a)** the brothers' father is the father of Ctesippus and all of all other humans and animals; **(b)** the brothers' mother is the mother of all humans and animals, and the same goes for Ctesippus' mother; **(c)** Ctesippus' dog is Ctesippus' father, and the dog's puppies are Ctesippus' brothers (298b-e).

7) Dionysodorus: Ctesippus beats his father (298-299a).

8) Euthydemus: no man has need of good things (299a-c).

9) Dionysodorus: a man should have gold inside his body (299c-e).

10) Euthydemus: cloaks can see (300a).

11) Dionysodorus: there is a speaking of the silent (300b).

12) Euthydemus: there is a silence of the speaking (300c).

Ctesippus laughs when Dionysodorus claims that all things both speak and are silent, and that they neither speak nor are silent (300d).

Socrates rebukes Clinias for laughing too, and thereby making light of serious and beautiful things (σπουδαίους...καλοῖς) (300e).

13) Dionysodorus: if beautiful things are beautiful by the presence of beauty, then Socrates, who is in Dionysodorus' presence, is Dionysodorus (300e-301a).

Socrates argues that the different is the different because it differs from the same (301a-c).

14) Dionysodorus: whoever cooks a cook, hammers a blacksmith, or turns a potter on a wheel is doing the proper business (301c-d).

15) Dionysodorus: Socrates possesses Zeus and the other gods and has the right to sell them and treat them however he pleases (301e-303a).

303b-307c: **SOCRATES AND CRITO:**

303b-304b: **Socrates' ironic evaluation of the brothers' performance:**

Most men understand these arguments so little that they would be more ashamed to employ them to refute others than to be refuted by them.

304b-d: **Crito on the brothers:**

Crito is one of those who would rather be refuted by such arguments than to refute others by means of them.

304d-306d: **Crito on the stranger:**

A man who thinks himself very wise (οἰόμενος πάνυ εἶναι σοφός) and who is clever (δεινῶν) at composing legal speeches disparaged the brothers display.

The stranger and Crito both seem to classify the display as philosophy.

The stranger criticized Socrates' willingness to participate in the brothers' antics.

Socrates analyzes the stranger's type and concludes that such men are neither philosophers nor statesmen, and are inferior to both.⁵⁷

306d-307c:

Education:

Crito has no confidence in those who profess to be educators of youth. Socrates advises Crito to think seriously about philosophy itself. If it seems valuable, he should pursue it in company with his sons.

⁵⁷ Many scholars believe that Plato intended this stranger to represent Isocrates.

EUTHYDEMUS INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

How does a culture unwittingly sow the seeds of intergenerational mistrust? When does youth begin to suspect that adult camaraderie may be deeply flawed? Revolutions begin in the younger generation, rather than the seasoned adults. Something in the cultural soil goes bad.

The *Euthydemus* envisions one variety of these seeds of mistrust and reveals that they usually begin to sprout informally, even playfully, in arenas like the Lyceum where young men mixed as freely with adult men as our own youth do at school, camp, or church socials. The young are always watching and wondering what makes adults tick. Their natural inclination to imitate the ways of adults is a deep source of cultural stability because it tends to ensure that what an adult does today will be emulated by a youth tomorrow. Youth is more tender, though, and more easily bruised than most of us like to admit, or to remember. If adults are perverse, sarcastic, or eristic with youth, or if adults advance their own sense of pride at the expense of youth, they must bear the shame and blame for what follows. This is one of the deep underlying messages of this dialogue in which two adults seize a chance to provoke laughter and win recognition at the expense of a vulnerable young man. The second and more pointed message is this: laughter is serious business.

What does philosophy have to offer by way of understanding and mending such rifts?

Socrates' dear friend Crito opens the dialogue with a question: "Who was it, Socrates, with whom you were conversing (διαλέγου) yesterday in the Lyceum. The crowd standing around you was so large that although I approached wanting to hear I

could not. Yet I had a look by standing on tiptoe, and it seemed you were speaking with some stranger. Who was it?" (271a1-5).

The inaccessible conversation takes many forms; but standing at a distance among a crowd of onlookers ensures that one will have little access to any important nuances. The maddening frustration that attends reading this dialogue was probably matched by the furious irritation Plato must have felt writing it. Crito himself experienced a similar frustration at being unable to follow the conversation, and even as Plato marks the distance separating Socrates from the other adult speakers, the crowded setting points to the fact that the average Athenian onlooker is often on the fringes of philosophic endeavors; like Crito, he is rarely in a position to participate or appreciate the subtleties of the dialectical displays taking place just beyond him.

Some scholars of this dialogue belong to the crowd that cannot quite make it out. They identify and label its many fallacies and silly puns in the belief that the dialogue was Plato's way of demonstrating his own facility with the rules and regulations of logic. But this interpretation ignores the setting, the speakers and their motivations; it is impervious to the warnings lying below the surface of the words.

Narrow readings tend to overlook the dialogues' roots in real life. Most of us can remember encounters with adults that were similarly playful on the surface but that left us with the same icky aftertaste that Socrates displays when he recalls the conversation for Crito. These emotional residues play a more significant role in the dialogue than any numbering or analyzing of logical fallacies can reveal. If Socrates must purge himself of the conversation, it is little wonder if the onlookers walk away slightly stunned or discombobulated. It is only Crito's personal friendship with Socrates that allows him a chance to clarify today what he strained to hear and comprehend yesterday. The other onlookers who were gathered there do not enjoy that opportunity; they have all gone

home to their families with their initial impressions and suspicions in tact. As a member of that crowd, Crito's point of view will eventually emerge as a salient feature attending our evaluation of philosophic conversation and the art of dialectic. As readers, though, we are part of the crowd. That is intentional.

The opening frame of the *Euthydemus* places Socrates like a hoplite shield-bearer next to a youth he is trying both to educate and to protect. On their flanks are two adult brothers, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. Although sincere and heartfelt one-to-one conversation is the badge of Socratic philosophic practice, Socrates cannot always choose his partners, nor steer their thoughts and conversational practice toward noble ends. The *Euthydemus* shows how a little philosophy can be used as a weapon, a "net of words," for ends other than the pursuit of truth, beauty, and justice. Those ends include generating laughter. Who hasn't thought at one time or another that philosophers say the silliest things in the strangest ways?

Socrates is only too glad to recount the conversation for Crito, though one can tell by his tone that he does not take the men he conversed with seriously and that he is still rankled. Sometimes the only way to relieve one's present distress is to relive its origins.

Socrates was preparing to leave the Lyceum when his divine sign bid him to stay. A few minutes later two older men, Dionysodorus and his brother Euthydemus, appear with a group of rowdy followers, "their pupils" (μαθητὰί), Socrates calls them. Not long after their arrival the fine young son of Axiochus, Clinias, arrives attended by his friends and admirers, most notably Ctesippus, who, Socrates notes parenthetically, has "a very noble and good nature, except that his youth makes him a bit hotheaded (ὕβριστής)" (273a7-b1).

Unlike the two brothers, who have ignored the solitary Socrates, Clinias immediately approaches the philosopher and sits down beside him. In this Clinias

manifests trust and openness, and his friends and admirers follow in turn. But as their gathering shapes up, Socrates notices the two brothers evincing a covert interest from across the way: “first they stood talking to each other, looking toward us from time to time—for I attended to them very closely—and then they approached and one, Euthydemus, sat down beside the boy and the other sat down to my left, and the others arranged themselves at random” (273b4-8).

One gets the distinct impression that Socrates and his friends are marks, targets.

Socrates does not know much about the brothers, but he does know a little. They are former colonists now in exile (φεύγοντες) from Thurii who have been knocking around Athens together, now and then putting on displays fighting in armor, or more recently composing speeches for those who have business in the courts. One can assume that colonies generally need and want people; if Thurii has banished the brothers, their offense could not have been trivial.

Why stay? Doesn't Socrates suspect enough already to suggest to Clinias and his friends, “Hey, let's all go play knucklebones or practice some wrestling.” Perhaps there is nowhere to run. Perhaps Socrates stays to try to control the situation. If the prevalence of sophisticated and eristic conversation is becoming as widespread in Athens as Plato's dialogues suggest, then perhaps the better part of valor requires Socrates to remain as a shield to protect Clinias and his friends from these rowdies who are making their way toward them.

Socrates generously introduces the brothers to his young friend as wise in serious matters. They are skilled, he explains, in military as well as juridical affairs. Why does he not mention their having been kicked out of Thurii? Is it manners? Perhaps he is hoping to preserve the young men's respect for their elders, even those elders who do not wholly deserve it.

The brothers, though, “regarded my words with disdain. They laughed and looked at one another and Euthydemus said, ‘we are no longer serious about these things, Socrates; we treat them as mere appendages to our real business’” (273d1-4).

What can prompt men to reject their past endeavors in this way? Socrates wonders the same thing.

“Virtue, Socrates—which we think we can provide to men better and more quickly than anyone” (273d8-9).

Ah, moral education is their new venture. Now, I might have said to these two, “Puhleeze. We are not impressed. You two oafs wouldn’t know virtue if it bit you in the behind.” But I would say it, or think it, partly because I already mistrust adult bravado.

That Socrates takes such a wild boast seriously is a feature of his honest and deep belief that people can improve. He himself has recently begun taking music lessons from the harpist Connus, and although his fellow students constantly laugh at him, he perseveres (272c). If, by some stroke of luck, these brothers have actually discovered that they can impart virtue to others, then it would be a far greater blessing than being able to play the harp.

“Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, please do all you can to gratify these men and display your skills (ἐπιδείξασθον) for my sake” (274d4-6). Then, indicating Clinias, he implores the brothers to “persuade this young man here that he must philosophize and care for virtue” (275a5-6). The brothers are eager to oblige. Euthydemus addresses the young man first, beginning what can only be described as a tag team assault:

“Clinias, who among men are the learners, the wise or the ignorant” (275d3-4).

Socrates marks this moment for Crito: “This being a significant question, the boy blushed and looked at me confused (ἄπορήσας). And I, seeing him discomfited, said, ‘Buck up, Clinias, and answer courageously, whatever you think. It may result in a great

boon” (275d5-e2). When youth blush before adults, it is sign of their deep goodness and desire to do well. Had Clinias simply brazened any old answer without hesitation, we wouldn’t know his character nearly so well.

So gathering up his pluck, Clinias answers. But his earnest response provokes two rapid displays of eristic gymnastics, which provoke in turn delighted applause and laughter from the followers of the two outcasts from Thurii. Dionysodorus even has the gall to whisper to Socrates that it was their aim all along to throw the boy for a loop (276e).

Why continue? Don’t most of us really dislike this sort of word play? Now that we see that the gist of the brothers’ “art” is to target others for fun, why not just get up and go? Making sport of another is no way to improve his confidence, after all, much less turn him toward wisdom or virtue.

There is a sense, though, that running away only leaves the thugs on the field. So Socrates intervenes. He tries to preserve a semblance of intergenerational trust by telling young Clinias that the men are just “playing” with him before they make good their claims and promises.

To show the men what he wants from them, and to prove his point to Clinias, he provides a little demonstration of genuine dialectic during which Clinias comports himself admirably. Yet when he turns Clinias back over to the two men they simply start in on him again.

At this point, young Ctesippus becomes angry. He does not like the brothers’ manner, he disapproves of their tone, and he cannot stand what they are attempting to accomplish at the expense of his friend. Ctesippus begins to function as a shield and a menacing distraction.

Socrates tries to pacify Ctesippus and volunteers to submit to the brothers' questions himself. Ctesippus will have none of it. Warning Dionysodorus to watch his mouth, he leaps into the ring and Dionysodorus works him over. But Ctesippus will not be cowed. After a brief exchange between Socrates and Dionysodorus Ctesippus interjects: "You say amazing things, O men from Thurii, or Chios, or from wherever and however you like to take your names. Talking nonsense doesn't bother you at all" (288a8-b2). One cannot help but admire Ctesippus and root for him against these bullies. One can feel the tension between the two groups rising.

Socrates again tries to repair this rift of competitive mistrust by ensuring Ctesippus of the brothers' wisdom and promising that "something thoroughly noble (πάγκαλον) in them will appear when they begin to be serious" (288c3-4). He then volunteers yet again to take the lead and show the brothers what he has in mind. He questions Clinias for a second time and once again the young man performs well.

Of course Crito, standing on the fringes, had missed all of this; and he now confesses enthusiastic amazement at Clinias' insights and warm approval of the direction of their conversation. For Socrates and Clinias had begun in earnest to seek the art that can, if properly employed, make people both wise and good (288d-290d). As he listens to Socrates' recollection, Crito himself takes up their question, for who wouldn't want to acquire both wisdom and goodness if he could? Crito wonders how it turned out, but Socrates confesses that their questions only generated more questions. Crito observes, "By Zeus, Socrates, it appears you all got very confused (ἀπορίαν)" (292e6-7).

Socrates laments that all he could do was "unloose a loud voice and beg the foreigners, as if I were summoning the divine twins, to save us, me and the boy, from this

mighty wave of argument,⁵⁸ and to be completely serious and reveal the nature of that knowledge in possession of which one can live nobly the rest of one's life" (293a1-6).

Be serious. Please, be serious.

Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, however, have only one trick in their bag. Ignoring Socrates' plea to speak in earnest, they return to their eristic, logic-chopping display, once again provoking uproarious laughter and knee-slapping applause in their followers.

Someone, though, has lost all patience. Ctesippus breaks in angrily to demand a proof that the two buffoons know all they claim. "In the name of Zeus, Dionysodorus, produce some evidence...by which I will know that you two are telling the truth" (294b11-c2).

Of course, the pair can't manage it, and they quickly return to harassing Socrates, who finally begins to resist their verbal trickery. He confounds their attempts to trip him up by qualifying and restricting the scope of his answers, by asking questions of his own, and by refusing to respond to inquiries whose precise meaning is not apparent. He soon realizes, however, that Euthydemus is becoming angry and so he decides to yield to the man. "If it seems good to you," he says, "to proceed [without my qualifications], then we must do so. For you know how to converse (διαλέγεσθαι) far better than I, who have only the art (τέχνην) of an amateur" (295d7-e3). To avoid anger and to maintain civility on both sides has become Socrates' goal.

But just as one's fingers will not play the harp at one's command, neither can Socrates stop qualifying the brothers' quibbles. At one point the brothers themselves bark

⁵⁸ Literally, "from the third wave of the argument (τῆς τρικυμίας τοῦ λόγου)." Compare the *Republic* 472a ff (τῆς τρικυμίας: 472a4).

at each other for “spoiling the argument,” which Socrates seizes as proof that they don’t know what they are talking about (297 a-b).

Ctesippus can’t bear it any longer. Throughout the raucous display, he has been watching, learning, and when he next enters the conversation, he is armed and ready to give it to the brothers as good as they have given it to their victims. This he accomplishes with a great guffaw to the astounded admiration and applause of his friends. “And Clinias was very pleased and he laughed, and Ctesippus swelled more than ten sizes. I think that he, Ctesippus, is deviously clever and has become so by hearing these things from these very men—for such wisdom is obtainable from no one else presently alive” (300d5-9). What goes around has finally come around. The brothers are confounded and beaten at their own game.

But rather than feeling vicariously victorious, Socrates is mortified. “Why do you laugh, Clinias, at such serious and beautiful matters?” (300e1-2).

Before Clinias can answer Dionysodorus goes in again after Socrates, the upshot of which leaves the poor man knocked out by the argument and lying speechless. Ctesippus then, coming to the philosopher’s aid, declares, “Bravo, Heracles, a beautiful argument!” and “O Poseidon, the clever arguments! I give up; these men are invincible!” (303a6-9).

The whole crowd of onlookers now erupts with cheering and unified laughter and applause till “they were all but worn out;” and they continued to the point that “the pillars in the Lyceum themselves almost resounded and were delighted with the men” (303b3-7).

Socrates openly credits the two brothers with Ctesippus’ victories. Their techniques are so easy to pick up that it has taken the young man no time at all to acquire and employ them himself. Ctesippus has learned to wield the verbal weapons and imitate

the sly tactics of the bully-brother buffoons. The next time he needs this sort of eristic talent, he will have it.

There is a sense in which Ctesippus' final victory is saturated by a feeling of loss. Why should any youth have to learn to manage and deflect adult aggression in this, or any other, way? Why do adults play it fast and loose with kids? If adults want to be jackasses, fine. But leave the youth alone. Socrates may have saved Clinias; he could not save Ctesippus.

But now, as Socrates concludes his account, Crito recalls something that reveals a new perspective on yesterday's events. There was at least one exception in the crowd of cheering people; another onlooker, and he wasn't laughing. As the crowd dispersed the man approached Crito and asked whether he studied with "these wise men" (304d7). No, no, Crito explains—besides, he couldn't even hear what was going on. He asks the man his opinion of the proceedings. The stranger is disdainful: he dismisses the conversation as nonsense and idle chatter. He then condemns "philosophy"—which term Crito himself applies to the conversation—as worthless. Had Crito been able to hear, he adds, he would have been ashamed for Socrates, whose willingness to participate in the brothers' display he characterizes as odd (ἄτοπος). The entire business, he concludes, is trivial and the men who engage in it are ridiculous (304e-305a).

Crito's revelation stuns Socrates. He doesn't know what to say. He immediately wants to know who this man, this critic of philosophy, is. Is he an orator, he wonders, or a writer of speeches? Crito assures him that he is not an orator, adding that he does know a lot about the business, and that he is clever and composes clever speeches.

Now Socrates offers a most interesting assessment of the unknown critic who has called him "odd" and philosophy "worthless."

“These are the men, Crito, whom Prodicus says are the boundary between the philosophical and the political man; they think they are the wisest of all men and that in addition to being so they are also thought to be so by very many men—and that the only thing that prevents them from having a good reputation among everyone is philosophy and those who study it. They believe that if they ruin the philosophers’ reputation, they will then be awarded celebrations as the undisputed champions of wisdom. They believe that they are truly the most wise, but that whenever in private conversations they come up short they have been cut off by Euthydemus’ followers” (305c6-d7). Socrates goes on to explain that these men, who think they are superior to philosophers and statesmen alike, are in fact inferior to both.

Socrates knows, then, that there are always onlookers, people sitting in judgment on the fences and sidelines, and that they may pose greater dangers to philosophy than the two eristic buffoons he encountered just yesterday. For these fence-sitters are ambitious men who would like to discredit philosophy by reducing it to its lowest common denominator: clever speech and eristic weaponry. Euthydemus and his brother are the plague of these men, for they foil their pretensions and boldly make fun of them. Socrates is incapable of that.

Socrates stops short of saying that the two brothers from Thurii are worthless, without philosophic talent, and shouldn’t even be considered philosophers. He suggests, instead—and alarmingly—that in philosophy, as in every pursuit, “most men are petty and worthless, whereas serious men are rare...” (307a3-5).

If we think about this for only a moment, we can plug its truth into any profession, for true excellence is indeed rare in any field. After all, Socrates can’t play the harp very well, which is not to say he can’t play it at all. Euthydemus and Dionysodorus have turned whatever true philosophic talent they have to self aggrandizement and

laughter. Their behavior is not unlike any other person who uses his intellectual gifts for less than serious and beautiful ends and directs his talents toward the acquisition of popularity, wealth, or power.

Having now fully understood the situation with Clinias and Ctesippus, Crito expresses his fears for the future of his own young son, Critobulus. He knows that Socrates can't be everywhere at once. He requests, therefore, that Socrates tell him how to plan for the child's educational future. Yesterday's display revealed to him the gulf that separates the best practitioner of philosophy from its worst. Chance encounters with people like the brothers from Thurii are likely. Who wouldn't be worried?

Socrates urges Crito to examine philosophy itself, not this or that practitioner who may very well be incompetent. Worry cannot relieve a parent from his obligation to educate his children. One must concentrate on the field of endeavor. "If [philosophy] appears petty to you, turn all men from it, not just your sons. But if it appears such as I take it to be, be bold enough to pursue and practice it—both you and you children, as the saying goes" (307c1-4).

Perhaps the final subterranean warning of the dialogue is just this: good men cannot be everywhere and they cannot protect everyone even when they *are* present. Youth will invariably discover that many of their adult mentors and teachers are inept buffoons, but they must learn what they can from everyone they encounter and turn their education to good despite its ragged edges.

Socrates does not think encountering such adults is reason enough to quit the field and wash one's hands of the whole business of intergenerational accord, nor does he want the young to imitate such people. Rather, when the chips are down, the mature man will try to mend intergenerational rifts when they threaten to break out. Philosophy must be judged by its aspirations rather than by its fallible, outrageous practitioners. Socrates

believes that philosophy is the art that can make us both wise and good; this faith allows him to take the high road even when two bullies use their very meager philosophic wits to raise a laugh and entertain others.

The *Euthydemus* is not a dialogue to study. It is an experience. As one reads it one will suddenly find oneself laughing, despite simultaneously being swamped by great waves of irritation. If and when that happens, remember that your laughter is the laughter of the onlooker. It has a dark side, for it tends to encourage adults to behave in outrageous ways for the sake of sport and entertainment. We might say, "Well, nobody got hurt. What's the big deal?" But this is the question, isn't it? Somebody walked away from that conversation with a new trick. And it won't be the last time he uses it.

GORGIAS

Subject: Rhetoric, justice, and eudaimonia.

Mode: Dramatic.

Setting: Dramatic date indeterminable, Athens.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Chaerephon.

Gorgias of Leontini.

Polus.

Callicles.

SHORT OUTLINE

GORGIAS

SHORT OUTLINE

- 447a-449a: **SOCRATES AND CHAEREPHON ARRIVE:**
Socrates and Gorgias (447a-c).
Chaerephon and Polus (447c-449a).
- 449a-461b: **SOCRATES AND GORGIAS:**
Definition of rhetoric (449a-455a).
The scope and power of oratory (455a-456c).
The unjust rhetorician (456c-457c).
On method (457c-458e).
Socrates exposes Gorgias' inconsistency (458e-461b).
- 461b-481b: **SOCRATES AND POLUS:**
Preliminaries (461b-462b).
Craft v. knack (462b-466a).
Polus on the power of rhetoricians (466a-468e).
Socrates' first objection: rhetoricians lack power (466e-467a).
Socrates' second objection: rhetoricians do not do what they want (467b-468d).
Socrates' conclusion (468d-e).
Disagreement concerning a) doing versus suffering injustice and b) the value of punishment (468e-474b).
Polus' sophistical refutation of Socrates' claim that the unjust man cannot be happy (471a-472c).
Polus' sophistical refutation of Socrates' claim that the unjust man who goes unpunished is wretched (472d-473d).
Polus' sophistical refutation of Socrates' claim that neither the unjust tyrant nor the unjust and punished tyrant is happy (473d-474b).
Socrates' argument that to do is worse than to suffer injustice (474b-476a).
Socrates' argument that punishment is good for the soul (476a-478d).
Consequences of the above arguments: justice, punishment, and happiness (478d-479e).
Socrates on the uses of rhetoric (480a-481b).
- 481b-522e: **SOCRATES AND CALLICLES:**
Enter Callicles (481b-482c).
Nature versus custom/law (482c-484c).
Critique of philosophy (484c-485e).
Socrates on trial (485e-486d).
Callicles as interlocutor (486d-488b).
Two quick refutations of Callicles' position (488b-490e).
Superior = stronger (488b-489b).
Superior = more intelligent (489b-490e).
Callicles clarifies his position (490e-491d).
- 491d-509c: **SELF-DISCIPLINE, PLEASURE, AND HAPPINESS:**
Callicles declares that self-indulgence produces happiness (491d-492e).
Socrates' two images of the soul (492e-494b).

Socrates' reductio ad absurdum (494b-495a).

Callicles declares the identity of the pleasant and the good (495a-c).

Socrates' first argument against identity of the pleasant and the good (495c-497d).

Socrates' second argument against the identity of the pleasant and the good (497d-499b).

Callicles denies the identity of the pleasant and the good (499b-d).

Good and bad pleasures (499d-500a).

Craft v. knack (500a-503a).

Two types of rhetoric (503a-d).

Order, discipline, and happiness (503d-505c).

Socrates' recapitulation of the argument (505c-508a).

Consequences and reflections (508a-509c).

509c-522e: **JUSTICE, POLITICS, AND HAPPINESS:**

To avoid suffering injustice (509c-511a).

Living well (511a-513a).

Athenian political life (513a-521a).

The life one should strive for (521a-522e).

523a-527a: **THE UNDERWORLD:**

Socrates' logos concerning judgment and punishment in the afterlife.

527a-e: **FINAL SUMMATION:**

Restatement of main conclusions.

[DETAILED OUTLINE](#)

GORGIAS DETAILED OUTLINE

- 447a-449a: **SOCRATES AND CHAEREPHON ARRIVE:**
447a-c: **Socrates and Gorgias:**
Gorgias, who has been boasting that he is capable of answering any question put to him,⁵⁹ agrees to engage in a discussion (διαλεχθῆναι).
447c-449a: **Chaerephon and Polus:**
Who is Gorgias?
Polus' unhelpful rhetorical display.
- 449a-461b: **SOCRATES AND GORGIAS:**
449a-455a: **Definition of rhetoric:**
a) Rhetoric is concerned with *speeches* (449c-e);
b) *Speeches of persuasion*, such as those spoken in the assembly and the law courts (449e-453a);
c) Persuasive speeches concerning matters of *justice and injustice* (453a-454b);
d) Persuasion that is based not upon knowledge but upon *belief without knowledge* (πίστιν... ἄνευ τοῦ εἰδέναι) (454b-455a).⁶⁰
- 455a-456c: **The scope and power of rhetoric:**
Gorgias reveals the awesome power of rhetoric (to which he had previously alluded at 452e).
- 456c-457c: **The unjust rhetorician:**
The teacher of oratory should not be blamed if a student uses his oratorical skills unjustly.
- 457c-458e: **On method:**
There is nothing worse than to be mistaken about the subject they are presently discussing.⁶¹
Socrates and Gorgias agree that it is good to have one's false beliefs refuted.
- 458e-461b: **Socrates exposes Gorgias' inconsistency:**
Gorgias will teach his students justice if they are not already just.
If someone learns justice, he is just.
A just man does just things.
A man who has been taught justice is just.
Therefore, Gorgias' students will not do what is unjust.
Gorgias' earlier plea that teachers of rhetoric not be blamed for the unjust acts of their students is incompatible with the present conclusion that his students will not act unjustly.

⁵⁹ See also 458d-e.

⁶⁰ Socrates prefaces this final inquiry with an assurance that he is not attacking Gorgias but only trying to ensure that everything is clear (454b-c; compare 453c). This is significant because the point raised in this section, namely that rhetoric is based not upon knowledge but belief, will be an important part of Socrates' critique of rhetoric. Socrates will similarly assure Gorgias of his intentions before he refutes him at 457c-d.

⁶¹ This would be an extraordinary claim if their conversation were really only about the proper definition of rhetoric. This is the first intimation of the fact, which becomes clearer as the dialogue progresses, that the real question at issue is how one should live one's life (see also 472c-d and 500c-d).

- 461b-481b: **SOCRATES AND POLUS:**
- 461b-462b: **Preliminaries:**
Socrates shamed Gorgias into contradicting himself.
- 462b-466a: **Craft v. knack:**
Rhetoric is not a craft (τέχνη); it is a knack (ἐμπειρία) for producing pleasure.
A craft is based upon *knowledge*, aims at the *good*, and is *admirable*; it produces *real* states of health in both body and soul.
A knack is based upon *opinion*, aims at the *pleasant*, and is *shameful*; it produces merely the *appearance* of health and fitness.
In short, rhetoric is a sort of fawning and flattery (κολακευτική; κολακεία).
- 466a-468e: **Polus on the power of rhetoricians:**
- 466a-e: Rhetoricians **a)** have the greatest power in their cities, for **b)** like tyrants they do whatever they want and whatever seems good to them to do.
- 466e-467a: **Socrates' first objection: rhetoricians lack power (against a):**
To have power is something good.
Rhetoricians do whatever seems best to them to do (ποεῖν ὅτι ἂν αὐτοῖς δόξη).
It is not good for one who lacks intelligence (νοῦς) to do what to him seems best (for his ignorance may cause him to mistake the bad for the good).
Rhetoricians lack intelligence.
Therefore when rhetoricians do what seems good to them, they do what is bad.
But power is good.
Therefore, rhetoricians lack power.
- 467b-468d: **Socrates' second objection: rhetoricians do not do what they want (against b):**
If someone acts toward some end, what he wants is not the act itself but the end.
Everything is either good, bad, or sometimes good, sometimes bad, and sometimes neither.
We perform those actions that are bad or neutral for the sake of the good.
Therefore, what we want is the good.
If a rhetorician acts in such a way as seems best to him, but which really is bad for him (which will happen given his lack of knowledge), then he is not doing what he wants.
- 468d-e: **Socrates' conclusion:**
Therefore, it is possible for a man who does whatever seems good to him neither to have power nor to do what he wants.
- 468e-474b: **Disagreement concerning a) doing versus suffering injustice and b) the value of punishment:**
Socrates: doing what is unjust is the worst of all things (μέγιστον τῶν κακῶν).
Polus: suffering injustice is the worst; the only problem with committing injustice is that the unjust man might be punished (ζημιουῖσθαι);
Archelaus, tyrant of Macedonia, acts unjustly and is happy (εὐδαίμων).

- Socrates: happiness is determined by education and justice; the noble and good man (ὁ κάλος καγαθὸς) is happy; the unjust and wicked man is wretched (ἄδικον καὶ πονηρὸν... ἄθλιον).
- 471a-472c: **Polus' sophisticated refutation of Socrates' claim that the unjust man cannot be happy:**
 Polus: Archelaus ascended to the throne unjustly but he considers himself happy, as do many others.
 Socrates: a mere tallying of opinions is not evidence of truth.
- 472d-473d: **Polus' sophisticated refutation of Socrates' claim that the unjust man who goes unpunished is wretched:**
 Socrates: the unjust who are punished are less wretched than those who escape punishment.
 Polus: punishment is painful.
 Socrates: this is telling scary stories, not a refutation.
- 473d-474b: **Polus' sophisticated refutation of Socrates' claim that neither the unjust tyrant nor the unjust and punished tyrant is happy:**
 Socrates: the unjust tyrant is wretched, though a tyrant who is punished for his injustice is less wretched than one who avoids punishment.
 Polus: laughs.
- 474b-476a: **Socrates' argument that to do is worse than to suffer injustice:**
 It is more shameful (αἰσχίον) to commit than to suffer injustice.
 One thing is more shameful than another because it surpasses it in pain or badness (κακόν) or both.
 Doing injustice is not more painful than suffering injustice.
 Nor, therefore, is it both more painful and worse.
 The only remaining option is that doing injustice surpasses suffering injustice in badness.
 Therefore, doing injustice is worse than suffering injustice.
- 476a-478d: **Socrates' argument that discipline is good for the soul:**⁶²
 Being justly disciplined (τὸ κολάζεσθαι δικάως) and submitting to justice (τὸ δίδοναι δίκην) are the same.
 All just things, insofar as they are just, are admirable.
 He who is justly disciplined has admirable things done to him.
 Admirable things are good.
 Therefore, he who is justly disciplined has good things done to him.
- 477a-e: He who is justly disciplined is benefited in that his soul is improved by the excision of badness.
 Corruption of the soul (injustice, lack of discipline—ἡ ἀκολασία) is the worst and most shameful sort of corruption.
- 478a-d: Justice administered by judges through the correct application of discipline cures one's soul of injustice.
 It is good to have badness in one's soul removed (i.e., to submit to justice), and better still never to be so corrupted.
- 478d-479e: **Consequences of the above arguments: justice, discipline, and happiness:**

⁶² In this section Socrates addresses his disagreement with Polus over the value of punishment (469c-470a). At this point, however, he employs the nomenclature of discipline (ἡ κόλασις) rather than of punishment (ἡ τιμωρία). This sets up his later dispute with Callicles over the merits of self-indulgence (ἡ ἀκολασία).

Therefore, happiest (εὐδαιμονέστατος) is the man who has no badness in his soul.

Second is the man who gets rid of it through submitting to justice.

He who retains badness in his soul has the worst life.

This is the man who is most unjust and who is able to avoid punishment.

480a-481b: **Socrates on the uses of rhetoric:**

If rhetoric enables one to commit injustice with impunity, then rhetoric is useless or harmful.

One should use rhetoric to secure punishment for one's unjust friends and freedom for one's unjust enemies.

481b-522e: **SOCRATES AND CALLICLES:**

481b-482c: Callicles is incredulous.

482c-484c: **Nature (φύσις) versus custom/law (νόμος):**

Socrates defeated Gorgias and Polus because they were ashamed to express their true thoughts, namely that a life of injustice is superior to a life of justice.

The truth according to nature: the better man should have a greater share than the lesser man.

The customary belief that the just life is superior to the unjust life is a lie spread by the weak in violation of the laws of nature.

484c-485e: **Critique of philosophy.**

Philosophy impedes a man's development of the skills required for success in public and private life.

485e-486d: **Socrates on trial.**

Socrates is so inexperienced in public activities that if an enemy should drag him into court and charge him with crimes of which he is innocent, he would be unable to defend himself.

486d-488b: **Callicles as interlocutor:**

Callicles has the three qualities that make for an ideal interlocutor: knowledge, goodwill, and frankness (ἐπιστήμην τε καὶ εὐνοίαν καὶ παρρησίαν).

488b-490e: **Two quick refutations of Callicles' position.**

488b-489b: **a) Superior = stronger:**

When Callicles says that the superior should rule the inferior he means that the strong should rule the weak.

Superior = stronger = better.

The many are stronger than those upon whom they impose the laws.

Thus the laws of the many are the laws of the superior and the better.

Therefore, the laws of the many are admirable by nature.

But it is a law of the many that it is wrong to take more than one's share, and that to do what is unjust is more shameful than to suffer it.

Therefore, Callicles' previous distinction between nature and custom/law is illegitimate—according to his own agreements, the two coincide.

489b-490e: **b) Superior = more intelligent:**

The more intelligent man (φρονιμώτερος) should rule over and have a greater share than the many less intelligent men.

But this leads to ridiculous results, such as that the weaver should wear the most and the most beautiful garments, and the cobbler should wear the largest and greatest number of shoes

490e-491d: **Callicles clarifies his position:**

By the superior Callicles means men who can intelligently manage the affairs of the city and who are courageous and able to enact their intentions without succumbing to softness of soul (μαλακία τῆς ψυχῆς). These men should rule and have a greater share than those who are ruled.

491d-509c: **SELF-DISCIPLINE, PLEASURE, AND HAPPINESS:**⁶³

491d-492e: **Callicles declares that self-indulgence produces happiness:**

Superior men must not practice moderation and self-discipline (σωφροσύνη and ἐγκράτεια).

The life of wantonness (τρυφή), self-indulgence (ἀκολασία), and freedom (ἐλευθερία) is virtue (ἀρετή) and happiness (εὐδαιμονία).

492e-494b: **Socrates' two images of the soul:**

Callicles' ideal man is like an uninitiated soul wondering unhappily through the underworld.

494b-495a: **Socrates' reductio ad absurdum:**

According to Callicles' standards the happy life would be the life of scratching itches or the life of a passive homosexual.

These are the results if one reduces happiness to the enjoyment of pleasure and refuses to discriminate between good and bad pleasures.

495a-c: **Callicles declares the identity of the pleasant and the good:**

Callicles insists that the pleasant and the good are identical.⁶⁴

495c-497d: **Socrates' first argument against the identity of the pleasant and the good:**

Neither the good nor the bad is acquired or gotten rid of simultaneously. Both the pleasant and the painful are acquired and gotten rid of simultaneously.

Therefore, the good and bad are not identical to pleasure and pain.

497d-499b: **Socrates' second argument against the identity of the pleasant and the good:**

Whoever feels pleasure is good and whoever feels pain is bad; and the more pleasure or pain one feels the better or worse one is.

But foolish and cowardly men feel pleasure to the same degree as or more than intelligent and brave men.

⁶³ In this, the longest continuous section of the dialogue, Socrates develops an argument to counter Callicles' position that radical self-indulgence produces happiness. Socrates' refutation depends upon the premise that pleasure and the good are not identical. Thus, before he can make the case for the life of self-mastery, he must prove that the good and the pleasant are different, which he attempts to do from 495a-499b.

⁶⁴ In the first explicit indication that *Callicles is not the ideal interlocutor* after all, he seems to have formulated his answer not according to his actual belief, but so as to guard against contradicting his earlier assertions. Later [at 499b], when Socrates concludes his argument against the identity of the pleasant and the good, Callicles responds that no one would ever deny that some pleasures are better than others. This directly contradicts his position here at 495a. So, Callicles is being uncooperative, disingenuous, or dishonest either here or at 499b. However we characterize his behavior, and whichever of the two responses we label misleading, the point is the same: Callicles is trying to avoid refutation rather than seeking the truth.

Therefore, foolish and cowardly men are as good as or better than intelligent and brave men.

But Callicles previously called foolish and cowardly men bad and intelligent and brave men good.

Therefore, Callicles' agreements commit him to the inconsistent position that bad men are as good as or better than good men, and good men are no better than or worse than bad men.

499b-d: **Callicles denies the identity of the pleasant and the good:**

Some pleasures are good and some are bad.⁶⁵

499d-500a: **Good and bad pleasures:**

Good pleasures are beneficial (ἀγαθὰ...αἱ ὠφέλιμοι).

Bad pleasures are harmful (κακὰ...αἱ βλαβερά).

Similarly, some pains are good and some are bad.

Therefore, we should strive for the good pleasures and pains and avoid the bad ones.

Only a man with craft (τεχνικός) can distinguish good from bad pleasures.

500a-503a: **Craft v. knack:**

The real subject of the discussion is the sort of life one should live.

500e-501c: A craft investigates the nature of its objects and the causes of their activities, and it is able to provide an account (λόγος) of each of these.

A knack knows nothing of the nature or causes of the pleasures it attempts to secure; it proceeds irrationally (ἄλόγως), and through routine and experience retains a memory of the usual outcome of its procedures.

501d-503a: The rhetorician is not concerned with the good of the citizens he addresses; his business is to gratify their desires for the sake of his own private advantage.

503a-d: **Two types of rhetoric:**

Rhetoric may be divided into two types, namely that which is directed to the common good and is admirable, and that which is merely shameful flattery.

Dispute over which type of rhetoric was practiced by men such as Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades, and Pericles.

503d-505c: **Order, discipline, and happiness:**

An organized soul is a good soul.

Ordered and organized souls are called lawful (νόμιμοι) and orderly (κόσμιοι).

Lawful and orderly souls are produced by justice and moderation.

The good rhetorician must produce justice and moderation in the souls of his audience, and eliminate injustice and self-indulgence (ἀκολασία).

It is harmful for a corrupt soul to indulge its appetites.

To prevent a soul from satisfying its appetites is to discipline it (κολάζειν).

Therefore, discipline is better for a soul than self-indulgence.

505c-508a: **Socrates' recapitulation of the argument:**

505c-506c: Callicles drops out of the conversation.

⁶⁵ This is the point that Socrates required as a premise for his argument against Callicles' claim that a life of self-indulgence produces happiness. To this argument he now returns.

- Socrates does not know the truth of these matters (οὐδὲ...ἔγωγε εἰδὼς λέγω ἢ λέγω), but in sum:
- 506c-508a: The pleasant and the good differ.
 The pleasant must be done for the sake of the good, not vice versa.
 We are good when some excellence (ἀρετή) is present in us.
 Excellence comes to be in a soul through order, correctness, and craft.
 Therefore, a good soul (ἀγαθή) is a soul which has its own proper order.
 A soul so ordered is a temperate (σώφρων) soul.
 Therefore, a temperate soul is a good soul.
 A foolish (ἄφρων) and self-indulgent (ἀκόλαστος) soul is bad (κακή).
 The good man is just, pious, and brave.
 The bad man is unjust, impious, and cowardly.
 Therefore, the temperate man is completely good, he does what he does well and nobly, and he is blessed and happy.
 The self-indulgent man does badly and is wretched.
 Therefore, happiness requires temperance.
 The self-indulgent man, to be happy, must be disciplined.⁶⁶
- 508a-509c: **Consequences and reflections:**
- 508a-c: Therefore, (a) a man should accuse himself, his family, or his friends if he or they have done anything unjust; (b) the unjust life is both more shameful and worse than the just life; (c) the man who would be a proper rhetorician should be just and have knowledge of justice.
- 508c-509c: Socrates' positions appear to be bound by arguments of iron and adamant.
- 509c-522e: **JUSTICE, POLITICS, AND HAPPINESS:**
- 509c-511a: **To avoid suffering injustice:**
 To avoid suffering injustice one must be a ruler oneself, or an associate of the ruler.
 To be a friend of the ruler one must have a character similar to that of the ruler.
 If the ruler is an unjust tyrant, then to be his friend one must be unjust oneself.
 Therefore, by ensuring that one does not suffer injustice one ensures that one commits injustice, which is the worst of all things.
- 511a-513a: **Living well:**
 A talent (like rhetoric) for preserving the lives of unjust men is not admirable.
 One should strive not just to live, but to live as well as possible (ὡς ἄριστα).
- 513a-521a: **Athenian political life:**
 The noble politician must improve his fellow citizens.
 Under Pericles' leadership the people became rebellious, unruly, and wild.
 Since, as Homer says, the gentle are just, the people must have become unjust as well.

⁶⁶ This concludes the refutation, begun at 491d, of Callicles' claim that the life of self-indulgence produces happiness.

- Therefore, Pericles could not have been a good politician—for under his influence the citizens became unjust and bad.
- 517c-519b: Pericles, Themistocles, et al. enriched Athens with material possessions; but as a result the citizens lost all sense of justice and self-discipline.
- 519b-521a: Politicians who claim to improve the citizens but then complain that these same citizens treat them unjustly are foolish—if they had really improved the citizens, the citizens would not be unjust. Similarly, sophists claim to be teachers of excellence (ἀρετή) but often accuse their students of treating them unjustly. But had they really improved their students, these same students would never be unjust to anyone.⁶⁷
- 521a:-522e: **The life one should strive for:**
Socrates claims to be the only true politician in Athens, for he is the only man who refuses to gratify the citizens' appetites for pleasures and instead strives to improve them. He may not be able to protect himself from suffering injustice, but he can provide the protection that the argument has consistently proven to be most admirable, namely protection against being unjust. One should beware of being unjust even more than one should fear death. For of all bad things, the worst is to arrive in Hades with an unjust soul.
- 523a-527a: **THE UNDERWORLD:**
Socrates' account (λόγος)—not a myth (μῦθος)—of the underworld, which he tells *as* true (ὡς ἀληθῆ γάρ ὄντα σοι λέξω).⁶⁸ Souls are judged with no consideration of their worldly influence and prosperity; the only criterion relevant to the evaluation is justice. Punishment (τιμωρία) is inflicted on souls who can benefit from it, or as an example to others. Socrates may not be able to defend himself in a trial before an Athenian jury. But Calicles, if he continues to live in admiration and pursuit of injustice, will be unable to defend himself before the jury in Hades: he will be condemned in the most important trial of all.
- 527a-e: **FINAL SUMMATION:**
- 527a-c: Neither Gorgias, Polus, nor Calicles—the wisest of the contemporary Greeks (σοφώτατοί τῶν νῦν Ἑλλήνων)—has been able to refute Socrates' arguments for the following conclusions: (a) doing injustice is worse than suffering it; (b) being good is more important than seeming good; (c) the best life is the just life, and the unjust man should submit to justice and discipline; (d) in all activities, rhetoric included, one must look to the good rather than the pleasant.
- 527c-e: We should practice justice in life as well as in death.

⁶⁷ This point recalls Socrates' exchange with Gorgias at the start of the dialogue.

⁶⁸ Socrates later says that he believes these things to be true (πιστεύω ἀληθῆ εἶναι, 524a8-b1) and that he has been persuaded by these accounts (ὑπὸ τούτων τῶν λόγων, 526d3-4).

GORGIAS INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

Ancient Greek culture is often described as agonistic. This word, “agonistic,” comes from the Greek word agôn (ἀγών), which means contest, trial, struggle. The Greeks created and inhabited a competitive society. They made everything a contest—athletics, politics, drama, even vase painting, as when Euthymides, on one of his own paintings, named a rival and wrote in effect “you can’t paint like this!” The ultimate struggle, of course, is war; and classical hoplite combat was much closer to a contest governed by rules than our modern wars of total destruction. Philosophical disputation, too, was often regarded as an agôn. Indeed, the first words of the *Gorgias* are “of war and of battle” (πολέμου καὶ μάχης). This is appropriate given the tone of the work. Socrates goes to war in this dialogue, and not only in self-defense.

This conception of philosophy as an agôn may surprise many readers, for we moderns tend to think of philosophy as an occupation more suited to the armchair than to the field of battle. But this is because the modern world has forgotten what is—or anyway what can be—at stake in philosophy. Among the Greeks philosophy was directly relevant to one’s life; philosophical doctrine was imbued with existential significance. In selecting a school of thought one selected a way of life.⁶⁹ In Plato’s dialogues the choice is often articulated more broadly; that is, the choice is not between one specific philosophical school and a rival, but between a philosophical and a non-philosophical life. The latter form of life is usually represented by politics or oratory, or some combination of both. This is the first thing we must understand about the *Gorgias*: the philosopher and the orators are waging war over rival conceptions of the good life. It is a war bounded by

⁶⁹ For more on this idea see the two excellent books by Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Blackwell: Malden, 1995) and *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Harvard: Cambridge, 2002).

regulations and proprieties to which the combatants are expected to adhere. But it is combat all the same.

But what exactly is to be gained—or lost—by battling in this way? Socrates is obviously committed to his life of philosophy, as the orators are committed to their way of life. Surely the loser of this fight will not abandon his accustomed practices and sit as a disciple at the feet of the victor. Nor will he be taken prisoner and forced to reform. What trophy, then, can the winner expect to carry away from this contest?

With this question we begin to see what is distinctive about the philosophical agôn. Unlike the typical contest, which demands exclusively physical excellence, philosophy requires excellence of soul—virtue. And whereas competition in the physical arena is rewarded with material possessions, power, or fame, each of which becomes the personal and exclusive possession of the victor, the rewards of true philosophical insight may be shared among many individuals. In other words, when a philosopher like Socrates defeats an opponent he may walk away from the contest with nothing obvious to show for it—but someone will come away with something. Who is this someone? And what is this something?

Let's answer these questions by looking specifically at the *Gorgias*. Just prior to the opening of the dialogue Gorgias exhibited his oratorical talents before a crowd of admirers and potential students. Such displays have made Gorgias famous throughout the Greek world; his fame has brought him power, for he is in demand everywhere and students flock to pay a fee just to hear him speak; and these fees have enriched him to such a degree that he can acquire whatever material possessions he desires. This sort of reputation and influence was attractive to young Greek men, especially to ambitious young Athenians. They wanted to learn from Gorgias because their history and their standard course of education taught them that the acquisition of political power was

the greatest good for which a man can strive. In other words, they admired Gorgias because they desired a certain way of life.

Socrates represents something altogether different. He does not respect the political life as envisioned by the typical Athenian, as he makes clear near the end of the *Gorgias* (515c ff). He believes, in fact, that what passes for success in that life is an impediment to true well-being. The skills one must acquire, and the actions one must perform, to be considered a “good” politician usually condemn one to being a bad human being. What does it profit a man if he gains the world but loses his soul? Socrates did not pose the question in precisely these terms, of course; but the words do communicate concisely and accurately one of his deepest concerns. Socrates cares about the souls of his fellow citizens, especially the young, for whom there is still hope because their souls are malleable. Their potential is a cause for optimism; but it is equally a cause for fear. The lure of gaining the world is always and everywhere more strikingly seductive than the promise of saving one’s soul. This is true especially for the young, who in adolescence are dominated by bodily desires and who have yet to accumulate the life-experience and develop the foresight that empower them to oppose the harmful among their impulsive inclinations. They are, therefore, easily seduced by the sort of physical gratifications that the oratorical life dangles before their watery eyes.

To return, then, to our question: when Socrates is victorious in a philosophical agôn, who is benefited and what is his prize? In the *Gorgias*, as indeed in many other dialogues as well, the answer to the first part of this question is: the members of the audience, the young men who witness the clash, are benefited. In this dialogue Plato intentionally alerts us to the presence of an audience. It is not insignificant that Socrates explicitly mentions Gorgias’ potential students just after the orator admits that he and his students need have no knowledge whatever of the subjects about which he will teach

them to speak so persuasively (455c6-d5). Socrates knows how dangerous this can be. The power to persuade coupled with ignorance of the truth may very well lead to disaster. This is especially true if one's business is to persuade others about justice and injustice, which is precisely what Gorgias promises to teach his students. If a man persuades a city to undertake a particular course of action by convincing the citizens of its justice, when it is in fact unjust, he may lead them into a grave error. Consider the example of Cleon, who in 427 convinced the Athenians to execute all the adult males in the city of Mytilene. They dispatched a ship to carry out the orders only to regret their decision and rescind the directive the following day. The second ship managed to arrive in time to prevent the executions, but this was pure luck: had the ship encountered contrary winds, a stormy sea, or any one of countless other eventualities, the men of Mytilene—many of whom the Athenians knew full well to be innocent of any crime—would have been put to death unjustly.

And so we approach the answer to the second part of our question. The prize young men take away from Socrates' victories is the preservation of their souls. Socrates contends with orators so often and so vigorously because he is trying to defend the souls of Athens' youth. He has seen the rise and fall of supposedly great men. Plato, too, knows this history; he writes with the memory of men like Alcibiades constantly in mind—men who possessed enormous potential for greatness but whose lusts for “power” and “glory” destroyed them. Indeed, Alcibiades' career may be the greatest, and hence also the gloomiest, illustration of the promise and the danger that attend those who have been blessed with natural gifts. They can do almost anything they want; but as a result they must select among a dizzying assortment of possible futures. Will they be seduced by the lure of immediate pleasure; or will they toil up the arduous incline of self-discipline? Socrates labors to expose the immense difference between the rewards that lie at the end

of these two ways. The smooth road leads to enjoyment; the rough road leads to greatness.

Socrates fights, then, to win a good life (εὐδαιμονία) for the non-combatants who are just coming of age. Of course, this is possible only if the spectators are able to learn the lesson Socrates' peculiar form of combat is meant to teach. His method is indirect; at times it can be hard to follow. It is also often frustrating, especially to those who entertain only facile and agreeable ideas. Socrates' pool of potential associates (we do not say "students"), therefore, is necessarily small. One imagines the philosopher had no illusions about the number of souls he might reach. Of the many men who gathered round his public confrontations Socrates' way would appeal to only a few—but what men these few were! Plato, for example. So let us keep in mind that the agôn depicted in the *Gorgias* is fought on behalf of an audience. And mark this fact, too: that audience includes us.

So Socrates and Chaerephon arrive too late to experience Gorgias' thrilling exhibition. No matter: Socrates would rather converse with the man than passively imbibe the mellifluous flow of his voice. He has no interest in being seduced by words; he wants to scrutinize them. Fortunately, Gorgias boasts not only that he can answer any question put to him, but that he can do so with the utmost brevity. He is a trained speaker, after all; and the art of speaking involves more than just delivering long-winded orations.

Socrates begins with what appears to be a simple question: what is oratory? Gorgias should respond to this without difficulty. But he does not; it turns out that he is incapable of providing a concise definition of the practice at which he claims to be an expert. Socrates must guide him step by step through the process of clearly distinguishing one thing from another:

Oratory involves speeches.

Yes, but what *kind* of speeches?

Persuasive speeches.

Yes, but persuasive speeches *about what*?

Persuasive speeches about justice and injustice.

All right; but does this persuasion result from the communication of knowledge—as a mathematician is persuasive because he teaches the truth—or is it merely persuasive without any connection to knowledge of the truth?

Persuasive speeches about justice and injustice not accompanied by knowledge.

Finally!

Socrates' first lesson to the audience of potential students: there are some questions that Gorgias cannot answer as concisely as he promised. More, he cannot even answer them *at all* without assistance. And who is the man who knows how to pose these questions and what it takes to answer them appropriately? Socrates, a philosopher.

This is the moment when Socrates refers to Gorgias' potential students. He wonders what Gorgias can offer them given that any man who possesses knowledge of a specific field would make a better adviser regarding matters related to his expertise than an orator who is entirely ignorant of the subject. This is a legitimate concern; Gorgias has no doubt met such skeptical queries before. His reply, therefore, may be one of many stock orations that he has memorized for just such an occasion. However that may be, he addresses the issue by delivering a longish speech concerning the mighty power of oratory. The appeal is directed to the basest instincts of his audience. But he knows his audience well: his most avid students are those who are most eager to satisfy precisely these instincts. They crave power; and the promise of this power is enough to blind them to the sort of doubts manifested in Socrates' question.

Power exists most obviously through its manifestations, especially power of the kind Gorgias has on offer. This generates new trains of thought, one of which Gorgias pursues in the course of his address. To his promise of power he appends the request that

the public not hold orators responsible if their students use their power unjustly. This is a clever rhetorical ploy: on the surface it expresses an earnest and concerned respectability; yet beneath this lurks the intimation that from Gorgias one may acquire a power unregulated by legal or ethical constraints. This is ominous, but only if one thinks about it critically. Gorgias does not expect his audience to do this. The type of man he attracts will consider this, not ominous, but enticing.

But Gorgias is not addressing his typical audience; nor is this an exhibition. That business ended earlier in the day. Gorgias is now speaking to Socrates, and this is an agôn. Now we, reading Gorgias' address, might detect nothing amiss. A little hyperbolic, perhaps; but otherwise unobjectionable. But we are not Socrates; we have not fought as many battles as this calloused old philosopher; we have not trained ourselves to detect, even in the thrusts and parries of combat, the exposed flesh of falsehood. Socrates is always alert; and on this day his reflexes are precise. He has observed a flaw in Gorgias' armor—and he moves in for the kill...

Yet Socrates does not attack before warning Gorgias that he is about to strike and securing his permission to proceed. Notice, however, that Gorgias' mind is still on his audience. He says that he doesn't want to bore them with a prolonged discussion. It is more likely that he would rather they not witness the blow that he now expects to fall but that he cannot deflect because he doesn't even know where it will land. When the audience begs them to proceed Gorgias must weigh his options: if he continues, he may suffer a dialectical defeat; if he bows out, he will be ashamed, especially since he has boasted so about his ability to answer questions. He chooses to continue: he just might rally and defend himself after all.

It is not to be. Socrates gradually draws Gorgias in, maneuvers him into position, and delivers the fatal blow. Now at first Socrates' strike appears to many readers to be

insignificant, anticlimactic. After all, it consists only of revealing an inconsistency in Gorgias' statements: Gorgias mentioned the possibility of his students acting unjustly but later assured Socrates that he would teach his students justice and agreed that if they learn justice, they will be just and so never act unjustly. These statements are indisputably inconsistent. But so what? Aren't we making too much of this?

We are not. This will be clear if we recall the nature of this agôn. Gorgias is an orator; he has claimed to be able to answer any question put to him. Words, persuasive words, are his business. Inconsistencies are not persuasive; they are the opposite of persuasive. A man of Gorgias' talents should not succumb so easily on the field of his own expertise. Socrates even alerted him to the fact that he suspected his statements were inconsistent. In fact, at the time Socrates said this, they were not inconsistent. Socrates thought Gorgias' allusion to unjust students of oratory was incompatible with his earlier assertion that oratory involved persuasive speeches about justice. But since Gorgias had said that oratory need not involve knowledge of justice, there was no inconsistency. The problem does not arise until after Socrates' warning, when he secures Gorgias' agreement that he will teach his students justice and that as a result they will know justice and so never be unjust. He should have resisted this line of reasoning. But he either could not or would not, or he failed to realize that this is where he had to make his stand.

However we account for the outcome, the fact is that Gorgias has been beaten at his own game. He had just awed the crowd with a spectacular verbal display, and assured everyone present that there was much more where that came from. Then, in off the street walks this silly old philosopher who displays a verbal and intellectual dexterity that Gorgias cannot begin to match. And Socrates does it so effortlessly.

We said that Socrates' dialectical victory, his triumph over the famous Gorgias on the field of the orator's own specialty, was his first lesson to the audience. There is a

second lesson as well. Like the first, it exposes something about Gorgias; but it goes deeper and so is more revealing. The first lesson involves Gorgias' competence as an orator; the second addresses his character as a man. The Greeks were fond of weighing a man's deeds against his words. They wanted to know whether he puts his money where his mouth is, as we would say. Consider Gorgias with this in mind: when speaking extemporaneously, uninhibited by ulterior motives—when, in short, expressing his sincere beliefs and so exhibiting his true character—he himself raises the possibility that his students might be unjust. He seems genuinely concerned that his apprentices' depraved deeds might somehow be attributed to him. This tells us something about Gorgias' deeds: he does not teach his students justice, nor does he examine potential students and accept only those of whose justice he is confident. He doesn't care one whit about the justice or injustice of his disciples. As long as he is not blamed when they misbehave, he is content. Now we know that he believes that the skills he imparts provide his students with unmatched power, for he said this explicitly. Adding this fact into our calculations, what more do we learn about his deeds? Gorgias knowingly supplies an instrument of immense power to men who may very well use it for unjust ends—and he does this regularly and for a fee!

Thus Gorgias' deeds. But what of his words? Well, when he is asked explicitly whether he will teach this skill, of whose tremendous power he has recently boasted, to just anyone, whether just or unjust, he lies. He assures Socrates—and everyone attending to his words—that he will ensure that his students are just. But, as we have just seen, he does not do this at all. Who among us would admit to empowering the unjust? Come to think of it, who among us would empower the unjust in the first place? But this is precisely Gorgias' business; he is just too ashamed to admit it.

The intervention of Gorgias' student Polus confirms all that we have said here. He acknowledges Gorgias inconsistency, attributes his misstep to shame, and through his own line of argument reveals that he, Gorgias' student, cares far more for power than for justice. Before we examine Polus' contribution to the argument, however, we should note a third lesson one may take from Socrates' victory. It is appropriate to mention it here since it is a generalization based upon the second lesson and is supported also by Polus himself.

This third lesson is a general point about oratory, or the oratorical life. This life promises to make one persuasive and powerful; yet it may also be characterized by ignorance and injustice. As we have noted, these are explosive combinations. Persuasion plus ignorance, power plus injustice: though these do not guarantee a reign of unrestrained hedonism, violence, and brutality, they certainly make such a regime more likely. The point is that oratory can do nothing of itself to prevent this menace—it cannot even recognize such a state as dangerous in the first place. This regime, moreover, may manifest itself in an individual soul as well as in a city. The man seduced by oratory believes that he will acquire power over the city. The *Gorgias* teaches that unless he has power over himself he will have no opportunity to dominate his city, for he will sooner destroy himself from within. It teaches, moreover, that this internal power cannot be had by pursuing oratory, but only by loving wisdom.

Socrates' encounter with Polus is really just a prelude to his titanic battle with Callicles. This is not to say that Polus' section of the dialogue is devoid of substance. Far from it: this section lays out not only the central problems of the dialogue, but much of the material upon which Socrates will later draw to resolve them. The early distinction between a "craft" (τέχνη) and a "knack" (ἐμπειρία) is particularly relevant in this regard. We would like, however, to attend for a moment to another feature of Plato's

work that Socrates' exchange with Polus sets in relief. Readers of the dialogues often complain that Socrates' interlocutors are easy targets. They assent to Socrates' arguments too readily: "Yes, Socrates." "Of course, Socrates." "Indeed you are right, Socrates." In short, Socrates' opponents too often bob when they should weave. One often hears this complaint regarding Socrates' "proof" that whatever is shameful is bad (474c-475c), which seems somehow weak but which Polus does not resist at all. This can be irritating. It can also make one skeptical of Socrates' arguments, for the fact that he can defeat a weak opponent proves little about the merits of his own position. "So his argument can defeat *that* opponent? Big deal; he was a feeble opponent!" The best arguments are those that overcome the most powerful opposition. Opponents like Polus simply lack the resources to produce any serious resistance.

These are legitimate concerns; and one should always read Plato with one's mind on high-alert. The dialogues are swollen full of content, so many ideas to contend with, so many levels of meaning and significance to attend to, so many puzzles, twists, and turns. That said, consider two points regarding the merits of opponents such as Polus.

First: Socrates says again and again throughout the dialogues that he is less interested in general statements of truth or falsity than in the specific beliefs of the man in front of him. He wants to know what *he* believes; he addresses his arguments and proofs specifically to *him*. This is related to the fact, mentioned earlier, that Socrates cares about the souls of individual men. His philosophy does not float idly in a realm of abstract propositions; it dwells within living and breathing individuals. But also, considered from a rhetorical point of view and with the audience in mind, Socrates tailors his arguments to the individual before him because this man is his immediate antagonist. If Polus cannot oppose Socrates' argument, the audience learns something about him, both as a thinker and as an orator. Polus is weak. Remember, this is an agôn. Socrates employs this same

technique during his clash with Callicles. His “proofs” that the many are stronger than the few and are therefore the measure of natural justice (488b-489b) and that the more intelligent man should have more food or wear more shoes than anyone else (489b-490e) are not meant as definitive refutations of Callicles’ position. Rather, they serve to reveal Callicles’ failure to provide an adequate definition of “superior,” which is a key term in his account of justice. Moreover, with these arguments Socrates as it were throws Callicles to the floor two times in quick succession. The expert orator should have detected the trajectory of Socrates’ line of questioning and defended against it. But he did not; he did not because he could not. In this way Socrates notifies the audience that he can dominate Callicles just as he dominated Gorgias and Polus. He will go beyond this, of course; he will develop more sophisticated and legitimate arguments. But he begins by letting everyone know who the real champion is here.

The second point about the dialogues’ weak arguments is two-fold. First, the arguments may not in fact be weak. One must never judge an argument after a first reading. Socrates is not averse to presenting an argument under a thin veil of disguise if doing so serves a tactical-rhetorical purpose. He may arrange the premises in a surprising order; he may employ as a premise a proposition that appears at first to be immaterial; he may incorporate into the argument an inference from a previously accepted proposition without making his reasoning explicit. One must not evaluate the arguments before rereading them closely, sorting out and clarifying their premises, and studying them with attention to nuance and detail.

Now for the second half of this second point: Suppose we have carefully evaluated one of Socrates’ arguments and still find it wanting. Are we finished; may we now reject the argument and everything that depends upon it? Not so fast. Recall Socrates’ argument that if Gorgias teaches his students justice, they will never be unjust.

This is another line of reasoning that readers often find specious. But this is not all Socrates has to say on the subject. His point here is related to his famous—or infamous—claim that he who knows the good will do the good. Socrates constructs other and more fully developed arguments for this point elsewhere in the dialogues. In the *Gorgias* he relies upon an argument sufficient to deal with a specific interlocutor. If, in another dialogue, he faces a more clever or more thoughtful man, he will employ a correspondingly sophisticated argument. The *Gorgias*, in fact, is remarkable in this regard, for it functions almost as three separate dialogues. Within this one work Socrates' confronts three different opponents, each one more formidable than the last. To meet this challenge he must constantly improve his arguments. Polus identifies the very weaknesses in Socrates' arguments as well as in Gorgias' responses that we readers detect. Precisely where Gorgias landed in the soup with a "Yes, Socrates," Polus stands firm with a "No, Socrates." This compels Socrates to develop the argument in more detail, to argue explicitly for its hidden premises. With this more powerful version of the argument he is able to surmount Polus' objections. But then he confronts a still mightier opponent: Callicles rejects the very points to which Polus too readily assented. And so Socrates must improve his argument yet again. This process enables Plato to develop an argument at higher and higher levels of sophistication, or to reverse the metaphor, it provides him the opportunity to reveal to his readers the argument's hidden depths. Plato seems always to have kept something in reserve, disclosing only so much as the situation calls for. Sometimes less, sometimes more. On occasion he reveals very much indeed. Yet one suspects that he never divulged the full extent of his treasure.

So far we have written at length about Socrates and Gorgias, a little about Socrates and Polus, and next to nothing about the main event, Socrates' bout with Callicles. This exactly reverses the amount of space devoted to these episodes in the

dialogue. We justify this by noting that the present essay is intended not as an argument-by-argument analysis or commentary, but rather as a summation of what we take to be one of the dialogue's most important lessons. Socrates' discussion with Callicles is brilliant and exciting, exasperating and challenging; one should read and reread it, arguing the while with both men, arguing as well with oneself. The specific arguments are fascinating, and their conclusions are spectacularly illuminating; the chains of reasoning provide material for rowdy debate and silent contemplation alike. The dramatic elements are noteworthy as well (note, in particular, Callicles' conduct). Yet these many dialectical and dramatic details are not so many random and dangling loose ends; they serve a larger purpose. And this larger purpose, the dialogue's higher end, is implicitly present in its beginning. The development that culminates in Socrates' encounter with Callicles produces nothing entirely new; rather it gradually reveals the full significance of what he has already said to Gorgias.

During his conversation with Gorgias Socrates remarks, "I think nothing is so bad (κακὸν) for a man as having a false opinion about the things we are now discussing" (458a8-b1). Really? Nothing so bad as misunderstanding the nature of oratory? What a thing to say! Socrates' statement must remain either mysterious or outrageous so long as one assumes that oratory is in fact the subject of this dialogue. It is not, and Socrates' remark is the first overt indication that something more is at stake. Not merely something more: something *much* more, for it involves what is best or worst for us as humans. What can this be? Socrates is more explicit when arguing with Polus about the merits of the life of a tyrant. "The main point of these [matters in contention between us] is knowing or not knowing who is happy (εὐδαίμων) and who is not" (472c8-d1). Now this makes more sense of Socrates' earlier assertion. If we consider that "eudaimonia" is best translated as

“the good life,” then we shall see that it is not at all outrageous to claim that a false opinion about eudaimonia is a terrible thing. Eudaimonia is that for the sake of which we do all that we do. We all want a good life. If we misidentify our ultimate end, we shall direct our actions toward the wrong goal, which goal will by definition be inferior. We shall think we are progressing toward the good life when in fact we are moving in some other direction toward a life less than good. We must, therefore, strive to identify our goal—our *telos*—correctly, for otherwise we will not attain it except intermittently and by chance. How, then, may we arrive at our goal, actualize our *telos*; how does one live the good life? Yes: this is the question, as Socrates makes clear when disputing Callicles’ equation of eudaimonia with the life of self-indulgence. “You see,” he says, “that our discourse is about this...namely, in what manner we must live—whether in the manner you advocate for me, conducting the business of a “man,” speaking to the assembled masses, practicing rhetoric, and engaging in politics in the way you orators do; or in the manner I advocate, according to the life of philosophy” (500c1-8). So this was Socrates’ point all along; this is what lay behind his surprising statement to Gorgias. This dialogue is not about oratory per se. It is the expression of an agôn between rival conceptions of the good life: the life of oratory—a life, that is, of bodily pleasures and worldly power, which in the end are mere ephemeral appearances, *versus* the philosophical life—a life based upon knowledge of reality and love of the good, which ultimately are manifestations of eternal and actual Being.

In summary, then, let us say this: the *Gorgias* depicts an agôn, a competition between rival conceptions of the good life. Or we might stress the competitors themselves, in which case we should say that the struggle is not between concepts but among men. In this way we stress the point that although these men are debating ideas, the ideas are meant to be embodied and actualized in living beings. The dispute does not

concern a mere concept: “the good life,” but an existential reality: the good *life*. The contestants, then, are men. In a way this makes the proceedings radically unfair, for Socrates stands alone against three combatants, one of whom is the greatest orator of his day. Yet this quantitative disparity is counterbalanced by an opposing qualitative inequality. The single philosopher, though inferior in body to his three antagonists, is far and away their superior in soul. His superiority is so great, in fact, that it compensates for his material shortcomings. Three against one—yet in the end the one stands alone, victorious.

Near the end of the dialogue Socrates admits that he cannot claim to know for certain the truth of the position he has maintained throughout the proceedings. Yet he does claim to know this: in all his years of dialectical disputation no one has refuted his conception of the good life. To the contrary, all those who have advocated rival conceptions have proven unable to defend them (508e-509a). Thus Socrates and his opponents. But what about the third party? We must not forget, here at the conclusion of these reflections, the audience. There they sit, these young men whose lives are still ahead of them. Socrates has fought mightily for them—“for them,” which is to say on their behalf. The orators have fought for them too—but in their case “for them” means “over them.” They have fought over these young men in order to acquire them; they have fought, in short, on their own behalf. When these orators are victorious they collect their fees and embellish their bodies with gaudy refinements. Socrates in victory remains barefoot and poor. His reward is shared among those in the audience with ears to hear, and it flows from a purse that cannot be exhausted. To say it again: Socrates fights to save the souls of Athens’ youth. As for Gorgias and his crew, their souls are already lost.

MENO

Subject: Virtue, and whether it can be taught.

Mode: Dramatic.

Setting: 402, Athens.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Meno.

Slave boy.

Anytus.

SHORT OUTLINE

MENO SHORT OUTLINE

- 70a-71d: **Can virtue be taught?**
Socrates, Meno, and Gorgias.
- 71d-79e: **What is virtue?**
Meno's first definition and Socrates' objections (71d-73c).
Meno's second definition and Socrates' objections (73d-77a).
Meno's third definition and Socrates' objections (77b-78b).
Meno's fourth definition and Socrates' objections (78b-79e).
- 79e-86c: **Aporia and Learning as Recollection:**
Meno's aporia (79e-80d).
Knowledge and the immortal soul (80d-82a).
The slave boy's aporia (82a-84c).
Demonstration that learning is recollection (84c-86c).
- 86c-96d: **Can virtue be taught?**
Hypothesis (86c-87c).
Virtue is knowledge, and so can be taught (87c-89a).
Virtue is not knowledge, and so cannot be taught (89a-e).
Anytus arrives (89e-90b).
Anytus on sophists (90b-92d).
Anytus on statesmen (92e-95a).
Meno on statesmen, sophists, and poets (95a-96a).
Virtue cannot be taught (96a-d).
- 96d-100b: **Virtue, true opinion, and the divine:**
Virtue and true opinion (96d-97c).
True opinion and knowledge (97c-98b).
Recapitulation and conclusions (98c-99b).
Virtue and the divine (99c-100b).
Socrates departs (100b).

[DETAILED OUTLINE](#)

MENO DETAILED OUTLINE

- 70a-71d: **CAN VIRTUE BE TAUGHT?:**
Socrates, Meno, and Gorgias.
Is virtue the result of teaching and learning (διδασκτόν...μαθητόν) or practice (ἀσκητόν), or does it come to humans by nature (φύσει) or in some other way?
Socrates knows nothing about virtue; nor has he ever met anyone who does.⁷⁰
- 71d-79e: **WHAT IS VIRTUE?**
71d-72a: **Meno's first definition of virtue:**
Virtue differs according to the (type of) person.
72a-73c: **Socrates' objection:**
Meno has not identified the specific single form (έν...τι είδος ταύτόν) that all the virtues share and that makes each one a virtue.
Any act, to be done well, must be done moderately and justly (σωφρόνως καί δικαίως).
Therefore, moderation and justice are necessary for any (type of) human to be good (ἀγαθός).
Therefore, all human beings are good in the same way, which requires that they possess the same virtue.
- 73d: **Meno's second definition of virtue:**
Virtue is to be able to rule over others.
- 73d: **Socrates' objection:**
73d: Children and slaves do not rule over others, but they can be virtuous.
Besides, a ruler must rule justly.
- 73d-77a: **Justice and virtue:**
Justice is one virtue among many (examples of color and shape).⁷¹
- 77b: **Meno's third definition of virtue:**
Virtue is to be able to procure the beautiful things (των καλών) one desires.
- 77b-78b: **Socrates' objection:**
He who desires beautiful things desires good things (ἀγαθών).
Of those who desire bad things (των κακών), some believe the bad to be good.
Of those who desire the bad and know it to be bad, some think the bad does not harm them (βλάπτει).
Both those who believe the bad to be good, and those who believe the bad does not harm them, are ignorant of the nature of the bad and in fact desire the good.
Regarding the class of men who know that the bad is bad and also know that it harms them:
Those who are harmed are wretched (ἀθλίους).
Those who are wretched are unhappy (κακοδαίμονας).

⁷⁰ Note the references to Gorgias, which continue throughout the dialogue.

⁷¹ In this section is located the so-called dialectical requirement on definitions (75c-d).

But no one wants to be unhappy.
Therefore, no one wants the bad; everyone desires the good.
But if everyone desires the same thing, the element of Meno's definition that identified virtue with the desire for beautiful things cannot distinguish the virtuous from the vicious man.

78b-c: **Meno's fourth definition of virtue:**

Virtue is to have the power to procure good things.

78c-79e: **Socrates' objection:**

78c-e: If the acquisition of the good is not accompanied by some one of the virtues, the acquisition will not be virtue, but vice (κακία).

Thus, whenever it is unjust to procure good things the inability (ἡ ἀπορία) to do so is virtue.

Therefore, it is no more virtue to procure than not to procure good things.

79a-e: Meno's definition, then, amounts to the claim that virtue is to act with a part of virtue.

But this definition is idle, for one who does not yet know what virtue is will not understand what it means to act with a part of virtue.

79e-86c: **ON APORIA AND LEARNING AS RECOLLECTION:**

79e-80d: **Meno's aporia:**

Socrates is in aporia (ἀπορεῖς) and he brings others into that state.

Socrates is using potions and charms to bewitch Meno into aporia.

Socrates is like an electric ray that benumbs its victims.

Socrates is like a sorcerer (γόης).

80d-82a: **Knowledge and the immortal soul:**

80d-80e: Meno's familiar eristic argument (ἐριστικὸν λόγον): it is impossible for a man to seek either what he knows or what he does not know. For if he knows it, he need not seek it; if he does not know it, he knows not what to look for.

81a-e: Socrates' true and beautiful (ἀληθῆ... καλόν) discourse concerning divine things (περὶ τὰ θεῖα πράγματα): the soul is immortal and through its cycles of birth and rebirth has learned all things.

Therefore, the soul can recollect (ἀναμνησθῆναι) the things it previously knew.

Seeking and learning just are recollection (ἀνάμνησις).

82a-84c: **The slave boy's aporia:**

Merely by asking questions Socrates brings the slave into aporia, in which condition he admits his ignorance and so is willing to seek the truth.

84c-86c: **Demonstration that learning is recollection:**

He who does not know something has within him true opinions (ἀληθεῖς δόξαι) about the things he does not know.

Under questioning he will recover the knowledge from himself (ἀναλαβῶν αὐτὸς ἐξ αὐτοῦ).

If questioned repeatedly, his knowledge will be accurate.

To recover knowledge in this way is to recollect it.

This act of recollection implies either that the man always possessed the knowledge, or that he acquired it at some time.

But if he always possessed it, he would always have known.

Therefore, he acquired it.

But he did not acquire it in this life.

Therefore, he must have acquired the knowledge during the time when he existed in non-human form.

Therefore, the truth about reality is always in our soul (ἀεὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια ἡμῖν τῶν ὄντων ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ).

Therefore, the soul is immortal.

Socrates would not affirm this entire account with utter confidence (τὰ... ἄλλα οὐκ ἂν πᾶν ὑπὲρ τοῦ λόγου διισχυρισάμην); yet he does believe that by seeking that which we do not know we become better, more manly, and less idle (βελτίους... ἀνδρικώτεροι... ἦπτον ἀργοί).

86c-96d: **CAN VIRTUE BE TAUGHT?**

86c-87c: **Hypothesis:**

If virtue is knowledge (ἐπιστήμη τις), it is teachable; if it is not knowledge, it is not teachable.

87c-89a: **Virtue is knowledge, and so can be taught:**

Virtue is good.

If anything other than knowledge is good, virtue may not be knowledge.

If, however, there is nothing good that knowledge does not comprise, they would correctly suspect (ὀρθῶς ὑποπτεύοιμεν) that virtue is knowledge.

Virtue is beneficial (ὠφέλιμον).

Health, wealth, beauty, justice, courage, and all such things sometimes benefit us and sometimes harm us.

The correct employment (ὀρθῆ χρῆσις) of these things benefits us; the wrong employment harms us.

These things are correctly employed only by the soul under the guidance of wisdom (ἡγουμένης... φρονήσεως).

Therefore, if wisdom is the beneficial, and if virtue is beneficial, then virtue is (as a whole or in part) wisdom (φρόνησις).

89a-e: **Virtue is not knowledge, and so cannot be taught:**

If something is teachable, it must of necessity (ἀναγκαῖον) have teachers and learners.

If there are neither teachers nor learners, it is probably not teachable.

There seem to be no teachers of virtue.

89e-90b: **Anytus arrives:**

Socrates suggests they invite Anytus,⁷² the well-educated son of a wise father, to take part in their investigation.

90b-92d: **Anytus on sophists:**

He who desires to learn about domestic and political management ought not to learn from sophists, for they corrupt those who associate with them.⁷³

92e-95a: **Anytus on statesmen:**

Any Athenian gentleman (ὁ καλὸς κἀγαθός) can teach virtue better than the sophists.⁷⁴

⁷² This Anytus was one of the men who brought Socrates trial.

⁷³ Anytus here employs the noun διαφθορά, corruption, which is cognate with the διαφθείροντα at *Apology* 24c in the accusation that Socrates corrupts the youth.

⁷⁴ Compare Meletus in the *Apology*, 24c ff.

But virtuous Athenians such as Themistocles, Aristides, Pericles, and Thucydides failed to pass their virtue down to their sons.⁷⁵

Anytus becomes angry at what he perceives as Socrates' slander (κατηγορεῖν) of these men.⁷⁶

95a-96a:

Meno on statesmen, sophists, and poets:

Athenian gentlemen of Meno's acquaintance sometimes claim that virtue can be taught, sometimes that it cannot.

Meno cannot decide whether the sophists can teach it.

Gorgias himself professes only to make men cunning speakers (λέγειν...δαινούς).

Even a poet such as Theognis is ambivalent about the matter.

96a-d:

Virtue cannot be taught:

If such people are so confused about whether virtue can be taught, they cannot themselves teach it.

But there are no others who might reasonably be supposed to teach it.

Therefore, no one teaches virtue.

If there are no teachers, neither are there learners.

But they previously agreed that that of which there are neither teachers nor learners cannot be taught.

Therefore, virtue cannot be taught.

96d-100b:

VIRTUE, TRUE OPINION, AND THE DIVINE:

96d-97c:

Virtue and true opinion:

Good men guide themselves and others toward that which is beneficial.

But this does not require knowledge.

Correct or true opinion (ὀρθή...δόξα ἀληθής) is no less beneficial (ὠφέλιμόν) than knowledge.

97c-98b:

True opinion and knowledge:

True opinions are easily lost unless one binds them by means of an account of their reason (αἰτίας λογισμῶ).

This is recollection (τοῦτο δ' ἐστίν...ἀνάμνησις).

Only knowledge bound in this way is stable.

Socrates does not claim to know this; he is merely offering his own conjecture. But that knowledge and opinion are different: this he is committed to as something more than conjecture; this he knows.

98c-99b:

Recapitulation and conclusions:

Men are good and their actions beneficial either by knowledge or right opinion.

Neither knowledge nor true opinion comes to be by nature.

Therefore, men are not good by nature.

According to previous agreements, virtue is not knowledge and men are not good as a result of teaching

Therefore, statesmen are good and their actions are beneficial as a result of correct opinion.

99c-100b:

Virtue and the divine:

⁷⁵ The sons of Aristides and Thucydides admit this themselves in the *Laches*, 179c-d.

⁷⁶ At *Apology* 23e Socrates says that Anytus is prosecuting him on behalf of the statesmen (as well as the craftsmen).

Such men are like oracle-mongers and prophets, who say many true things under inspiration without knowledge.

They are divine and possessed by the god.

Meno agrees, though he notes that Anytus may be vexed (ἀχθεταί) with Socrates for saying so.⁷⁷

Virtue results neither from nature nor from teaching; it is a divine apportionment unaccompanied by understanding (θεία μοίρα... ἄνευ νοῦ).

100b:

Socrates departs:

This, anyway, is how it appears at present.

To be certain, they must understand what virtue is.

Unfortunately, Socrates must go.

Meno should persuade Anytus of these things, for this would make him gentler (πραότερος).

In so doing Meno will profit (ὀνήσει) the Athenians.

⁷⁷ At *Apology* 23e, when Socrates mentions Anytus as one of his accusers, he describes him as vexed (ἀχθόμενος).

MENO INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

The most famous maxim of the Classical Age is the Delphic imperative: “Know thyself” (γνώθι σαυτόν). Such a command is not as easy or straightforward as one might think. It has nothing whatever to do with listing one’s credentials or vital statistics. Socrates treats the command as one of the most serious and beautiful tasks a human being faces, and one of the most easily skirted.

Some Platonic dialogues are pitiless, for they make the dramatic point that for more than a few adults as well as for the youth in their charge it is probably too late to obey the oracle’s command. These poor unfortunates live out their lives without an inkling of who and what they really are.

Meno is a pitiless dialogue. It depicts two people incapable of Delphic insight. It also shows—and here, although there is an intimation of optimism, the optimism itself reveals a deeper tragedy—that however hard the philosopher tries to guide them, the best he may able to do is shield others from their hubris by sowing a tiny seed of warning that the ignorant man is not in charge of himself or of others. But such a seed has to have soil, and in this discourse one of the speakers leaves the scene before Socrates can sow it.

There are four speakers in the dialogue. Meno is a wealthy, confident, articulate youth visiting Athens for a few days, most probably in 402 BC. By the time Socrates is tried and executed in 399, Meno will have embarked on the misadventure of the expedition of the Ten Thousand;⁷⁸ he will have been captured and held prisoner under horrible torture for a year before perishing on foreign soil. With Meno is a nameless illiterate boy, a slave. They are staying at the home of Anytus, young Meno’s aristocratic and powerful host. Anytus will become Socrates’ chief prosecutor in 399 and thereby

⁷⁸ This expedition is recounted in Xenophon’s *Anabasis*.

earn his everlasting place in the annals of injustice, much like Pontius Pilate. Anytus is the stone upon which the mustard seed is lost. The last speaker is, of course, Socrates.

By the time this dialogue reached the Athenian public, all knew Meno's miserable end. What a sobering experience it must have been to relive a conversation in which we see Meno full of life, promise, energy, and confidence, and Anytus before he entered the halls of infamy.

There are clear signs in the opening lines that convey the sort of student Meno is, and he is evidently not the sort who is capable of understanding or aspiring to obey the Delphic command. It is as if Meno is conducting a multiple choice poll: Tell me, Socrates, can virtue be

- a. taught, or
- b. is it by nature, or
- c. by both, or
- d. none of the above?

Whoa, Meno.

Socrates is not in the habit of responding to multiple choice questionnaires; he insists he doesn't have a clue how to answer such a question. He needs a genuine discussion of what virtue is before he can hazard a guess as to its causes or origins. Not only that, Socrates insists he doesn't know anyone in Athens who would dare presume to answer such a bold question.

Meno is puzzled. It is a simple, straight forward question. Why won't Socrates just answer it?

Throughout the first half of the dialogue, Meno wheedles, cajoles, complains, and finally accuses Socrates of obstructionism. If Socrates won't even answer a plain, well formed question, what is Meno to think, after all?

Socrates won't do it. If Meno cannot tell Socrates what he thinks virtue is, Socrates is in no position to help him. Meno tries. He tries again and fails. He becomes frustrated. Suddenly he confesses that he has heard that Socrates is like an electric ray that paralyzes its prey. He cannot believe that he, too, has fallen victim to Socrates' sting. He drops names in order to verify his credentials and education; he has been taught by the best sophists in land; he reveals that he has spoken eloquently before crowds on this very subject with great success.

This final revelation is significant, for it portrays Meno for who he really is: an orator seeking applause. He has no aptitude for philosophy. He cares less for discovering the truth than for acquiring a bit of doctrine and persuasive argumentation to store away for use in some future speech. He is frustrated because Socrates will not just give him what he wants. Indeed, he blames his present confusion on Socrates' philosophical methodology; he insists that dialectical investigation is futile. At this point he articulates what has come to be known as *Meno's Paradox*: "If we don't know what virtue is, how can we look for it? And if we find it, how will we recognize it?" This marks the aporetic high-water mark of the dialogue.

Socrates assures Meno that this paradox is not unknown to him. It may sound plausible at first; yet others wiser than himself have convinced him that its force is only apparent, that inquiry into such matters is legitimate and may very well be successful. He offers to prove the point with the illiterate slave boy who is standing by. The slave has no education, no credentials. No one could be further from the prospects of a podium and cheering applause than this slave boy.

The slave comes forward meekly; he is honest and willing to try. This alone proves him a better student than Meno. By means of a diagram he draws in the sand, Socrates shows Meno that his own slave is capable of insights concerning geometry upon

which all men can agree. How does Meno explain this? All Socrates has done is ask the boy questions. Knowledge is in him, just as it is in you, Meno. We simply have to question one another patiently and carefully to force the knowledge to the surface. Socrates calls this method of retrieval “recollection.” The human soul is divine, has lived before, will live again, and has within it all the knowledge we should ever need or want. But we have to unearth that knowledge with care and patience through a process of dialectic.

Socrates is willing to admit that such a course is not without side streets and dead ends, for the slave made errors along the way; but he has proven that self correction is possible, and that in any case, this is the only way to discover whether we know what we are talking about. Do we have true opinion, or knowledge? This is the heart of the problem. Do we know or only believe what is true? A man may have a true opinion, but unless he knows the roots of its truth dialectically, he cannot be said to know it. Finally, even if we do not find the complete answer, we will “be braver and less idle” human beings for having sincerely tried.

But even with the demonstration in the sand with his slave, and Socrates’ explanation that knowledge as recollection occurs under dialectical conditions, Meno returns maddeningly to his original, very anti-dialectical, question. It is as if he dozed during the demonstration of the slave’s innate abilities. The dramatic message is that the slave boy has more potential than Meno. But his opportunities are such they will never be realized. Meno has more opportunities than the slave, but far less potential to realize them.

When Anytus abruptly shows up and briefly joins their company, Socrates rallies. Here is Meno’s host; perhaps he can help turn Meno’s soul toward the goal. Dramatically, though, Anytus is a foreshadowing of who Meno would have become as an

adult. Socrates barely begins his dialectical effort when Anytus displays his own impatience with the question concerning the nature of virtue. He becomes irritated by Socrates' suggestion that mere labels and credentials, such "sophist" or "Athenian gentleman" are not foolproof indicia of knowledge. Just as Meno is too pressed for time to participate in the upcoming initiation into the Mysteries at Eleusis, Anytus has no time to reflect on the ground or conditions of the virtuous soul. Meno and Anytus are thus clones: twins separated by time. They are each one beyond saving. Speaking cleverly before large crowds and winning their applause have captivated Meno just as speaking cleverly and winning the approval of large juries will be the biggest event in the life of Anytus.

Anytus huffs off, leaving Socrates to face Meno's insistence that surely someone must know and be able to say how people become good. Socrates knows by now that Meno is incapable of fulfilling the Delphic command. He also knows that he enjoys the acclaim of others. Who are these others that Socrates will never meet or know? Whoever they may be, Socrates wants to protect them from Meno's influence. To this end he forges two powerful and memorable hypotheticals.

The first hypothetical concerns point (a) in Meno's original multiple choice question and the second matches choice (b).

The hypotheticals read smoothly and quickly. If virtue could be taught, we would expect certain results to follow. For example, virtuous men would be able to teach their sons. But virtuous men have slacker sons. So virtue can't be taught. Choice (a) is not an option. Similarly, if virtue were to occur by nature, we ought to be able to recognize it in infants and children as we do most other traits that occur in us by nature, such as dimples or freckles. But we cannot recognize it in youth, thus virtue is not conferred by nature. Choice (b) is not an option. If (a) is not an option and (b) is not an option, then (a) and (b)

together, option (c) must be rejected as well. That leaves option (d): virtue comes to humanity some other way. Socrates elects (d). And what is this other source of virtue? If it cannot be taught and it does not come naturally, then it must be a gift from the gods.

We have said that Socrates has produced these hypotheticals in order to shield Meno's future audiences from his baleful influence. What sort of protection can they provide? If Meno stays true to form, he will use these hypotheticals in future addresses. And if he goes all the way with them, he will have unwittingly reminded the audiences who hear them that there are gods capable of bestowing gifts, or not, as they see fit. Not a bad lesson, however oblique, that we should honor the gods. One of these gods is Apollo, on whose shrine at Delphi the famous maxim "know thyself" was inscribed. Socrates framed these hypotheticals suspecting that they would find their way into Meno's speeches. If they do, Meno will not understand their true significance; he will appreciate only their rhetorical flare. He, who cannot himself obey it, will offer up the Delphic command for the consideration of his audiences, and he will do so in situations that are hostile to proper dialectical efforts. But the dialectical conclusion will come through—it will reach men who desperately need a reminder that there is something important left to accomplish in their lives, and that in this pursuit no merely clever speaker can be of service. The orator will unwittingly deliver the philosopher's message. This, then, is the shelter Socrates has provided for those numberless men he will never know. He can do no more for them.

EUTHYPHRO

Subject: Piety.

Mode: Dramatic.

Setting: 399, the Royal Stoa in the agora.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Euthyphro.

SHORT OUTLINE

EUTHYPHRO SHORT OUTLINE

- 2a-5c: **At the royal stoa:**
 Meletus' indictment of Socrates (2a-3e).
 Euthyphro's indictment of his father (3e-4e).
 Euthyphro's knowledge of the divine (4e-5c).
- 5c-11b: **Euthyphro on the pious:**
 Euthyphro's first definition (5c-6c).
 Socrates' objection (6c-e).
 Euthyphro's second definition (6e-7a).
 Socrates' objection (7a-8b).
 Euthyphro's third definition (8b-9e).
 Socrates' objection (divine command) (10a-11b).
- 11b-e: **On the instability of Euthyphro's words.**
- 11e-15c: **Euthyphro on the pious:**
 The pious is a part of the just (11e-12d).
 What part of the just is the pious? (12d-e).
 Euthyphro's fourth definition (12e-13a).
 Socrates' objection (on care) (13a-14a).
 Euthyphro's fifth definition (14a-e).
 Socrates' objection (14e-15b).
 Back to the beginning (15b-c).
- 15c-16a: **Euthyphro departs.**

DETAILED OUTLINE

EUTHYPHRO DETAILED OUTLINE

- 2a-5c: **AT THE ROYAL STOA:**
- 2a-3e: **Meletus' indictment of Socrates:**
The charges: Socrates is corrupting (διαφθείροντες) the young by making new gods (φησὶ γὰρ με ποιητὴν εἶναι θεῶν) and not believing in the old ones (τοὺς δ' ἀρχαίους οὐ νομίζοντα).
Euthyphro: this must have something to do with Socrates' divine sign (τὸ δαιμόνιον) and his innovations regarding divine matters (καινοτομοῦντός σου περὶ τὰ θεῖα).
- 3e-4e: **Euthyphro's indictment of his father:**
Euthyphro is indicting his own father for murder.
His relatives say this is impious (ἀνόσιον), but they do not understand.
- 4e-5c: **Euthyphro's knowledge of the divine:**
Euthyphro possesses accurate knowledge (ἀκριβῶς οἶει ἐπίστασθαι) of the divine, the pious, and the impious.
Socrates must become Euthyphro's pupil and so avoid Meletus' charge of impiety (ἀσεβεία).
- 5c-11b: **EUTHYPHRO ON THE PIOUS:**
- 5c-6c: **Euthyphro's first definition:**
What is the nature of the pious (τὸ εὐσεβές) and the impious (ἀσεβές)?
The pious (τὸ ὅσιον) and the impious (τὸ ἀνόσιον) is each always the same as itself, having some one form (ἰδέα).
The pious is prosecuting the unjust.
Examples of Zeus and Chronos.
- 6c-e: **Socrates' objection:**
This is an example, not a definition.
The pious is pious by means of one form (μιᾶ ἰδέα); but an example does not explain the form itself by which every pious action is pious (ἐκείνο αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος ᾧ πάντα τὰ ὅσια ὀσιά ἐστιν).
Socrates wants to know this form (ἰδέα) so that he may look to it (εἰς ἐκείνην ἀποβλέπων) and use it as a model (χρῶμενος αὐτῇ παραδέγματι) in order to judge the piety of any action whatever.
- 6e-7a: **Euthyphro's second definition:**
The pious is that which is dear to the gods (τὸ...τοῖς θεοῖς προσφιλές).
- 7a-8b: **Socrates' objection:**
Euthyphro has said that the gods dispute with one another.
Their disputes must involve the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad.
Therefore, some gods must consider some things just, beautiful, and good, while other gods consider those same things unjust, ugly, and bad.
The gods love what they consider just, beautiful, and good, and hate what they consider unjust, ugly, and bad.
Therefore, some gods will love some things that other gods hate.
Therefore, the same things will be both hateful to the gods and dear to the gods.
Therefore, the same things will be both pious and impious.

- 8b-9e: **Euthyphro's third definition:**
The pious is that which all the gods love.
- 10a-11b: **Socrates' objection (divine command):**
 The pious is loved because it is pious; it is not pious because it is loved.
 In other words, the fact that it is pious is the reason of the gods' love; it is not the case that the gods' love is the reason for its being pious.
 But something is beloved of the gods (τὸ φιλούμενον, τὸ θεοφιλές) because it is loved by them; it is not loved by them because it is beloved of them.
 In other words, the fact that the gods love something is the reason it is beloved; it is not the case that the gods love it because it is beloved.
 In sum, the pious is pious independently of the gods' love, whereas that which is beloved of the gods is beloved precisely because they love it.
 Therefore, that which is pious is not the same as that which is beloved of the gods (τὸ θεοφιλές).
 The fact that it is dear to the gods turns out to be only *a quality* of the pious. That which is pious *is* in fact dear to the gods; but this provides no insight into its nature.
- 11b-e: **ON THE INSTABILITY OF EUTHYPHRO'S WORDS:**
 Euthyphro's words are like the works of Daedalus, whose sculptures were said to be so life-like that they actually walked.
- 11e-15c: **EUTHYPHRO ON THE PIOUS:**
- 11e-12e: **The pious is a part of the just:**
 Everything pious is just (δίκαιον), but not everything just is pious.
- 12e-13a: **Euthyphro's fourth definition:**
The pious is the part of the just that concerns care for the gods (εὐσεβές τε καὶ ὄσιον τὸ περὶ τῶν θεῶν θεραπείαν).
- 13a-14a: **Socrates' objection (on care):**
 By "care" Euthyphro cannot mean that humans benefit the gods and make them better.
 Euthyphro: it is a service (ὑπηρετική).
 But what do the gods produce by employing mortals as servants?
 Euthyphro does not respond directly to this question.
- 14a-e: **Euthyphro's fifth definition:**
Piety (ὀσιότης) is the knowledge of asking and giving to the gods.
 To ask correctly is to ask of the gods what we need; to give correctly is to give to the gods what they need.
- 14e-15b: **Socrates' objection:**
 The gods receive no advantage (ἡ ὠφέλεια) from our gifts; our gifts are honor (τιμὴ), praise (γέρα), and gratitude (χάρις).
 Socrates: so the pious is gratifying (κεχαρισμένον) to the gods, but neither advantageous (ὠφέλιμον) nor dear (φίλον).
 Euthyphro: to the contrary, the pious is the dearest of all things.
- 15b-c: **Back to the beginning:**
 It has already been concluded that the pious and that which is loved by the gods (τὸ θεοφιλές) are not the same.

But Euthyphro's most recent formulation, namely that the pious is dear to the gods (τὸ τοῖς θεοῖς φίλον), amounts to the same thing as saying that the pious is loved by the gods (τὸ θεοφιλές).

Therefore, either they were wrong before to reject this definition or they are wrong now to assert it.

15c- 16a:

EUTHYPHRO DEPARTS:

Socrates exhorts Euthyphro to begin the search from the start.

Euthyphro is in a hurry; it is time for him to go.

Socrates laments that Euthyphro is dashing his hopes of learning from him and so convincing Meletus to drop the indictment.

EUTHYPHRO INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

The *Euthyphro* is often a reader's introduction to Socrates. The experience can be jarring, for it plunges one into the rapid currents of his distinctive philosophical method without warning. The result: one must form one's first impression of the man while straining and struggling not to drown. It is rarely a favorable impression.

Here, then, are three tiny caveats to the virgin reader:

1. You are about to be tested. Few of us are accustomed to the tightly wound reasoning this conversation displays. As we read, we are apt to feel rising frustration, just as Euthyphro does. This is intentional. At the close of the dialogue, Euthyphro has had all he can take and simply runs away, leaving Socrates calling for him to come back, please come back. The question Plato is raising between the lines is stark and simple: Are you more like Euthyphro or Socrates?
2. As you read, you will forget that a man's life is at stake. This, too, is intentional. Euthyphro is preparing to march into court to prosecute his father for murder, and if he succeeds, his father may be executed. The only person standing between him and this possible eventuality is Socrates. This conversation matters to a man who is not present.
3. Socrates is not the same man with everyone. He tailors his speech and attitude to match and draw out the single, particular person before him. When he is with youth, he is tender. When he is with sophists, he is more aggressive. His interlocutor establishes the ground of the conversation; and Socrates' demeanor tells you something about that interlocutor.

To begin:

Euthyphro, a middle aged Athenian and self-styled religious prophet, is completely surprised to find the elderly Socrates on the steps of the Royal Stoa. He knows that Socrates avoids the law courts and has no time for political intrigue. As the two men converse Socrates discloses that he is facing a criminal prosecution.

Socrates relates what he knows of the criminal indictment, explaining the charge that he corrupts the young, which is related to the charges involving his conception of the divine. Euthyphro understands the situation immediately, and he associates Socrates' guidance by his divine sign (τὸ δαίμόνιον) with his own special insight into divine matters. Special indeed: from Euthyphro's remarks we learn that although his fellow citizens ridicule him when he stands in the assembly to predict the future, "of the things I have predicted I have not spoken one that was not true" (3c3). This is a bold claim; but also somewhat puzzling. If Euthyphro's claim to unerring prophetic powers is true, then he is indeed a remarkable man. But if he *is* telling the truth, surely the men before whom he has issued these prognostications would have noticed their accuracy and stopped mocking his prophecies. This conundrum must have occurred to Socrates, for he indirectly tests Euthyphro's knowledge of the future by remarking of his trial, "how this will come out is unclear except to you prophets (τοῖς μάντεσιν)." Euthyphro is sanguine, but also a bit evasive, as fortune-tellers are wont to be. "Perhaps," he says, "it will amount to nothing, and you will contest the charge as you intend (κατὰ νοῦν)" (3e2-6).

At this point, still very early in the dialogue, we have learned much about Euthyphro. He has a high opinion of his knowledge of the divine (and he elaborates on this point at 4b1-3 and 6c5-7); yet his articulation of this knowledge is vague at best (which would explain why no one is impressed by the accuracy of his "predictions"). Soon, however, we learn something much more significant, namely his intention to prosecute "one whom I seem [to others] to be crazy for prosecuting." His father.

Socrates is astonished. Euthyphro had earlier commented that in prosecuting Socrates Meletus would "harm (κακουργεῖν) the city, beginning with the hearth" (3a7-8). But talk about beginning with the hearth! In Euthyphro's case the proverb applies, not

just metaphorically, but literally. The context, then, is one of intergenerational strife. A young man is prosecuting Socrates; a middle-aged son is prosecuting his father. The young are attacking their elders, and they are using the courts for the purpose. Who is corrupting whom here?

Socrates' shock surprises most students because Euthyphro's position sounds so modern, so right to our ears: "It is ridiculous, Socrates, that you think it makes some difference whether the killer is a stranger or a relative, but not that this alone must be guarded, namely whether the killer killed justly or not; if he killed justly one must let him go, but if unjustly one must prosecute him even if he shares one's hearth and table" (4b7-c1).

Here, then, is Euthyphro's claim: being a murderer absorbs absolutely every other quality or attribute one has. That the murderer is one's father makes absolutely *no* difference to sons.

Is that true? That it makes *no* difference? Does justice require that we treat everyone impersonally, even our closest relatives? Does the law erase the distinction between family members and strangers? Euthyphro knows full well that his relatives believe "that it is impious for a son to prosecute his father for murder." But he rejects their view as wholly mistaken; it merely reveals "how insufficiently they understand the divine in its relation to the pious and the impious" (4d5-e3).

And now Socrates is shocked all over again. "In the name of Zeus, Euthyphro, do you think yourself so thoroughly to understand the gods, and the pious and the impious, that given the facts of the case as you have stated them you are not afraid that in prosecuting your father you may be doing something impious" (4e4-8)? No, Euthyphro is not the least bit afraid; how silly. He wouldn't be the extraordinary prophet that he is if he didn't know what he was doing. "I would be of no use," he calmly replies, "and

Euthyphro would not differ at all from other humans, if I did not know all such things accurately” (4e9-5a2). Euthyphro has no worries. He knows too much; he walks too close to the gods.

This is an extraordinary claim to special wisdom; and it is Socrates’ opening. “So tell me,” the philosopher asks, “what do you say the pious is, and the impious?” (5d7)

So begins Euthyphro’s vigorous attempt to bring his actions under the banner of both righteous religiosity and legal justice. For justice is giving what is due to man, while piety is giving what is due to God. Euthyphro sees these as completely inseparable and intertwined, but Socrates is not so sure. Man’s laws and God’s laws may have different aims; they may conflict; they may be at odds.

No text better illustrates this tension than Sophocles’ *Antigone*. In that play Antigone defies the command of her sovereign and uncle, Creon, who forbade anyone to bury her dead brother, Polyneices. But to facilitate his soul’s release, Antigone sneaked to the dusty plain where he lay and sprinkled dust over him. When Creon’s guards seize her and drag her before the furious king she confesses her unlawful behavior, but defiantly argues that Creon’s earthly command cannot overturn the ordinances of the gods. Proper burial is a duty she owes both her brother and the gods. This tension between divine law and earthly law arose among the Greeks in the fifth century, and it has marked Western civilization for nearly twenty-five centuries. Jesus. Thomas Becket. Gandhi. Martin Luther King.

Although the facts of Euthyphro’s case do not amount to what anyone today would call “murder,” Euthyphro is correct that he may level this charge, legally speaking. But like Creon, he has to show that divine law will not be offended. To do so, he first argues that he is doing nothing different from what Zeus did to his father, Cronus; and nothing different from what Cronus had done to his father, Uranus. He insists that it is

inconsistent to accept these stories while disapproving of his prosecution of his own father (5e-6a). That he is a mere mortal, not a divine being, does not strike him as relevant. He is a fundamentalist committing the transgression of hubris. He is convinced, “If God can do it, so can I!” Creon thought the same thing.

Socrates reminds Euthyphro, though, that whatever he thinks of the similarities between himself and God, he has promised to say what piety is. Unfortunately, alleged instances or examples of piety do not define its essence. Euthyphro scrambles: “Well, then, what is dear to the gods is pious, and what is not dear to the gods is impious” (6e11-7a1). From here it would be only a short step to assert that what he is doing by prosecuting his father is “pleasing to the gods.” But Socrates will not allow him to take this step. Instead, he insists on examining this definition.

Socrates and Euthyphro go round and round this definition because “pleasing to the gods” only names an attribute of the holy; it does not define its nature. Euthyphro becomes confused, then exasperated, and finally vexed, complaining, “I am not able to communicate what I have in mind. For somehow whatever we propose keeps going around in a circle and will not stay still where we put it,” and “you seem to me to be Daedalus; for if I had my way these things would stay put” (11c8-d2).

At this point Socrates offers to assist Euthyphro, who is evidently flustered. He proposes that everything pious is just, which proposal Euthyphro eagerly accepts. But now the rub: “So is everything just also pious, or is...the just not all pious, but part of it is pious and part of it something else?” (11e7-12a2). This is Antigone’s point to the vengeful king. He has the authority, the right, the might, and the earthly “justice” to make and carry out any command he pleases; but this does not ensure that what he commands is righteous. But if it is not, Antigone’s pleading ought to have prevailed. It didn’t, of course.

But all this, and more, is lost on our seer, our hubristic Euthyphro. Is it pious because God loves it, or does God love it because it is pious? He does not know. He cannot say. Again they rush around in circles, returning at last to where they began. But, oh, look at the time! Euthyphro is in a hurry; it is time for him to go.

Aporia. All these words in vain. To what end this long and aggravating conversation? Over the entire dialogue there hovers the question of motive. What will this son gain by having his father executed? He is grown. He feels himself righteously aligned with God. He counts himself a religious seer. His peers' mockery and his family's resentment do not move him. What is really at the bottom of this prosecution?

Let us recall the facts of the case: One of Euthyphro's dependents (πελάτης τις), in a drunken stupor, killed one of the household slaves (τῶν οἰκετῶν). Euthyphro's father bound the man, tossed him in a ditch, and sent to Athens for advice from a spiritual advisor (τοῦ ἐξηγητοῦ). In the meantime the murderer died from hunger, the cold, and his shackles.

What do we learn from these facts? The father usurped Euthyphro's authority over one of his dependents. The man died; Euthyphro lost a perfectly good laborer. This might irritate any man, but would it motivate Euthyphro's present actions, which are admittedly extreme? Perhaps not in isolation; but consider the larger context: Euthyphro considers himself a religious prophet with special insight into divine matters; he claims to have precise knowledge (ἀκριβῶς εἰδείην) of the pious and the impious (4e9-5a2), which he identifies as the crux of his father's case (4e1-2). No doubt his father was aware of his son's wild boasts. Did he laugh at Euthyphro's pretensions like the men who mock him in the assembly? Maybe. But perhaps a father would not express his disappointment or derision so openly. Still, the son would discern this, would he not? Well, had he somehow failed to detect his father's dubieties before, the old man's response to the

crime on their homestead would have clarified everything. For when he urgently required precise knowledge of the pious course of action—when it was literally a matter of life and death—he did not seek advice from his son; he sent to Athens for word from a spiritual guide. This one act tells us everything relevant about his estimation of his son's hubristic pretensions.

A man like Euthyphro would seethe and boil over this slight. If he could, he would get even. And he can. And he will.

Antigone cannot soften the raging heart of Creon; Socrates can do no better with Euthyphro. Both men feel the sting of disrespect: Euthyphro from his father, Creon from his niece. Anger born of hubris, not pious righteousness, drives them toward destruction. It causes them to harm the city by neglecting the pieties of the hearth.

APOLOGY

Subject: Socrates' defense speech.

Mode: Dramatic.

Setting: 399, a law court in Athens.

Dramatis personae:

Socrates.

Meletus.

SHORT OUTLINE

APOLOGY SHORT OUTLINE

- 17a-18a: **Socrates' opening remarks:**
Socrates is not a practiced orator (17a-c).
Socrates' mode of address (17c-18a).
- 18a-24b: **Socrates' defense against his first accusers:**
Two groups of accusers (18a-19a).
The slanders of Socrates' first accusers (19a-20c).
Socratic wisdom (20c-e).
Socrates and the Delphic oracle (20e-21a).
Socrates' interrogations of the reputedly wise (21a-22e).
The results of Socrates' activities (22e-24b).
- 24b-28b: **Socrates' defense against his later accusers:**
Socrates v. Meletus: corruption of the youth (24c-26b).
Socrates' first defense against the charge of corruption (24d-25c).
Socrates' second defense against the charge of corruption (25c-26b).
Socrates v. Meletus: atheism (26b-28a).
Socrates' defense against the charge of atheism (27b-28a).
- 28b-34b: **Conclusion of Socrates' defense:**
On life and death (28b-29b).
Socrates' practice of philosophy (the gadfly) (29b-31c).
Socrates and public affairs (31c-33b).
Socrates and his followers (33c-34b).
Socrates on the conduct of his defense (34b-35d).
Socrates is found guilty
Meletus proposes execution
- 35e-38b: **Socrates proposes alternative penalties:**
Socrates deserves something good (35e-37a).
Alternative penalties (37a-e).
Socrates will not abandon philosophy (the unexamined life) (37e-38b).
The jury sentences Socrates to death
- 38c-39d: **Socrates' addresses those who condemned him:**
On death and injustice (38c-39b).
Socrates' prophecy for Athens (39c-d).
- 39e-42a: **Socrates bids farewell to his friends:**
Remarks on death (39e-41c).
Final thoughts and advice (41c-42a).

DETAILED OUTLINE

APOLOGY DETAILED OUTLINE

- 17a-18a: **SOCRATES' OPENING REMARKS:**
17a-c: **Socrates is not a practiced orator:**
Socrates' accusers tell persuasive lies.
Socrates speaks the truth.
- 17c-18a: **Socrates' mode of address:**
Socrates will speak in his accustomed manner.
Jurors' must considers the litigants' truthfulness and nothing besides.
- 18a-24b: **SOCRATES' DEFENSE AGAINST HIS FIRST ACCUSERS:**
18a-20c: **The early accusers:**
The slanders: Socrates is unjust, a mischievous meddler, a wise man who studies phenomena in the heavens and under the earth, makes the worse argument appear stronger, and teaches these things to others.⁷⁹
Allusion to Aristophanes' *Clouds*.
- 20c-e: **Socratic wisdom:**
Socrates' reputation is the result of his possession of a certain human wisdom (διὰ σοφίαν τινὰ... ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία).
- 20e-21a: **Socrates and the Delphic oracle:**
Apollo: no man is wiser than Socrates.
- 21a-22e: **Socrates' interrogations of the reputedly wise:**
What did the god mean?⁸⁰
Socrates interrogates political men (21b-22a), poets (22a-c), and craftsmen (22c-e).
Neither Socrates nor the men he questioned were wise.
But the men thought that they were wise, whereas Socrates did not.
Therefore, Socrates is wiser to the extent that he knows that he does not know.
- 22e-24b: **The results of Socrates' activities:**
Socrates' interrogations have made him unpopular.
His enemies have been slandering him for years.
Meletus accuses Socrates on behalf of the poets, Anytus on behalf of the craftsmen and politicians, and Lycon on behalf of the orators.
- 24b-28b: **SOCRATES' DEFENSE AGAINST HIS LATER ACCUSERS:**
24b-c: **The charges:**
Socrates is unjust in that he corrupts the young and does not believe in the gods whom the city believes in but rather in other new divinities (Σωκράτη... ἀδικεῖν τοὺς τε νέους διαφθείροντα καὶ θεοῦς οὓς ἡ πόλις νομίζει οὐ νομίζοντα, ἕτεραδὲ δαιμόνια καινά).
- 24c-26b: **Socrates v. Meletus: corruption of the youth:**
Socrates intends to demonstrate that Meletus is unjust (ἀδικεῖν).
- 24d-25c: **Socrates' first defense against the charge of corruption:**

⁷⁹ This combines the charges as summarized by Socrates at 18 b-c and 19b-c.

⁸⁰ See "[Socrates and the Oracle](#)."

- Young men are improved only by those few who are trained in their care, whereas they are corrupted by the ignorant many.
Meletus' ignorance (or willful neglect) of this is proof that he neither knows nor cares about the matters at issue in his accusations.
- 25c-26b: **Socrates' second defense against the charge of corruption:**
Wicked men harm (κακόν τι ἐργάζονται) their associates.
No one wishes to be harmed (βλάπτεσθαι).
Socrates is not so stupid as to intentionally turn out men to harm him.
Therefore, Socrates either does not corrupt the youth or he does so unwillingly.
Either way Meletus is proved a liar.
- 26b-28a: **Socrates v. Meletus: atheism:**
Meletus confuses Socrates with Anaxagoras.
- 27b-28a: **Socrates' defense against the charge of atheism:**
Whoever believes in divine things (δαίμονια...πράγματα) believes in divinities (δαίμονας).
Socrates believes in diving things (δαίμονια).
Therefore, he believes in divinities.
Divinities are gods or children of gods.
Therefore, Socrates believes in the gods.
- 28a-b: These arguments suffice to prove that Socrates is innocent of the charges Meletus has brought against him.
If he is convicted, it will be the result of the widespread enmity against him.
- 28b-34b: **CONCLUSION OF SOCRATES' DEFENSE:**
- 28b-29b: **On life and death:**
Socrates as Achilles: the risk of death should concern a man less than the pursuit of a just life.⁸¹
To fear death is to think one knows what one does not know.
- 29b-31c: **Socrates' practice of philosophy (the gadfly):**
Socrates will never stop exhorting his fellow citizens to care about nothing so much as the condition of their own souls.
If the jurors condemn Socrates to death, they will harm themselves more than they harm him—for it is not permitted (οὐ...θεμιτὸν) for a better man to be harmed (βλάπτεσθαι) by a worse man.
The god attached Socrates to the city like a gadfly.
- 31c-33c: **Socrates and public affairs:**
Socrates' divine sign (θεῖόν τι καὶ δαιμόνιον) prevents him from engaging in politics.
Socrates has never colluded in unjust activities,⁸² he has never been anyone's teacher, and he has never demanded a fee in return for speaking with anyone.
- 33c-34b: **Socrates and his followers:**

⁸¹ On Socrates' military career see "Socrates as Hoplite."

⁸² This is exemplified by his resistance to the illegal trial of the generals after the battle of Arginusae and his refusal to obey the Thirty Tyrants' command to fetch Leon of Salamis for execution.

Although many of the young men who associate with Socrates are present with their relatives, none of them has volunteered to speak for the prosecution.

- 34b-35d: **Socrates on the conduct of his defense:**
Socrates' unwillingness to conduct his defense by arousing the jurors' pity may cause some to resent him.
But he refuses to act contrary to what is noble, just, and holy.

SOCRATES IS FOUND GUILTY⁸³

- 35e-38b: **SOCRATES PROPOSES ALTERNATIVE PENALTIES:**
35e-37e: **Socrates deserves something good:**
In return for a life spent encouraging others to virtue Socrates should be fed in the Prytaneum.⁸⁴
Olympic victors make the Athenians *seem* to be happy; Socrates makes them *be* happy (εὐδαίμονας).
He is confident that he has never intentionally treated anyone unjustly (ἀδικεῖν), and he refuses to do so now by imposing upon himself an undeserved punishment.
- 37e-38b: **Socrates will not abandon philosophy (the unexamined life):**
The greatest good for a man is to converse everyday about virtue and the other subjects Socrates discusses.
The unexamined life is not worth living.
Socrates offers to pay a fine from contributions from Plato and others.

THE JURY SENTENCES SOCRATES TO DEATH

- 38c-39d: **SOCRATES ADDRESSES THOSE WHO CONDEMNED HIM:**
38c-39b: **On death and injustice:**
The Athenians will be abused (λοιδορεῖν) for executing him.
Socrates has not escaped death; but his accusers have succumbed to baseness (κακία) and have been condemned by truth to depravity and injustice (μοχθηρία καὶ ἀδικία).
- 39c-d: **Socrates' prophecy for Athens:**
Vengeance will come to the Athenians from men whom Socrates has held back until now, younger and more difficult men (χαλεπώτεροι) who will continue his practice of examining their fellow citizens and reproaching those who fail to live correctly.
- 39e-42a: **SOCRATES BIDS FAREWELL TO HIS FRIENDS:**
39e-41c: **Remarks on death:**
Socrates' customary prophetic divine sign (ἡ... εἰωθυῖά...μαντικὴ ἢ τοῦ δαιμονίου) did not oppose him once this day.
Therefore, what has happened to him may be a good thing.

⁸³ The prosecution prevailed by a margin of only thirty votes.

⁸⁴ This was a government building in which dignitaries (including Olympic victors) were banqueted at public expense.

The dead are either nothing and lack all perception, or their souls are removed to another place.

There is nothing to fear in the first option, for death would then be like a dreamless sleep.

If death is rather a relocation to Hades, in which dwell gods, demigods, heroes, and men who are just and good, then Socrates will pass his time in death as he has been accustomed to in life, interrogating men with a reputation for wisdom.

That would be true happiness (εὐδαιμονία).

41c-42a:

Final thoughts and advice:

Have good hopes about death, and remember that nothing bad can come to a good man in life or in death.

SOCRATES AND THE ORACLE

What exactly did Socrates think about Apollo's oracle? What status did he ascribe to it? He characterizes the oracle itself and his relation to it in a variety of ways in the *Apology*. Below is a list of his several different (and contradictory?) descriptions and characterizations.

- 21b7-9: Because Socrates was at a loss (ἠπόρουσιν) regarding the oracle's meaning he turned with great reluctance to an investigation (ζήτησιν) of it.
- 21c1: He set out to question/cross-examine/disprove the oracle (ἐλέγξων τὸ μαντεῖον) by finding someone wiser than himself.
- 21e6: By questioning those who seem wise Socrates was investigating what the oracle meant (σκοποῦντι τὸν χρησμὸν τί λέγει).
- 22a4: Socrates was investigating according to/in obedience to the god (ζητοῦντι κατὰ τὸν θεόν).
- 22a7-8: Socrates undertook these labors in order that the oracle might be (demonstrated to be?) irrefutable (ἵνα...ἀνέλεγκτος ἡ μαντεία γένοιτο).
- 23b5: Socrates investigates and examines according to/in obedience to the god (ζητῶ καὶ ἐρευνῶ κατὰ τὸν θεόν).
- 23b7: By demonstrating that someone who thinks himself wise is not in fact wise Socrates assists the god (τῷ θεῷ βοηθῶν).
- 23c1: Socrates is quite poor because of his service to the god (διὰ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ λατρείαν).
- 28e4-5: Socrates thought and believed that the god had ordered/posted/stationed him (τοῦ θεοῦ τάττονος, ὡς ἐγὼ εἰρήθην τε καὶ ὑπέλαβον) to live the philosophical life.
- 30a5: The god commands these things (ταῦτα...κελεύει ὁ θεός).
- 30a6-7: Socrates' activities are a service to the god (τὴν ἐμὴν τῷ θεῷ ὑπερησίαν).
- 30d7-e1: Socrates, or his mission, is a gift from the god (τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δόσιν).
- 30e3: Socrates has been attached to/laid upon the city by the god (προσκειμένον τῇ πόλει ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ).
- 30e6: The god bestowed or imposed Socrates upon the city (ὁ θεὸς ἐμὲ τῇ πόλει προστεθηκέναι).
- 31a7-8: Socrates has been given to the city by the god (ἐγὼ τυγχάνω ὧν τοιοῦτος οἷος ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ πόλει δεδόσθαι).
- 33c4-5: To examine those who think themselves wise is a task that has been assigned to/enjoined upon Socrates by the god (ἐμοὶ...τοῦτο...προστέτακται ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ πράττειν).
- 37e6: If Socrates were to keep quiet, he would disobey the god (τῷ θεῷ ἀπειθεῖν).

APOLOGY INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

Unlike our common use of the term “apology,” which signifies regret for injury or harm, the Greek term “apologia” (ἀπολογία) signified a “defense” such as one presents at a trial. The term for systematic defenses of the Christian faith, “apologetics,” retains this Greek flavor.

This partial “transcript” from Socrates’ trial is the most widely read Platonic work and it establishes the record of the second most famous trial in the history of Western Civilization. Scholarly introductions, papers, and analyses are abundant and I urge all thoughtful readers to dive into a varied lot of them. No one writes about the *Apology* in the same voice, nor with the same emotional register. Some analyses are brief and cool; others are lengthy and warmer in tone. Some scholars are wedded to conveying the broad mood, while others analyze and critique Socrates’ arguments. There is a full basket of interpretations of interpretations and commentary upon these interpretations. Moreover, these analyses and introductions differ just as Plato’s readers differ. A reader coming to the *Apology* for the first time needs a different sort of introduction than one who is revisiting or mulling it over year after year. An attempt to provide an introduction for any and all ears is a large and very un-Socratic task, but we hope to bring readers of every sort together by examining Socrates’ defense in the context of Athenian custom while drawing comparisons to our system.

It is both the best and the worst defense a criminal defendant ever raised.

Opening lines are important. Unfortunately, Plato did not record the prosecution’s opening lines; nor did he provide us direct access to their case. Indirectly, we learn that the prosecutors (Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon) produced no witness. Not one. To support charges as serious as impiety and corruption of the youth, one might have expected the

prosecution to call at least one witness, or better yet, to have produced one victim willing to testify that Socrates had ruined his religious faith or moral goodness.

When a person is charged with a crime in our judicial system, he or she may invoke the Fifth Amendment right to remain silent. This right applies the moment one is arrested, and it shields one throughout trial. One does not have to explain oneself to anyone because the burden of proof is wholly on the prosecution; it must carry that burden of proof “beyond a reasonable doubt” to secure a conviction. We know that if a team of prosecutors produces neither victim nor witnesses, they have no proof to put before the jury. They will lose. Game over. The defendant will receive a directed verdict of acquittal by the judge and be free to go. The jury will have nothing to deliberate about and will be discharged without further ado. Such prosecutors would be furiously castigated by the court for wasting its time and sullyng the name of the defendant without proof of wrongdoing. They could be held liable for malicious prosecution should the defendant chose to pursue his civil remedies. In our system, a man is innocent until proven guilty. If there are no witnesses, there is no “proof” that a crime even occurred, much less that the defendant did it. So we know immediately that Socrates’ trial would never have gone to a jury and he would have been free to go.

What, then, could the Athenian jury have deliberated about? Without the sworn testimony of victims and witnesses, they had only the opening statements of the prosecutors. In our system, opening statements are not proof. Opening statements merely acquaint the jury with the charges and anticipate for them the proof they will hear from the witness box. A prosecutor in our system will say something like “...and you will hear, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, from actual eyewitnesses and victims that Socrates is an atheist who corrupted the youth.” Evidently, these three prosecutors stood up and complained that the youth has gone to hell in a hand basket; that the culture has lost its

moral compass; and that someone is responsible for all this growing impiety. They must have concluded with something like, “And who else but Socrates could have done it?”

Let’s suppose that the prosecutors were fully correct. Let’s suppose the young men of Athens had gone to hell in a hand basket, that Athenian society, in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, was deteriorating, and that impiety was running rampant in the streets. To charge a single person with the responsibility for such things is surely to seek a scapegoat in the most robust sense of that word. One person, however powerful, cannot in a single lifetime affect such cultural deterioration on so vast a scale. Socrates was not an aristocrat with political power; he was just a persistent man on a mission.

Nevertheless, it must have been a powerful opening statement. When the three prosecutors finished, Socrates rose to make his defense and Plato records his response. “How you were affected by my accusers I do not know; but I nearly forgot myself, they spoke so persuasively. And yet...nothing they have said is true” (17a1-4).

Socrates does more than deny the charges and show that they are inconsistent on their face. He tells his story; how he came to feel charged by the god at Delphi to interview the many people he interviewed over the years. The oracle, it seemed to Socrates, was trying to say “that ‘he is the wisest among you who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is truly worthless.’” Therefore to this day I go around investigating these matters, and in obedience to the god I examine any citizen or foreigner whom I think wise. And when he seems to me not [to be wise] I assist the god by demonstrating that he is not wise. Because of this activity I haven’t the leisure to engage in political affairs, nor even to see to my own affairs to any remarkable extent—in fact I am quite poor because of my service to the god” (23b2-c1).

This is not the first instance of offering a defense under the Divine Command theory in Greek experience. In Sophocles’ great play *Antigone*, the heroine raises the

same defense before her king and uncle with about as much success as Socrates, which is to say, with no success at all.

Socrates acknowledges that his activities made him unpopular. This is lamentable; yet he felt he had to act in this way. In order to understand the oracle's meaning he had "to approach everyone who appeared to know something" (21e5-22a1). After disposing of the pretensions of politicians, Socrates examined "the poets—the composers of tragedies, of dithyrambs, and the others;" and he concluded his investigation by questioning "the artisans." Of all the men he examined he discovered that none had as much knowledge as he thought, and they had none at all about the most important matters. By demonstrating this he incurred the wrath of these men and their associates. "For these reasons Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon attacked me, Meletus being angry on behalf of the poets, Anytus on behalf of the craftsmen and politicians, and Lycon on behalf of the orators" (23e4-24a1). Socrates knows that these groups framed and built his reputation over the years. Aristophanes' *Clouds* is the most striking instance of their caricature; but their seeds of ill will have had time to blossom into a long standing popular misconception that Socrates is compelled to counter if he would persuade the jury to acquit him of the charges.

Socrates tries. He confronts Meletus directly and refutes the accusations that he is an atheist and that he corrupts the young. That he interrogates Meletus in the very manner that (as he himself has admitted) landed him in court in the first place is perhaps not the most prudent strategy. But this is what he does. Besides, this behavior will not be the cause of his final undoing. If he succumbs, it will be to the extreme hostility so many men feel toward him. "This will convict me, if I am convicted—not Meletus or Anytus, but the slander and the envy of the many. These have convicted many other good men,

and I think they will do so in the future; there is no danger that this will stop with me” (28a6-b2).

The Athenian jury responsible for deciding the verdict of Socrates’ trial consisted of 501 citizens from the ranks of the very factions of men that Socrates has offended. In Athenian custom there is no procedure of *voir dire*, nor any provision for seeking a change of venue. In our system, the court takes great pains to ensure that all prospective jurors are impartial before they are impaneled and sworn. Not only do attorneys closely question them, but judges warn them to make known any ties to the defendant or his cause. Thus, impartiality requires that jurors do not personally know or have any vested interest, pro or con, in the defendant’s life or activities. Impartiality requires that they have formed no previous opinion on the case. Attorneys question each prospective juror about his prejudices and beliefs, as well. If a juror has heard about the case, or formed an opinion of the defendant based upon rumor or reputation, he is challenged and discharged. When a particular defendant is famous, notorious, or the facts of the case have already been tried in the court of public opinion through the media or gossip-mill, the court may relocate the trial to a completely different city or state where the pool of jurors has not been tainted and passions are not inflamed. Such changes of venue help insure the defendant’s right to be judged on the merits of the case, rather than on speculation or innuendo.

We know that the jury Socrates is addressing includes many men who would be instantly dismissed as unfit for jury service by our courts under our laws. Socrates knows these men and they know him. Even if they do not know him personally, they surely know or have heard of someone whom Socrates has publicly embarrassed over the years.

Moreover, given the longstanding and widespread suspicion of philosophy in Athens,⁸⁵ a defense lawyer in our courts could present a credible case for a change of venue. Had the Athenians' nursed a proper concern for impartiality, this jury would never have been impaneled. Even assuming the trial had gone forward, though, any guilty verdict rendered by a hostile and impassioned jury in a town known for its animosity to philosophy would have been overturned and reversed on appeal. Unfortunately, Athenian law did not provide a criminal defendant any appellate rights at all—which guaranteed the legal legitimacy of even those verdicts laced with the prejudice, bitterness, faction, and passion of the jury. What was commonplace for the Athenian citizen is unconscionable for us.

We know indubitably that Socrates' jury is hostile and inflamed. Their raucous shouts interrupt his defense several times in the course of the proceedings; they threaten to erupt from the time he rises to speak. There is no judge present to bang his gavel and sternly bring order to the court. Even if there were, he could hardly "clear the courtroom" because the people shouting are not spectators sitting behind the bar: they themselves are the jurors! Imagine it. Socrates has to plead with his own jury to please let him talk, please let him finish, please do not continue to interrupt. It is impossible to respect these proceedings any more than we would respect an old fashioned kangaroo court. Incredibly, though, a good many people insist that Socrates' trial was "fair."

Socrates has brought his past activities within the proper scope of Athenian religious duties owed to Apollo, whose oracle at Delphi commissioned his lifelong task. We know, then, that there is no counterpart in Athens of our First Amendment protection of the free exercise of one's religious convictions. Moreover, charges such as "impiety" or "atheism" or "introducing new gods" or "doubting the old gods" show conclusively

⁸⁵ Prior to Socrates' trial this suspicion was most evident in the Athenians' treatment of the philosopher Anaxagoras.

that Athenians did not have the least inkling of what our courts have interpreted as the separation of church and state implied by the First Amendment antiestablishment clause. For us, whatever a person says to another in conversation about God is private and protected, even if it is impious, atheistic, offensive, and insulting. No American citizen would be threatened with capital punishment for expressing doubts about the existence or nature of God. And although Socrates shows by his cross examination of Meletus that the charges are contradictory on their face, this is not enough to secure an acquittal from the jury.

Why not? Because Socrates' commitment to honesty causes him to speak his mind just a little too freely. His words both bait and shame a jury that he knows will seize upon any reason to convict him. What does he say? He tells these hostile men that death doesn't scare him and that they don't scare him either. He reminds them that "the juror does not sit in order to grant justice as a favor, but to render a proper verdict" (35c2-4). He warns them that even if they should offer to acquit him on the single condition that he stop philosophizing in his accustomed manner, he will refuse (29c-d). He rebukes them roundly, asking, "Are you not ashamed that you concern yourselves with how you will acquire the most money, and with fame and glory, but you have neither concern nor forethought for wisdom, truth, or for how your soul might attain its best condition?" (29d9-e3). And he tops this oration off by proclaiming "I will not act otherwise [than I have always acted], even if I must die many times" (30b8-c1). "The god commands this," he says, adding, "I think you have no greater good in the city than my service to the god" (30a5-7). Finally, he assures the jurors that if they put him to death, "You will not harm me more than you harm yourselves" (30c8-9).

There is much more. But one can tell by the tone that Socrates fairly bristles at the very people who hold his fate in their hands.

The 501 men render their verdict, and by a margin of a mere thirty votes, Socrates is found guilty of the charges against him. He expresses surprise that the decision was so close. Athenian custom provides no time for the jury and the defendant to take a breath and reconvene later for the penalty phase, as our system does; it settles the matter of punishment immediately. Our system has laws that govern the assessment of penalties. Our juries must hear both mitigating and aggravating circumstances before they deliberate about penalty. Moreover, a jury may recommend only within legal penalty structures; the court may modify or abandon that recommendation if it feels the jury's decision was irrational. If first degree burglary, for example, carries a penalty of imprisonment not less than two and not more than five years, the jury cannot simply decide it will recommend fifty years.

Under Athenian practice, on the other hand, the prosecution may offer whatever penalty it likes or thinks it can get. No matter what their recommendation is, the defendant must rise and make an alternative offer. The jury must then and there decide between the two offers without conferencing to consider a middle ground. Socrates knows that his accusers might have called for something less than death: exile, loss of civil privileges, fines, or conditional release upon a promise to stop conversing in the streets. When they recommended death, he could have availed himself of any one of these alternatives himself. He does not do this. Rather, he poses the following question: "What alternative penalty shall I offer to you, O Athenian men? It is clear, is it not, that it must be deserved? What then? What do I deserve to suffer or to pay...?" (36b3-5).

What does one deserve if one is innocent? What does Socrates deserve for urging his fellow citizens "to converse every day about virtue" and to consider "the unexamined life not worth living for a man" (38a3-6)? As Socrates assesses the situation, he is not only innocent of any crime, he has benefited the entire city. He has, in short, done good.

What he deserves, therefore, is a reward! Accordingly he proposes that the city provide him with free meals for life. The city honors Olympic victors in this way; and as Socrates sees it he is better for Athens than any athlete. The Olympic victor, he explains, “makes you *appear* happy (εὐδαίμονας), whereas I make you *be* happy” (36d9-10).

Socrates was “bound” by an oath to speak the truth. His innocence hasn’t changed one whit by virtue of the verdict. It is a matter of sheer logical fact that those who are innocent should not be punished, not even a little bit. In this stance we find the kernel of our own wisdom that it is better for ten guilty men to go free than one innocent man to suffer an unjust penalty.

Now the jury must decide Socrates’ punishment. He has, in the end, volunteered to pay a fine. Not a very large one, mind you; but some of his friends and associates have offered to contribute the necessary funds, and so he concludes his remarks by proposing a modest fine as an alternative penalty to death. Logically speaking, those who voted for acquittal are duty bound to accept his proposal even if they don’t like it, for, after all, they believe he is innocent. One does not vote to acquit a man and then turn around and vote for his execution if one hasn’t succumbed to complete irrationality. So, even if every juror who had declared Socrates guilty voted now to put him to death, the prosecution’s proposal should carry by no more than thirty votes. But the vote for execution is overwhelming. How can one think such a trial was fair?

Socrates’ defense was the best and the worst of defenses. It was the best defense because it was honest, true to his character and to his ideals. But it was the worst defense imaginable because he did not adapt it to the character and capacity of the jury. The capacity of this jury was negligible. It was utterly incapable of fully digesting what Socrates meant when he asked, “What do I deserve?”

Nevertheless, Socrates keeps his composure. As he leaves the courtroom, his final words are gentle. “But now is the time to go, I to die and you to live. Which of us has it better is unclear to everyone but the god” (42a2-5).

Socrates knew all too well the character of his accusers and many of the men sitting in judgment of him that day on the jury. But he would not convict himself out of his own mouth by offering a penalty for something he had not done. His stand sowed a tiny seed that became the origin of the Fifth Amendment right to remain silent and the germ of all conscience defenses everywhere. Between Classical Athens and our own laws of criminal procedure, then, is stretched a frayed and twisted, but still shining silver string that binds a defendant and his jury to duties and obligations they must not forsake, lest they lose the name and cause of justice.

CRITO

Subject: Whether Socrates should escape from prison.

Mode: Dramatic.

Setting: 399, Socrates' cell.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Crito.

SHORT OUTLINE

CRITO SHORT OUTLINE

- 43a-44b: **Socrates' cell:**
Crito arrives (43a-c).
The ship from Delos and Socrates' dream (43c-44b).
- 44b-46b: **Crito's Plea:**
That Socrates should save himself (44b-c).
Socrates on the opinion of the many (44c-d).
That Socrates should not fear escape (44e-45c).
That Socrates is wrong to stay (45c-46a).
- 46b-50a: **Socrates' response:**
Logos and knowledge v. opinion (46b-48b).
Preliminary conclusions (46b-49a).
First principle: *never act unjustly* (49a-e).
Second principle: *abide by just agreements* (49e).
Final formulation of main question (49e-50a).
- 50a-54d: **The laws speak:**
Preliminary remarks (50a-c).
Socrates' relation to the laws (50d-51b).
Persuade or obey (51b-c).
Socrates' consent to the laws of Athens (51d-52d).
The consequences of escape (52d-54b).
The laws peroration (54b-d).
- 54d-e: **Socrates will stay.**

DETAILED OUTLINE

CRITO DETAILED OUTLINE

43a-44b: **SOCRATES' CELL:**

43a-c: **Crito arrives:**

Socrates sleeps pleasantly (ἡδέως).

43c-44b: **The ship from Delos and Socrates' dream:**

Crito: the ship from Delos will arrive that day, which means that Socrates must die on the following day.⁸⁶

Socrates dream:

“on the third day you would reach fertile Phthia.”

These words suggest that he will die in three days.

Therefore, the ship will not arrive until the following day.

44b-46b: **CRITO'S PLEA:**

44b-c: **That Socrates should save himself:**

1) If Socrates dies, Crito will lose a friend.

2) The many will think that Crito refused to spend the money necessary to secure Socrates' release.

44c-d: **Socrates on the opinion of the many:**

Socrates: they need not care what the many think.⁸⁷

Crito: but the many are capable of working nearly the greatest of evils (... τῶν κακῶν ἐξεργάζεσθαι... τὰ μέγιστα σχεδόν).

Socrates: if so, they would also be able to work the greatest goods (τὰ μέγιστα ἀγαθά).

Yet they can do neither: they can make a man neither intelligent nor unintelligent (φρόνιμον... ἄφρονα).

44e-45c: **That Socrates should not fear escape:**

Neither Crito nor anyone else will suffer for helping Socrates escape.

The sycophants, who would cause trouble, can be paid off.

Crito has friends in Thessaly who will protect Socrates.

45c-46a: **That Socrates is wrong to stay:**

Socrates' refusal to save himself is unjust (οὐδὲ δίκαιόν):

1) Socrates is betraying himself (σαυτὸν προδοῦναι) and promoting the ends of his enemies (οἱ ἐχθροί).

2) He is abandoning his children.

3) He is exposing himself and his friends to a reputation for cowardice (ἀνανδρία).

46b- 50a: **SOCRATES' RESPONSE:**

46b-48b: **Logos and knowledge v. opinion:**

Some opinions are more respectable than others.

⁸⁶ The Athenians celebrated a festival in commemoration of Theseus' voyage to Crete, where his slaying of the Minotaur liberated the city from its obligation to send seven boys and seven girls for the beast to devour. The festival was held on Delos, whither the Athenians sent a ship, supposedly the very ship on which Theseus sailed. It was unlawful for the city to execute prisoners during this festival. Executions could resume on the day after the ship's return.

⁸⁷ Socrates elaborates this point at 46d ff.

We must honor the good opinions (τὰς... χρηστὰς) but not the bad (τὰς... πονηρὰς).

The good opinions are those of intelligent men (τῶν φρονίμων); the bad opinions are those of unintelligent men (τῶν ἀφρόνων).

Life is not worth living if we harm that which is injured by injustice (τὸ ἄδικον) and improved by justice (τὸ... δίκαιον).

Whatever part of us this is (ὅ τί ποτ' ἐστὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων), it is more important even than our body.⁸⁸

Therefore, we must consider only what the man who knows about the just and the unjust says, and truth herself (αὐτὴ ἡ ἀλήθεια).

48b-49a:

Preliminary conclusions:

The main thing is not to live, but to live well (οὐ τὸ ζῆν... ἀλλὰ τὸ εἶ ζῆν).

To live well and to live justly are the same (τὸ... εἶ καὶ καλῶς καὶ δικαίως... ταῦτόν ἐστιν...).

Therefore, the only question to consider is whether or not it is just (δίκαιον) to escape.

49a-e:

First principle:

To act unjustly is never good or noble (οὐδαμῶς τό γε ἀδικεῖν οὔτε ἀγαθὸν οὔτε καλόν).

We must never act unjustly (οὐδαμῶς ἄρα δεῖ ἀδικεῖν).

Therefore, we must never act unjustly in return for suffering an unjust act (οὐδὲ ἀδικούμενον ἄρα ἀνταδικεῖν).

We must never act unjustly in return nor do wrong to any man (οὔτε ἄρα ἀνταδικεῖν δεῖ οὔτε κακῶς ποιεῖν οὐδένα ἀνθρώπων).⁸⁹

It is never right to act unjustly or to return an unjust act, nor to defend oneself from being wronged by wronging another (οὐδέποτε ὀρθῶς ἔχοντος οὔτε τοῦ ἀδικεῖν οὔτε τοῦ ἀνταδικεῖν οὔτε κακῶς πάσχοντα ἀμύνεσθαι ἀντιδρῶντα κακῶς).

49e:

Second principle:

A man must always do what he has agreed to do so long as it is just.

49e-50a:

Final formulation of the main question:

Regarding Socrates' escape, then, they must consider,

a) whether he would wrong those whom he least should wrong (κακῶς τινὰς ποιούμεν καὶ ταῦτα οὐς ἥκιστα δεῖ);

b) whether or not he would abide by what he has agreed to be just.

50a-54d:

THE LAWS SPEAK:

50a-c

Preliminary remarks:

The polis cannot exist if its legal decisions are destroyed by private citizens.

Even if the polis was unjust (ἡδίκηι) and did not judge the trial correctly, Socrates agreed to abide by the all judgments of the polis, not just those he considers correct.

⁸⁸ Notice that Socrates intentionally avoids using the word "soul" here.

⁸⁹ Socrates says that people who disagree about this despise each other (ἀλλήλων καταφρονεῖν).

- 50d-51b: **Socrates' relation to the laws:**
 What fault does Socrates find with the laws that he would try to destroy them?
 These very laws oversaw his parents' marriage.
 They oversaw his rearing and education.
 Therefore, Socrates is an offspring of the polis, and its slave.
 Socrates and the laws are not equal with respect to the just.
 Therefore, it is no more just for Socrates to retaliate against the laws than it was for him in his youth to retaliate against his father.
- 51b-c: **Persuade or obey:**
 To use force against the fatherland rather than persuasion is impious (οὐχ ὄσιον).
 Therefore, the actions Socrates is considering are not just.
- 51d-52d: **Socrates' consent to the laws of Athens:**
 Socrates was free to leave Athens once he became an adult and familiarized himself with the laws and the city's practices.
 Any citizen who remains in Athens yet refuses to abide by his agreement is unjust (ἀδικεῖν) to the laws in three ways:
 1) he refuses to obey the laws who bore him;
 2) he refuses to obey the laws who reared him;
 3) he refuses either to obey the laws or to persuade them that they are unsound (μὴ καλῶς τι ποιούμεν).
 Evidence that the laws and the polis pleased Socrates:
 1) Socrates never left Athens except for military service;
 2) he begat children in the city;
 3) during his trial he explicitly rejected the possibility of exile.
 Therefore, Socrates consented to the laws of Athens in deed if not in word (ἔργῳ ἀλλ' οὐ λόγῳ).
- 52d-54b: **The consequences of escape:**
 If Socrates violates his agreement,
 1) he will not help his friends, who will be punished as his accomplices;
 2) he will arrive in the polis to which he escapes as an enemy (πολέμιος), a destroyer of laws (διαφθορέα... τῶν νόμων), and thus he will confirm the jurors' verdict against him (as a corruptor—διαφθορεὺς—of young and unintelligent men⁹⁰);
 3) he will appear disgraceful (ἄσχημον) if he continues to praise virtue, justice, lawful things, and the laws after violating the laws of Athens;
 4) Thessaly is disordered and unruly (ἄταξία καὶ ἀκολασία), and its citizens will ridicule his escape;
 5) they will say that Socrates lusted shamelessly for life (οὕτως αἰσχροῶς ἐπιθυμῆν ζῆν);
 6) Socrates will live as an inferior and a slave to everyone;
 7) he will have no more conversations about justice and the other virtues;
 8) he will either make exiles of his children or abandon them in Athens, in which case they will have no more advantage of him than if he were dead.
- 54b-d: **The laws' peroration:**

⁹⁰ Compare *Apology* 24b, where one of the accusations against Socrates is that he τούς... νέους διαφθείροντα.

Socrates should care for nothing more than for the just, so that in death he may defend himself before those who rule in Hades.

Escape will be neither better, nor more just, nor more holy (ἄμεινον...δικαιότερον...όσιώτερον) for himself or his friends, nor will it be better for him in the underworld.

If Socrates dies now, he will die having suffered injustice (ἠδίκημένος).

If he escapes,

1) he will have shamefully returned injustice for injustice and wrong for wrong (οὕτως ἀίσχρῶς ἀνταδικήσας τε καὶ ἀντικακουργήσας);

2) he will have violated his agreements and compacts with the laws;

3) he will have wronged (κακὰ ἐργασάμενος) those whom he least should wrong;

4) the laws of Athens will be angry with him while he lives, and their brothers, Hades' laws, will not receive him kindly (εὐμενῶς) when he dies.

54d-e:

SOCRATES WILL STAY:

Socrates invites Crito to respond but assures him that his words will be in vain (μάτην ἐρεῖς).

Crito has nothing to say.

Therefore, they must act according to the laws, for god leads them this way (ταύτη ὁ θεὸς ὑφηγεῖται).

CRITO INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

The opening lines reveal the extent of Crito's deep attachment to Socrates. Only mothers typically watch their children sleep in our culture, but in Athens there were friendships between adult men as deep and as loyal. This dialogue evidences one of those friendships under the threat of imminent loss.

Crito, who in the *Apology* pledged funds toward any fine that should be imposed upon his friend, fears the imminent return of the Athenian ship from its traditional voyage to Delos. He knows that upon its arrival at the Piraeus the brief stay of execution will expire and the sentence of death imposed upon Socrates will be carried out.

In the few weeks following the trial he has been busy: pleading for pardons, contacting his friends in Thessaly, and making gifts to the jailer so he might come and go from Socrates' cell at will. He has crept into the cell in the dead of night armed with a purpose, a plan, and a host of supporting reasons to try to convince Socrates to escape. But he cannot bring himself to wake the sleeping prisoner. He marvels at the peace and serenity of his friend's repose.

Socrates stirs.

"Crito, is that you? What time is it? Why didn't you wake me? How'd you get in here? Has there been an official pardon?" These and other questions have to be met and addressed before Crito can come to his point: escape.

Crito is not a philosopher. He is a philosopher's old friend. His arguments in support of his plea for escape pour forth as though he has practiced them in the dark while sitting vigil at the bedside. That he has assembled such a list of reasons shows that he understands Socrates' deep commitment to reflection. Most death row prisoners we

can imagine would have leapt at the chance Crito has offered. They would have needed no arguments in support. It is otherwise with Socrates, and Crito had to have known it.

Socrates first calms his friend's rising dread of the returning ship in a way that we barely understand: "not to worry, Crito, the ship won't arrive today." Socrates relates that he has had dream that assured him that he will be led to the fields of paradise three days hence. It is an age that allows dreams to comfort, an age that embraces omens. Three days, however, is small comfort for Crito who launches into his arguments for flight.

The position Crito takes is straightforward and heartfelt: Socrates is his friend, his irreplaceable friend. What sort of friend would Crito be if he sat idly by and watched his innocent friend die for something he did not do? He will be thought unworthy of his friend. One is obligated to help one's friend. Socrates has young children and a wife who need and require his support and guidance. What will happen to them if he dies? They will all suffer needlessly if Socrates does not escape. Furthermore, Crito rushes on, he has already contacted associates in Thessaly who are ready to receive Socrates with open arms. Crito has seen to all the arrangements. There is nothing left undone, nothing to prevent a fresh start. Moreover, upon escaping, Socrates will be able to complete his Delphic charge in Thessaly every bit as well as he can in Athens. You will go, Socrates, and we will follow! Nobody will come after us. (The Greek city states do not send the FBI or a horse riding posse to recapture men on the lam. There is no federalism in Greece, no interstate commerce clause or extradition treaties to contend with.) Seeking sanctuary elsewhere is only prudent practice.

Both men know something else that is part of their living experience as Athenians. Given the passage of time, the hot passions and impulsive caprice of Athenians often wane. They have a history of expelling their best people and then

regretting it. They sometimes recall the very people they have banished or exiled. That could surely happen in this case, and even if it doesn't, life in Thessaly is life, after all.

But if Socrates remains and dies, he will foreclose the possibility of future Athenian contrition. By dying he will commit a grave injustice against himself. He is innocent, after all. If he dies, he will not be upholding justice, but willingly participating in a miscarriage of justice.

So! He has to go—tonight; right now. Get up. Get moving.

Socrates listens calmly to every word.

But as we know, he does not go. Instead, he insists that they examine the various positions, point by point, to decide what is really best. If they see that it is right, Socrates will leave.

The only point Socrates doesn't attempt to examine is his own importance to Crito. He knows that this judgment cannot be deflected. Everything that Crito has done or said, both here and in the other dialogues, testifies to the reality of his love for Socrates. To call that into question would be fruitless. But to each of the other arguments Crito has so carefully marshaled, Socrates has a reply. First, what others may think of their friendship is of no concern. This dismissal serves to make whatever decision they arrive at strictly their own affair, their own decision. In a way, then, Socrates assures Crito that between them they are up to this examination and they will not fail each other. Let others think what they like. We friends trust one another.

Second, Socrates knows that Crito will see to his wife and the education of his children, whatever happens to him; this knowledge eases the temptation to use them in the calculation of what he should do. Of all the replies Socrates makes to Crito, this one shows that Socrates trusts Crito with decisions of the utmost importance. Most parents would surely name a guardian if they were in Socrates' position. But it would have to be

an extraordinary friendship that would allow one to regard a guardian as one's equal in the care of family. The confidence Socrates has in Crito does not convey the worries most parents would have in a similar situation.

Socrates reminds Crito that he himself might have offered the punishment of exile at his trial, but he did not. What would it look like if he were to run off to Thessaly seeking refuge with Crito's friends? They would receive him, yes, but they would be receiving a law breaker. One who abandoned his post. There are laws against escape, after all; being an escapee is no way to continue his Delphic mission.

To each of these points, Socrates carefully and gently solicits Crito's grudging assent. He wants Crito to know that he has not rejected him; he has only rejected some of the arguments his friend put forth.

But one must do more than simply reject another's arguments to carry the day. Otherwise, it could be that the options are of equal worth. Escape may not be right, but perhaps remaining in jail isn't right either. Perhaps both options are equally wrong, equally right, or equally neutral. Socrates has insisted that they will examine the question of escape or remaining in jail with reference to which of the two options is the right course. The burden of proof, then, must shift to Socrates to educe positive reason to remain in jail.

The most complex argument of the dialogue then concerns Socrates' handling of the question of his innocence. The first and most important goal of the rule of law is to convict guilty men, not innocent ones. To punish or execute an innocent man is a serious perversion of justice, even if that man is oneself. Crito has hit the mark. How can Socrates preserve his own sense of justice if he willingly cooperates with a state that intends wrongfully to execute him? The fact that Socrates is innocent of the charges of

corrupting the youth and blasphemy taints the verdict: however lawful their procedures, such verdicts are quite simply wrong.

To address this problem, Socrates imagines the spirit of Laws of Athens cross-examining him. He puts himself on trial again. Once wholly personified, The Laws are quick as cats to distinguish themselves from the men who enforce them. The injustice of men does not imply the injustice of the laws. Does Socrates not agree that the laws against corrupting the youth and atheism are well and truly made? He does. He has lived his whole life under these laws and he knows that if at any time he had had a question about their justice he had ample opportunity to persuade others to change or amend them. Living in a civilized society requires a citizen to “persuade or obey.” It is not the Laws that have wronged Socrates. The Laws are blameless. Rather, it is the men of Athens who have done him this injury.

The wanton injustice of men is the common plight of all societies. It is their injustice to each other that laws are meant to curb. If Socrates tries to escape the injustice of men by breaking the law, though, he will have done a wrong to the innocent party most concerned with addressing the injustice of men in the first place. He will have harmed the primary guarantor of justice in society: The Laws. Put to such a choice, Socrates would rather uphold the laws as the safeguard of justice and suffer an injustice at the hands of men, than break the laws unjustly and thereby render himself one of the unjust men for whom the laws were devised.

To this imaginary conversation, Crito has nothing left to say. He accepts his friend’s narrative because he thinks his friend is right.

But had Crito been more dialectically astute, he might have argued that not all laws are created equal. Some laws are substantive laws that address real harms and others are mere housekeeping laws, such as those prohibiting escape or statutes of limitation or

directing the procedural steps to perfect an appeal. Once a person is found guilty of a substantive crime, there is no reason other than advancing the convenience of authorities to layer penalties for escape on top of a criminal penalty. Armed with this distinction, Crito might have argued that protecting substantive justice *always* counts more than the convenience of those who enforce undeserved penalties on innocents. Consider the Count of Monte Cristo. Could anyone today argue that his escape from the French dungeons was an affront to justice? Consider the laws of the Third Reich that made it unlawful to harbor a Jew. Such laws were established for the convenience of authorities seeking to enhance the efficiency of their barbaric and unjust regime. Could anyone today argue that such heroic resistance was unjust because it violated the law? I think not.

Crito might have argued that if a verdict of a jury is prompted by passion or prejudice, it should be considered first tainted, then voidable, and finally *void ab initio*. Athenian juries were notoriously capricious. Crito might have argued that a man's conscience counts more than obedience as a preservative of justice and that Socrates' conscience is clear. Finally, he might have insisted that it is better for ten guilty men to go free than for one innocent man to suffer unjustly. All of these dialectical distinctions exist today.

But these and other arguments like them were not to be born for over a thousand years; and they would not be born in Greece, but on a tiny island we know today as England.

Crito was no philosopher. He was Socrates' truest friend, though. And as a friend, he surely succeeds beyond most of our own wildest dreams.

PHAEDO

Subject: Immortality of the soul. Socrates' death.

Mode: Narrative, Phaedo to a group of Pythagoreans in Phlius not long after the event.

Setting: 399, the final day of Socrates' life, in his prison cell.

Diologi personae:

Socrates.

Phaedo of Elis.

Echecrates of Phlius.

Simmias.

Cebes.

Xanthippe.

Among the others present are Apollodorus, Aeschines, Antisthenes, Ctesippus, Menexenus, and Euclides.

SHORT OUTLINE

PHAEDO SHORT OUTLINE

- 57c-59c: **Among the Pythagoreans:**
Phaedo in Phlius (57c-58a).
The ship from Delos (58a-c).
Socrates and friends (58c-59c).
- 59c-62c: **Socrates in jail:**
The friends arrive (59c-60c).
Socrates the poet (60c-61b).
Socrates on death and suicide (61b-62c).
- 62c-69e: **Socrates on trial:**
Cebes' and Simmias' objection (62c-63a).
Socrates begins his defense (63b-e).
Philosophy and/as death (63e-66a).
Death and/as purification (66b-68c).
On virtue (68c-69e).
- 69e-80d: **Immortality of the soul:**
Cebes' doubts (69e-70b).
Socrates' argument that the soul is immortal (70c-72d).
Socrates' argument that the soul exists prior to birth (first part) (72e-73a).
Cebes' proof of Learning as Recollection (73a-b).
Socrates' proof of Learning as Recollection (73b-76c).
Socrates' argument that the soul exists prior to birth (conclusion) (76c-77a).
Socrates' argument that the soul exists after death (77b-80d).
- 80d-84b: **Purification and reincarnation.**
- 84c-88c: **Objections to Socrates' arguments:**
Reflections on Socrates' arguments (84c-85d).
Simmias' objection (85e-86d).
Cebes' objection (86e-88c).
- 88c-89a: **Phaedo and Echecrates.**
- 89a-107b: **Socrates replies:**
Misology (89a-91c).
Preliminary agreements (91c-92a).
Socrates' three-part response to Simmias objection (92a-95a).
Socrates' response to Cebes' objection (95a-107b).
Socrates' youthful investigations into the causes of natural phenomena (95a-99c).
Socrates' safe account of the causes of natural phenomena (99c-102a).
Socrates' sophisticated account of the causes of natural phenomena (102a-103a).
Socrates' sophisticated account and the earlier argument from opposites (103a-c).
Socrates' sophisticated account continued (103c-105c).
Socrates' sophisticated account and the immortality of the soul (105c-107b).
- 107c-115a: **Socrates' description of the afterlife:**
The soul in Hades (107c-108c).
The true earth (108c-115a).

115a-118a: **Socrates' death.**

DETAILED OUTLINE

PHAEDO DETAILED OUTLINE

- 57c-59c: **AMONG THE PYTHAGOREANS:**
57c-58a: **Phaedo in Phlius:**
Echecrates asks Phaedo for details of Socrates' final days and death.
- 58a-c: **The ship from Delos:**
Phaedo explains the chance (τύχη τις...ἔτυχεν) delay between Socrates' condemnation and execution.
- 58c-59c: **Socrates and friends:**
Phaedo on the happiness and nobility (εὐδαίμων...γενναίως) with which Socrates confronted his death.
Plato absent due to illness (ἡσθένει).
- 59c-62c: **SOCRATES IN JAIL:**
59c-60c: **The friends arrive:**
Socrates recently released from his bonds (λύουσι; λελυμένον).
Xanthippe and child.
Socrates: it is not possible to feel pleasure and pain at the same time.⁹¹
- 60c-61b: **Socrates the poet:**
Socrates' recurring dream: "O Socrates, compose music (μουσικήν) and make it your business."
Philosophy is the greatest music (μεγίστης μουσικῆς).
- 61b-62c: **Socrates on death and suicide:**
Anyone who engages in philosophy worthily will be willing to die.
It is fitting for one about to die to investigate and tell tales about (μυθολογεῖν) the journey to the other world.
Humans are in a kind of prison, and a man must not release (λύειν) himself or run away.
Humans are the possessions of the gods, and no man should take his own life before the god sends some necessity.
- 62c-69e: **SOCRATES ON TRIAL:**
62c-63a: **Cebes' and Simmias' objection:**
It is unreasonable for humans to desert the gods who are their guardians.
- 63b-e: **Socrates begins his defense:**
Socrates must defend himself as if he were in court (ἀπολογήσεσθαι ὥσπερ ἐν δικαστηρίῳ).
Socrates is hopeful that something good awaits good men after death.
- 63e-66a: **Philosophy as/and death:**
Those who practice philosophy correctly practice nothing but death and dying.
Death is soul's release (ἀπαλλαγῆ) from body.
The philosopher strives to release (ἀπολύων) his soul from his body by:
a) practicing virtue;
b) seeking knowledge.
- 66b-68c: **Death as/and purification:**

⁹¹ Compare this with Phaedo's earlier remark (59a) and with *Gorgias* 494a-497a.

The body and its desires distract us from the practice of philosophy.
We will not attain pure and complete knowledge until after death, when
god releases (ἀπολύση) our soul from our body.

In this life we come as close to knowledge as humanly possible by
dissociating ourselves from the body and its impurities.

Socrates' intellect has been purified (διάνοιαν...κεκαθαρμένην).

Purification is the separation and release (τὸ χωρίζειν...λύσις) of soul
from body.

This separation is death.

Philosophy, purification, separation/release, and death all amount to
the same thing.

Therefore, philosophers should fear death least of all men.

68c-69e:

On virtue:

Virtue must be guided by wisdom, which is a kind of purification.

They are purified who have practiced philosophy correctly.

69e-80d:

IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL:

69e-70b:

Cebes' doubts:

To believe that the soul exists after death and possesses intellect requires
much persuasion and proof (οὐκ ὀλίγησ παραμυθίας δεῖται καὶ
πίστεως).

70c-72d:

Socrates' argument that the soul is immortal:

All things that have opposites come to be from their opposites.

Two processes correspond to the coming to be of one of the pairs from the
other, and vice versa.

Being dead comes from being alive according to a process known as
dying.

Therefore, being alive must come to be from being dead according to a
process of coming to life (τὸ ἀναβιώσκεισθαι).

Besides, if everything that was once alive were to die and never come to
life again, everything would be dead.

But this is not the case.

Thus the souls of the living must come to be from the dead.

Therefore, souls exist after death.

72e-73a:

Socrates' argument that the soul exists prior to birth (first part)

If learning is recollection (ἀνάμνησις), we must have acquired
knowledge at some time before our soul acquired a human form.

73a-b:

Cebes' proof of Learning as Recollection:

When men are questioned well they produce the right answer.

Therefore, the knowledge and the correct account is within them.⁹²

73b-76c:

Socrates' proof of Learning as Recollection:

If a man perceives a thing and not only knows that thing but thinks of
a different thing, he recollects the second thing.

Such recollections are prompted by the perception of items that are either
different from or similar to the thing remembered.

The Equal itself (αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον) differs from equal things.

We think of the Equal itself when we perceive that which differs from it.

⁹² Compare *Meno* 82a-86c.

Therefore, we recollect the Equal itself.

Moreover, when we compare the equal things to the Equal itself we notice that the equal things fall short of a complete likeness to the Equal itself.

If when we perceive something we measure it against something else, we must have prior knowledge of that to which we compare it.

Therefore, we possess knowledge of the Equal itself before we first perceive equal objects and compare them to it.

But we began to perceive at birth.

Therefore, we possess knowledge of the Equal itself (and the Beautiful itself, the Good itself, and all these things to which we can attach the word “itself”) prior to birth.

Therefore, either we retain this knowledge acquired before birth and know it throughout life, or we forget it at birth and must later recollect it.

If we had knowledge of it all along, we would be able to give an account of what we know.

But most men are unable to give an account of Equality, Goodness, etc.

Therefore, we do not know these things all along.

Therefore, we recollect them.

76c-77a:

Socrates’ argument that the soul exists prior to birth (conclusion):

If learning is recollection, we must possess knowledge prior to birth.

Therefore, our souls must exist and have intelligence apart from and prior to our bodies.

Therefore, if the beautiful itself and the good itself and every such reality (ἡ οὐσία) exists and we refer to them all the things we perceive, then our souls exist before we are born.

77b-80d:

Socrates’ argument that the soul exists after death.

Soul is a member of the class of things that are divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, and always the same.⁹³

80d-84b:

PURIFICATION AND REINCARNATION:

A soul that has undergone purification through the correct practice of philosophy departs to the invisible realm and is happy (εὐδαίμων).

A soul that is impure from associating with and serving the body becomes a ghost.

The greatest and most extreme evil (ὁ πάντων μέγιστόν τε κακῶν καὶ ἔσχατον): the soul’s belief that truth is what the body says it is.

84c-88c:

OBJECTIONS TO SOCRATES’ ARGUMENTS:

84c-85d:

Reflections on Socrates’ arguments:

There is still much to find fault with in these arguments (πολλὰς... ἔτι ἔχει ὑποψίας καὶ ἀντιλαβάς).

Nevertheless, like the swans who sing before their death, Socrates is sanguine about the future that awaits him.

85e-86d:

Simmius’ objection:

⁹³ Dissoluble→Composite→Changing→Particulars→Visible→Body
Indissoluble→Noncomposite→Unchanging→Forms→Invisible→Soul

As the harmony of a musical instrument dissipates as the instrument degenerates, and predeceases the physical instrument itself, so the soul must perish before its body.

- 86e-88c: **Cebes' objection:**
Although the soul may outlive many of the physical bodies it inhabits, it will eventually die.
- 88c-89a: **PHAEDO AND ECHECRATES:**
These objections caused everyone to doubt (ἀπιστίαν) Socrates' proofs. Echecrates has the same experience.
- 89a-107b: **SOCRATES REPLIES:**
89a-91c: **Misology:**
Socrates must revive (ἀναβιώσασθαι) the logos.
If there is an argument that is true, secure, and understandable, a man should censure his own incompetence (ἀτεχνίαν) rather than arguments.
- 91c-92a: **Preliminary agreements:**
Learning is recollection.
The soul preexists the body.
- 92a-95a: **Socrates' three-part response to Simmias' objection:**
92a-e: **a)** If learning is recollection and the soul preexists the body, then the soul must be something more than the harmony of the body.
92e-94b: **b)** That which is harmonized more is more a harmony than that which is less harmonized.
But no soul is more or less a soul than any other.
Therefore, soul is not identical to harmony.
c) If soul is harmony, then virtue and vice are harmonious and unharmonious conditions of the soul.
Thus the more virtuous or vicious a soul is the more or less harmonized it is.
But no soul is more or less harmonized (and therefore more or less a soul) than any other.
Therefore, soul is not harmony.
- 94b-95a: **d)** The soul rules the body.
But harmony is ruled by the elements of the object of which it is the harmony.
Therefore, the soul is not the harmony of the body.
- 95a-107b: **Socrates' response to Cebes' objection:**
95a-99c: **Socrates' youthful investigations into the causes of natural phenomena:**
On the investigation of nature (περὶ φύσεως ἱστορίαν).
Critique of Anaxagoras' philosophy of Mind (νοῦς).
- 99c-102a: **Socrates' safe account of the causes of natural phenomena:**
If one grants the existence of the Beautiful itself, the Good itself, and all other such things, he can use them to reveal causes and to discover that the soul is immortal.
Safe hypothesis: all beautiful things are beautiful by means of the Beautiful (τῷ καλῷ πάντα τὰ καλὰ γίγνεται καλά).
- 102a-103a: **Socrates' sophisticated account of the causes of natural phenomena:**
The Big itself can never be small.

Similarly, the Big in us (τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν μέγεθος) never admits (προσδέχεσθαι) the Small.

The Big flees and withdraws from the approach of the Small, or else it is destroyed (ἀπολωλέναι) by it.

This same account applies to all opposites.

103a-c: **Socrates' sophisticated account and the earlier argument from opposites:**

The earlier argument for immortality from opposites concerned *things that have* opposites and receive their names from them; the present discourse concerns *the opposites themselves*.

103c-105c: **Socrates' sophisticated account continued:**

Some things, though not themselves a form (τὸ εἶδος), nevertheless always possess a form's character (ἡ μορφή).

105c-107b: **Socrates' sophisticated account and the immortality of the soul:**

The soul is that which when present in a body always causes the body to be alive.

Death is the opposite of life.

The soul will never admit the opposite of the character it always possesses.

Therefore, it will never admit death.

That which never admits death is deathless.

Therefore, the soul is deathless.

That which is deathless is indestructible.

Therefore, the soul is indestructible.

Therefore, when death overtakes a man the mortal part of him dies, but the deathless and indestructible part departs and goes away, giving up its place to death.

107c-115a: **SOCRATES' DESCRIPTION OF THE AFTERLIFE:**

107c-108c: **The soul in Hades:**

The soul's only escape and salvation from evils (κακῶν) is to become as good and wise as possible, for it enters Hades with only its education and rearing, which most benefit or harm (ὠφελεῖν ἢ βλάπτειν) the dead as they begin their journey in the underworld.

After remaining in Hades the necessary time and obtaining what it must, the soul is conducted here again by another guide.⁹⁴

108c-115a: **The true earth:**

1) The earth needs nothing to support it.

2) The true surface of the earth under the true heavens is far different from the earth as we observe it.

3) Beneath the earth flow rivers of fire and mud, all of which run together into Tartarus.

4) After judgment souls enter Tartarus by way of different rivers depending on the lives they have lived.

Those whose lives have been judged holy (τὸ ὁσίως βιῶναι) are released to live on the pure surface of the earth.

⁹⁴ Compare *Phaedrus* 246d ff and *Republic* 614b ff.

Those who have purified themselves sufficiently by philosophy (οἱ φιλοσοφία ἱκανῶς καθηράμενοι) proceed without a body to habitations that are even more beautiful.

No intelligent man would affirm these things in all their details.

Nevertheless, to believe them is worth the risk, for the risk is a noble one (καλὸς...ὁ κίνδυνος).

115a-118a:

SOCRATES' DEATH:

Socrates playfully mocks Crito's concern for the state of his body after his death.

A government official praises Socrates as the noblest, gentlest, and best man he has encountered in his duties (γενναϊότατον καὶ πραότατον καὶ ἄριστον).

Socrates prays for a fortunate (εὐτυχῆ) passage to the underworld and drinks the poison.

Socrates final words:

Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; give it him and do not neglect it.

Socrates was the best, wisest, and most just of men (ἀρίστου καὶ... φρονιμωτάτου καὶ δικαιοτάτου).

PHAEDO INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

The *Phaedo* is a memory within a memory of the last day of day of Socrates' life and the conclusion of his Delphic mission. In the broadest sense the dialogue reveals how the roots of love and friendship survive and reform in the wake of losing our friends to death. Those who loved Socrates had to find a way to live their lives without him just as we do when those we love die. The broadest message of this dialogue is that shared memory matters; talking about the one you loved with others who loved him, too, will transform your pain, rekindle your spirit, and revive the presence of the loved one among you.

It is difficult for us to imagine ourselves stuffed like sardines in a cramped jail cell with a dozen other people who alternately laugh, cry, groan, and talk heatedly as the last hours of Socrates' life tick away with the rising and setting of the sun over the blue Aegean Sea. There is a world far away from our sterile white hospital corridors; from silent bedrooms where Hospice nurses administer injections to ease pain; from priests whispering the last rites over rattling lungs. Is our way healthier? With our cultural practices and rituals concerning death, do we emerge able to say, as *Phaedo* does, that "remembering Socrates, both speaking of him and hearing about him from another, is always the most pleasant of all things"(58d5-6)?

Can a dramatic encounter with a condemned man illustrate for us the best of all deaths? Can a dialogue reframe the way we endure our own losses? Buried deep in the *Phaedo*, toward the final page and at the end of day, Socrates suggests that his purpose and aim in having undertaken this particular conversation was to comfort his friend Crito, as well as himself and the others present. To the extent that this conversation survives him, the comfort Socrates offered them on his final day is available to us as well.

Some weeks after Socrates shared his last hours with his friends, Phaedo, one of those present, leaves Athens on unidentified business. He stops in Phlius, where several other friends of Socrates gather round him for information concerning the philosopher's death. They know Phaedo will have heard more than they have owing to the fact that he resides in Athens whereas they of late have had little communication from the city.

But how much more does Phaedo really know of the events? The opening lines press first for credentials. "Were you yourself, Phaedo, present with Socrates on that day he drank the poison in prison, or did you hear it from someone else?" (57a1-3).

That Phaedo was an eye-witness, sitting on a little footstool to Socrates' right, establishes him as reliable (57a4 and 89a10-b1). Finally, then, these non-Athenian friends of Socrates will hear the whole story; but Phaedo must first account for the time that passed between the trial and the execution to be sure that everyone has his bearings. Having explained this detail, Phaedo begins his account, naming all who were present and at least one who was absent. So and so, and such and such, and this and that person, and then, without warning, suddenly this: "Plato, I think, was ill."

Plato was not present. Plato was absent. Where on earth was Plato? I believe Plato was at home alone with the shutters closed writhing in wretched despair. The opening section reveals that the person who immortalized Socrates and set his cornerstone firmly in the bedrock of Western Civilization had found the situation of that last day so unbearable that he could not take the full force of the loss first hand.

How, then, did Plato come to come to write this dialogue?

I think it is plain that Plato survived the immediate aftermath of Socrates' loss by gathering the details of that day from Phaedo and cross-checking the facts with those included in the roster of names listed from 59a-c. It is not always possible to be present at a loved one's passing; not always possible to be a star witness. For every person who

dies, there are millions who are absent. They are shopping or they are on a cruise or on the other side of the world in Tibet. Or they are home weeping alone as I imagine Plato that day.

What we confront here is a significant division between two sorts of memory. Phaedo's memory is arguably more reliable because it is first hand, whereas Plato's dialogue is an imitation of that memory, a memory of a memory. Plato is honest. He is on the same footing with the men of Phlius, and also with ourselves. For our own unavoidable absence from Socrates' cell requires us to trust others and the testimony of others in order to share the comfort and grief that last afternoon afforded. The dialogue suggests that our own losses can be healed despite our absence, and that secondhand comfort will serve if we cannot be present. If a conversation has the power to comfort or heal, its repetition will comfort or heal as well. This is the subterranean promise of the *Phaedo*.

Phaedo confesses to his friends in Phlius that he and everyone present experienced the most inexplicable range of emotions. We must track these emotions, for the dialogue rides them like waves throughout the day. It is only when the group is settled and theorizing philosophically about the soul's immortality, its past experiences and future prospects, that time seems suspended and all seems well. Conversations like these quiet our anticipatory grief. But as in many of the dialogues, most notably at the conclusion of the *Lysis*, wider life with its pressing demands always breaks in, and when such interruptions occur our leashed emotions slip their restraints.

The philosopher's friends have learned that the ritual ship from Delos has returned to the port, bringing to an end Socrates' brief stay of execution which, by law, will expire with the next sunset. They agree to meet and to proceed *en masse* before dawn in order to arrive at the jail even earlier than usual. But upon their arrival they are told to

wait, for Socrates is having his chains removed. When the men gain entry, however, there sitting quietly with Socrates is his wife Xanthippe with one of their two young boys on her lap. We do not know how long they have been there, nor what they were talking about.

Was there a bit of disappointment in the men at the door? I believe there was, and that the memory of it still rankles Phaedo. Socrates' wife beat them to the jail and thereby upset their planned show of solidarity; this may help explain Phaedo's sniping.

But interruption works both ways, and remember it is only the first of several interruptions that day.

Xanthippe's sense of having been interrupted is patent. Upon seeing his friends arrive, Xanthippe cries out, "O Socrates, this is the last time your companions will address you, and you them!" The words are out of her mouth before she has time to think, and with that she breaks into tears. At Socrates' urging, Crito dispatches his servants to see her and her small son home.

This would not happen today, of course. Friends of the family would never think of hastily ushering the wife and the children of a condemned man home, nor of saying later something like, "You know how it is with women," as justification. But then again, we would not allow either family or friends to sit all day in a jail cell on Death Row with a condemned prisoner either. Our Death Row inmates have no such luxury in their final hours. Official life today has swallowed up real life.

The final day officially begins, then, with Socrates rubbing his sore legs commenting on the pleasure and pain of having had his chains removed and, by implication, of having had them removed for the last time. He reflects briefly on the oddity of the constant conjunction of pain and pleasure and uncharacteristically imagines how Aesop could and perhaps should have ventured a myth to explain their odd marriage.

Into the long dead mouth of Aesop, Socrates places these words concerning pleasure and pain: “God wanted to reconcile these combatants, but when he could not he joined them together by their heads and because of this where the one is present the other later follows as well” (60c2-5).

Socrates’ reference to Aesop reminds Cebes of the rumors that the philosopher has been composing poems, of all things, and that the poet Evenus is keen to know if it is so. Socrates is a talker after all, not a writer; a dialectician, not a poet. Socrates admits he has been composing poems, not for public consumption, but in order to clear his conscience. He explains that for years he has had a recurring dream urging him to “practice music and make it your business,” and that for as long as he can remember, he has dismissed the dream because he was sure that in practicing philosophy he was already doing this. Philosophy, he says, is surely “the greatest music (μεγίστης μουσικῆς).”

Having had the nagging dream yet again without the luxury of being free to roam the streets looking for conversation, it has occurred to him that he may have been mistaken in his interpretation of the insistent dream. Rather than exhorting him to persist in what has been doing, perhaps the dream meant to correct his course and broaden the scope of his activities. To meet the possibility of this error, Socrates has been turning Aesop’s fables into verse and composing a hymn to Apollo.

On such interpretations as the one Socrates has related whole lives are erected. We often set the course we take in life too narrowly; but we realize this only when looking back as if through a dream. Yet the dialogue suggests that it is never too late to change course; we always have time to broaden our horizons and to redirect our talents toward alien shores, even if they are shores we formerly avoided. It is well known that Socrates had clear and strong reservations about poetry (see *Republic* 276c-402e). That he has recently been laboring to compose poems testifies to his commitment to manage

his life as god would have him do, up to the very end. More than this no one can accomplish: we are not omniscient. Life demands that we struggle to forge our lives according to the best interpretations we can devise. Socrates shows that such struggles engage us even unto our final hour.

We possess neither the aforementioned lyrical adaptations of Aesop nor Socrates' hymn to Apollo, just as we do not have a single one of Aristotle's dialogues. These works are lost to us and so our portraits of Socrates and Aristotle must remain forever incomplete. What is not lost, though, is the *Phaedo*'s dramatic counsel to open our palms widely to life, even if the time left to us is short.

The conversation begins in earnest when Socrates asks Cebes to urge Evenus to "follow me as quickly as possible" (61b9).

What can such advice mean? Not suicide, of course. What then? Cebes and Simmias insist that Socrates is taking this whole affair too lightly, and that such a statement requires a defense. And so, for the second time in under a month Socrates submits to a trial: he must present a defense, as if he were in court, of both his carefree attitude and his farewell remark to the absent Evenus. (63d)

Socrates notices that Crito has been trying to interrupt. An official has warned him that lively conversations such as the one that seems about to transpire will raise Socrates' blood pressure, which will impede the poison's operation. Socrates may have to swallow two or even three doses of the nasty stuff. This early indication of the jailer's concern for Socrates blossoms later into a wholesale profusion of emotions; but here, Socrates lets the worried man off the hook. Mixing and administering poison is the jailer's business; should he deem two or three doses necessary, so be it. Socrates finesses this tiny reminder of what these men still must confront.

Returning to his newly empanelled jury, Socrates begins what is arguably the most compelling set of rational arguments for the soul's immortality in the Western Tradition.

This is not to say that we rehearse or rely on or even fully understand Socrates' arguments. Most people belong to religious traditions that assure them of some sort of afterlife, and most people are content with their beliefs. All the same, though, they believe religiously, not philosophically. Socrates, on the other hand, has tried in addition to think abstractly and logically about the matter and finds that his thinking provides him a great source of hope; this hope is what he sets about to share with his anxious friends.

Cebes and Simmias examine Socrates' arguments for the soul's immortality. They naturally fear, though, that this topic of discussion is somehow inappropriate and that it will vex Socrates given his present circumstances. Socrates eases their worries by assuring them that he does not deem his present circumstances a misfortune, any more than the swans that sing more the hour before their death than ever before deem their impending demise a misfortune. These swans sing for joy because "they are about to go to the god whose servants (θεράποντες) they are" (85a2-3).

The conversation depicted in the *Phaedo* is to be read as a song.

We learn in the *Apology* that Socrates does not know what death is. Fear of death stems from ignorance, not from knowledge. But one thing is certain: "Nothing bad befalls a good man either living or dead, nor are his concerns neglected by the gods" (41d1-3). In the *Phaedo* we learn that the philosopher is a good man because he does not cling so desperately to life that his passions and desires overcome his reason or his sense of dignity and honor. To live justly and well, not merely to live, is the main thing. Socrates insists that philosophy offers those who follow her "deliverance and purification" (λύσει τε καὶ καθαρμῶ, 82d6) that will see the soul happily into the next life.

In short, religious faith and blind obedience are not enough to qualify a person as good. In addition, or perhaps rather, one must commit oneself to the daily care of one's soul through philosophy by employing "pure reason (εἰλικρινεῖ τῆ διανοίᾳ) itself to attempt to capture each pure instance of reality (τῶν ὄντων)," which the intellect does best when "neither hearing nor sight, neither pains nor any pleasure disturb it." Only in separation from the body and its desires does the mind "reach out toward reality (ὀρέγεται τοῦ ὄντος)." Philosophers know from experience that they face many sensual and material traps during their earthly existence, but they struggle to ensure that they do not hamper their ultimate journey (65a-66b *passim*). These reflections make it clear to all those present in the cell that the philosopher is a good man.

But as Phaedo describes to Echechrates and the others the zigzag course of the lengthy discussion, he notes how the hopes and despairs of those present rose and fell like leaves in the wind as they pondered and questioned Socrates' explanations and assurances that "all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well."⁹⁵

Echecrates ventures his sympathy, for he admits upon hearing the arguments and objections that he, too, has similar misgivings, and he urges Phaedo to relate whether Socrates rescued the arguments for the soul's immortality from doubts. Phaedo recounts that at one of these critical and despairing junctures, as Socrates took the pulse of the silent and dejected company, he quietly placed his hand on Phaedo's head and played with his curls for moment. Socrates gently assured Phaedo that all was not lost; that they should and would rescue the argument from doubts; and he warned all who were dismayed against the danger of mistrusting or despising reason. Arguments, like people, may let us down from time to time; but we must learn to trust our ability to discover truth

⁹⁵ From Dame Julian of Norwich by way of T. S. Eliot's *Little Gidding*.

through reason (90c-e). That said, Socrates recovers his momentum and saves the arguments for the soul's immortality to everyone's satisfaction.

As he develops his arguments Socrates demonstrates what it means to practice philosophy, and in doing so he encourages his friends to do the same. One must attempt to give an account of the basis of one's belief lest earthly miseries get the upper hand.

Once the soul's immortality is secure, the company realizes that there is still much to ask and perhaps to fear; the subject, they know, is intricate and vast. Socrates himself admits that his arguments are neither complete nor obviously sound (107a-b). He does not, however, pursue them any further; instead, he offers up an image and a myth of the soul's postmortem fate. He frankly admits to his friends at the outset that he is unable to prove it and that even if he could, the time remaining would be too short for a long explanation. Moreover, he later insists that no reasonable man would maintain that the facts are exactly as he has expressed them. Still, belief in the image he has presented is worth risking, for the risk is "noble."

So before this second jury—this jury of friends—Socrates reveals his grounds and reasons for the claim he made before his first jury that "nothing bad befalls a good man either living or dead."

The company falls peacefully silent, in agreement at last. But their conversation has consumed the hours and now the sun is slipping down into the western sky. Realizing this, Socrates excuses himself to bathe and prepare for this, his next journey. Crito accompanies him into another room. Later, Xanthippe returns with Socrates' sons; they say their farewells out of earshot. Finally, Crito and Socrates return to the friends with whom they have shared this extraordinary day.

As Socrates settles down, a government official enters, interrupting the peace, to inform Socrates that he must drink the poison. This man is no mere bureaucrat, however;

or anyway the time he has recently spent in Socrates' company has made him something more than that. He will miss this strange little philosopher whom he has come to know and admire. He bids Socrates farewell and praises his character: he has never known, he says, a nobler man. Then, sputtering a tearful goodbye, he flees the room.

It is time. Socrates asks Crito to see to it that the poison is prepared. Desperate to delay the inevitable, Crito points out that the sun isn't even down yet. Sometimes, he says, the officials allow a final meal to be served, and what's the hurry anyway? Socrates gently explains that they will gain nothing by putting off the poison a few more moments or hours; besides, to cling to life in this way would make Socrates feel ridiculous in his own eyes.

Crito sends his servant to see to the request.

In the meantime, they wait. For Phaedo the moments stretch out, it seems a long time; but suddenly, there in the room is the official with the thimble of poison in his hands, and at once Socrates is getting up to meet him, to take the poison from his hand, to receive his instructions. And then he drinks. It happens in an instant, without hesitation, without a shred of fear, without shuddering or flinching, without warning!

The company knows what is to happen, what has to happen, but when they see that he is drinking, has drunk it down in one long swallow, all hell breaks loose. Apollodorus keens loudly. Everyone is groaning and sobbing.

To his audience in Phlius Phaedo confesses: "Against my will my tears flowed in spate, so that I covered my face and wept" (117c7-9).

From under this new wave of fresh emotion, Socrates gently extricates himself. "What behavior, you remarkable men! This was the main reason I sent the women away, to avoid such false notes (πλημμελοῖεν). For I have heard that one must die in pious silence. So keep calm and be strong" (117d7-e2). As his friends endeavor to stifle their

grief and regain their former composure, Socrates follows his instructions, slowly and calmly walking around the cell, waiting to feel the poison's initial effects. As first his feet and then his legs become numb, he lies down on his prison slab and in preparation for his end covers his face with ritual cloth.

The official begins to mark the loss of feeling in his body by a series of hard pinches. The progress and effects of the poison are making their way from his feet toward his stomach, and "when the cold reaches his heart he will be gone."

In the penultimate moment, though, Socrates suddenly sits up, uncovers his face, and whispers, "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. So render it up and do not neglect it." Of course, Socrates. Is there anything more?

Silence.

The official lifts the cloth from Socrates' face and Crito sees that his friend is gone. No longer a prisoner of his body, or of the state of Athens, the flight of Socrates' soul has begun.

He is free.

Phaedo's willingness to share and relive the events of that tumultuous day with the men of Phlius, and Plato's willingness to set this dialogue in the stream of Western thought, suggest that what we leave behind us when we die are the memories of comfort, concern, instruction, and care that we showered upon our friends during our lives. One need not endorse the dialogue's logic or mythology to agree that the *Phaedo* shows us how conversations and dialectic can help ease the anxiety of anticipatory grief, and how remembering such encounters can help us heal in the aftermath of loss.

XANTHIPPE'S LETTER

Dear Mother,

I am approaching you through this letter on my knees to seek your forgiveness and to admit that you were right about this marriage from the beginning. It has been a nightmare the shadows of which do not lift even at noon.

Everything you warned me about has come to pass, and then some. If it were not for the children—three beautiful boys, Mother, blonde and dimpled like you and Grandmother—and utterly unlike their father—I should have left weeks, no, years ago.

I cannot stay here another day, Mother. Please let me come home. I promise I will earn my keep and that I will be no trouble. We will get a place of our own just as soon as we can, I swear this to you. I have to get away from here, away from these fawning, supercilious idlers who keep coming by to say “how sorry” they are and to see whether there is “anything, anything at all” they can do for “the poor widow” and the “poor children.”

Yes, Mother. He is dead and I am “poor widow” now. Except that I blame these sniveling friends of his for all of it. ALL OF IT! They can neither see the rage in my eyes, not feel the heat of the anger boiling in my heart. They are deaf to everything except their own big talk. They are laying plans for my boys, for me, for us—as though I am incapable of making decisions of my own now that the whole charade is finally over. You cannot imagine the magnitude of their self-importance.

Of course that is the first thing you warned me about, remember? Why didn't I listen to you, Mother? After he boasted of his former position on the city council and “let slip” the mention of his war decorations and his inheritance, you took me aside and said, “Be careful, daughter. This man has an inflated sense of his own importance.” How I scorned you! I think I even accused you of being jealous because Daddy had never held

any kind of political distinction. Why, he was a “hero,” he was educated, he knew poetry, he was from the big leagues, not the Flatbush we called home; and didn’t everyone know that he had even been the subject of an award winning play? And when you tried to warn me of the age difference between us, I sharply replied that his “maturity” would help guarantee his “fidelity”—unlike Daddy, whose affairs and liaisons were as regular and common as sundown.

Oh, mother, please forgive me. My words hurt you, I know. My tongue swells in my mouth as I recall them. I beg you to soften your heart to me, a proud woman whose life is miserable and who admits that she was a fool.

The big inheritance was not enough to keep us in decent clothing. I regularly begged him to get a job, ANY JOB, but he was too good for that. Too good for honest work! The children used to ask what their daddy did for a living. How could I tell them that he “hung out” for a living? That he had a gift for gab and that flapping his jaws every day and every night meant more to him than replacing their worn-out shoes? That he would rather spend his time with those good-for-nothing idlers who fancy themselves the gentry, than sit down with us for dinner? That he got his kicks from rubbing elbows with the glitzy Might-a-Beens. Thank God children cannot discriminate between the popularity of being esteemed and the popularity of a clown.

One night my sweet youngest looked up at me and said shyly and proudly, “Everyone knows Daddy, don’t they, Mama? They even write plays about him, don’t they?” Should I have said, “Yesindeedy, they know him, dear heart, he is the town buffoon and no comedy is complete without a reference to him!” I could not. I remember only too well my own failure to distinguish “famous” from “infamous.” Ignorance was my ally then, and she will be the shield I use to spare my boys for as long as I can. They will not discover soon that their father was a laughing stock. I will come home, away

from here, and they will dodge the red hot cheeks of shame—for a little while at least! Do you understand, Mother? I have to get away.

I warned him over and over that those “friends” of his were just using him. That they enjoyed seeing him get the best of some petty bureaucrat and they loved watching him berate and belittle decent folk. Did he listen? He so loved being the center of their elitist attentions that he would ridicule anyone and anything just to get an “attaboy” or “that’s tellin’ ‘im” from one of his buddies. But they were always real careful to see the fellow later and make sure there were no hard feelings for THEM. After all, THEY hadn’t said a word! Oh, it was pathetic. Really pathetic.

Six weeks ago he comes home and announces that he is in “a little trouble.” It “isn’t anything,” the “guys” will “tend to it” and not to “fret” and on and on and on and on and on...talking and talking. “A little trouble” turned out to be going on trial for his life. But “no sweat” because this one has “connections” and that one is a “pillar of the community” and after all, his friends aren’t some bunch of hick red-necks, they’re the goddam “Who’s Who” of the whole city, and they have CLOUT! They’ve fucking assured him that everything is “under control.” (I apologize for using that word, Mother. The delicacy and class of this place leaves a lot to be desired. All their elegance is in their monuments, their statues, their scenic skyline of lifeless stones. Such a veneer they erect for themselves! The hammering never rests.)

The morning of the trial they were all here plotting strategy and boasting that the “fix” was in and when it came time for him to have his say, he should just “let it rip.” He should shame them for even dreaming of bringing him to court. He refused to listen to any advice of mine, which was to remember who he was, tone it down, and let the four of us, the boys and me, sit in a prominent position down front. He scoffed at me. What did a woman know of such things? He had all the influence he needed. Look around the room.

Why, they had the jury “in their pockets.” I did not tell him that their influence was as out of date as last year’s beans—that his pals didn’t have pockets that deep. What did I, a mere woman, know, after all?

Well, they strutted out together arm-in-arm in a noisy confusion like a fraternity headed to a festival. I made my way up the hill alone under a cloudless sky. The stones shimmered in the heat and the white glare made my eyes water. I felt an eerie kinship with those silent, stony, lifeless things.

Somehow I arrived at the court before them. I found a seat near the rear. It was steamy and close what with all the weekend warriors, the jurors, the curiosity seekers, but I could not see him anywhere. Just then, he made a belated grand entrance with his crew sweeping in two-by-two behind him, and in that split-second, Mother, I knew all was lost. That they had set him up. Not one juror seemed the least bit aware of who they even were. If you’ve got a jury “in your pocket,” they can’t help but squirm a little when you walk in. I watched with care. Every single face was blank. Bored and blank. After they found him “guilty,” there was a brief recess. His entourage huddled around him, coaching, urging, and whispering. I never caught his eye, much less his ear. He never once looked away from their faces. When it came time for him to propose a counter-punishment to the death penalty, do you know what the damn fool did? He offered the taxpayers of this city the privilege of supporting him for life!

All hell broke loose. I watched the faces of his noble friends, Mother. They weren’t just snickering, they were laughing. Like it was some sort of huge joke. I left before they pronounced the sentence. I heard later that those who had voted for his innocence in the first phase of the trial had voted to execute him in the penalty phase. I was not surprised.

It took me a while to find the jail. By the time I arrived, they were all there in high dudgeon and had already convinced him that they had been “swindled” and “double crossed,” but not to worry because a pardon was the “easiest thing in the world to arrange” and they would see to it “immediately.” He believed them, Mother. The fool had just been condemned to death for their entertainment, and he still believed that their “clout” meant something. In fact, he was consoling THEM, telling THEM not to worry, as if their egos needed mending now that the strings they had tried to pull had flown apart in their dainty hands. It was obscene.

What does he see in them? Why was being in with them so goddam important?

Five weeks, Mother. Every night for five weeks I listened to them telling him, and telling themselves, that there were just a “few more details” to work out. Just a couple more people to “speak to” and the pardon would magically arrive and we’d all have a good laugh about all of this then, wouldn’t we? They were so earnest and sober, so intense and convincing, that even I halfway believed them. I almost forgot the rule, Mother, the cardinal rule of existence:

DON’T GET NOTICED

Don’t get noticed by the crowd, or the gods, or the enemy, or the sycophants, the sophists or the boss. But most of all don’t get noticed by the GOVERNMENT. EVER.

One night we were alone for just a little while. I suppose the strain of waiting and hoping had shifted me into a mental twilight. I must have breathed the rule in a sigh, in a whisper to myself, because he startled me when he asked what I meant. After I told him he laughed and said it was a good rule, but he had a better one: BE THE NOTICER. (So that was it. All along, that was it.) Then the gaggle began to dribble in. As they arrived, I searched each face with care, Mother, and I suddenly knew they were cowards living by

my rule, but they had convinced him that they were incarnations of his rule. It was pathetic. As I left, I realized that if we waited for them, he would die. He had to escape.

The next morning I waylaid one of the worst of the lot of them in the alley behind the jail. His name is Crito. He'd laughed the loudest at the trial, and he'd been the one babbling about "imminent release" and "total vindication" for weeks. I simply told him that if he could not convince my husband to be on a certain hay wagon that would be parked outside the jail at moonrise tonight, then I would expose his part in the vandalism of the public statues here a few years ago. He was furious and demanded to know where I had heard such an outrageous lie. I didn't tell him that he himself was the drunken source of the information; I just warned him that if he didn't want to join my husband, he had better have him outside and on that wagon tonight.

When I got there that night, I could hear them arguing. I have to hand it to old Crito, the goddam coward, he tried. But there was no convincing him. The "official discharge" was on the ship just outside the harbor. He would be released in three day's time! Escape now was "out of the question." As I eavesdropped the deep hopelessness of it all sank in. I turned the wagon around and went home. The boys thought they had had a grand adventure hiding under all that hay. I can still smell the sweetness of that wagon full of hay and the promise it held.

I did not make good my threats against Crito, Mother. They care too much about their damn statues here. They care more for them in their lifelessness than they do for the living. Crito tried. That was enough. I still care for the living, even if they are swine.

So: the next day came. The sun came up. The sun went down. The swarm arrived as I was saying goodbye to him. I refused to cry. Not one tear for the benefit of men whose sole ambition was to watch an old man die for their amusement. The only one who didn't rush right over to tell me how disconsolate, how outraged, how bereaved he was,

was old Crito. I haven't seen hide nor hair of that one since our little chat that morning in the alley. Thank God.

They commenced to tell me how bravely he died. How he drank the hemlock without a shudder. I laughed out loud. I fed this man for fourteen years and they are telling me, ME, that he swallowed that disgusting brew with a "smile on his face." Why, he couldn't even chew willow bark for his arthritis without gagging and retching. I have seen him dry heave from the smell of moldy bread. Who do they think they are kidding here? I was his WIFE!

So now I am the "poor widow" and the riff-raff that did him in are showing up daily to see if they can "help." They figure I am their charge, so to speak. That the boys are their "responsibility," so to speak. I keep the boys away from them as best I can, for I do not intend them to listen to the revisionist history these devious scholars are already crafting. The boys are much too young to realize that their "uncles" are busy fabricating a host of good intentions to conceal their part in their father's death.

I should have driven that hay wagon straight to Thessaly from the jail that night. I know it would have been a shock to open the door and find four waifs standing there, one of whom has hurt you to the quick, but it would have spared me and the boys the incessant fawning we have had to endure from these "fine citizens." The charade continues to play itself out. For them. One of them, a young arrogant pimple-faced slacker had the gall to tell me he plans to "memorialize the life and death and times of" and to submit it in next year's festival of poets. And would I be so kind as to relate, say, the "gist" of our last hours together? I THREW HIM OUT. He complained to others of my "curtness." I can just hear them clucking and cooing over his wounded pride at the hands of the harpy-widow. Oh, the pains and trouble these liars will go through to preserve their "dignity."

And for what? For what, Mother? Another husband, another father, another clown goes to the gallows for ...what?

I am thirty-one. No longer young. I have three children to rear and protect and I am not going to play the part of the "poor widow" in their ever growing tissue of lies. No one will remember this fiasco in a year, but it has well-nigh ruined my life.

The writing of this letter has taken me longer than I intended. It is well past midday. I have neither food, nor a plan, for supper; the heat has probably wilted all the produce at the market. I dread the dusty, rocky climb to the Acropolis under the dead, fixed stares of their abominable statues. But all the messengers leave from there and I must hire one today.

Please let come home to Thessaly, Mother. My heart aches for honest affection and yearns to be rid of this city of statues whose eyes are glazed and lifeless from listening to men talking and talking and talking to no purpose, no end, without cease.

Let me come home, please, to you.

Your daughter,

Xanthippe

REPUBLIC⁹⁶

OUTLINE

BOOK I

- 327a-328c: Down in the Piraeus.
328c-331d: Socrates and Cephalus: Introducing justice.
331d-336a: Socrates and Polemarchus: Justice is helping friends and harming enemies.
336b-342e: Socrates and Thrasymachus: Justice is the advantage of the stronger.
343a-354c: Socrates and Thrasymachus: Injustice is more profitable than justice.

BOOK II

- 357a-362c: Glaucon's revival and "defense" of Thrasymachus' position.
362d-367e: Adeimantus' "defense" of Thrasymachus' position.
367e-373e: The city in speech.
373e-376c: Introduction of the guardians, and on their nature.
376c-378e: Education of the guardians: On tales told to the young.
378e-380c: God is responsible only for the good.
380d-383c: Gods do not alter their form, nor do they lie.

BOOK III

- 386a-392c: More restrictions on poets and their tales.
392c-398b: The proper and improper subjects and modes of imitation.
398c-402e: Music: melody and rhythm.
402e-403c: Excessive pleasure: Sex.
403c-404e: Gymnastics and diet.
405a-408e: Medicine and doctors.
409a-e: Judges.
410a-412b: Summary of effects of gymnastic and music on body and soul.
412b-414b: Selecting rulers from among the guardians (now labeled auxiliaries).
414b-415d: The noble falsehood.
415d-417b: Communal living of the auxiliaries.

BOOK IV

- 419a-421d: Happiness of the auxiliaries and of the whole city.
421d-427d: Wealth and poverty, the proper size of the city, innovations in music, and other regulations and laws.⁹⁷
427d-429a: Wisdom in the (now completed) city.
429a-430c: Courage in the city.
430c-432b: Moderation in the city.
432b-434d: Justice and injustice in the city.

⁹⁶ The Greek title is πολιτεία, which designates the constitution or political organization of a polis (city-state).

⁹⁷ In this section Socrates mentions the common possession of women and children (423e6-424a2), which subject will lead in Book V to the three waves and the introduction of the Philosopher King.

- 434d-441c: Tripartite soul.
 441c-444b: Courage, wisdom, moderation, justice, and injustice in the individual.
 444c-445b: Justice and injustice likened to health and illness.
 445b-e: Identification of the regime Socrates has constructed in speech as an aristocracy or monarchy.⁹⁸

BOOK V

- 449a-451c: Request that Socrates explain his remark (at 423e6-424a2) concerning the regime in which women and children are possessed in common.
 451c-452e: Education of women in music and gymnastics.
 452e-456c: It is *possible* for women, some of whom are fit to be guardians along with the men, to be educated in music and gymnastics.
 456c-457c: It is *best* for women to be educated in music and gymnastics.⁹⁹
 457c-466d: The community of women and children is *best*, for it promotes harmony and prevents faction.¹⁰⁰
 466e-471c: Digression on the conduct of war.¹⁰¹
 471c-473c: Whether the community of women and children is *possible*.¹⁰²
 473c-474b: Introduction of the Philosopher-King.
 474b-480a: Distinction between the philosopher and the non-philosopher: Knowledge of that-which-is; opinion of that-which-both-is-and-is-not.

BOOK VI

- 484a-487a: Qualities of the philosopher.
 487b-e: The many claim that philosophers are either vicious or useless.
 487e-489d: The uselessness of decent philosophers.
 489d-496a: The corruption of potential philosophers.
 496a-499a: The true philosopher.
 499a-502c: The true philosopher, continued; the rule of the philosopher(s) is *best* and *possible*.¹⁰³
 502c-509d: Education of the philosophers—the form of the Good (sun analogy).
 509d-511e: The Divided Line.

BOOK VII

- 514a-517c: The Cave.
 517c-521b: Philosophers must be compelled to rule.
 521c-526c: Education to lead men to the Good: number and calculation.

⁹⁸ The identification and evaluation of other types of regime is deferred until Book VIII.

⁹⁹ The questions regarding the possibility and the benefit of the women's education constitute the first wave.

¹⁰⁰ At 457c-d Socrates implies that the questions concerning both the benefit and the possibility of the community of women and children constitute the second wave. At 472a, however, he distinguishes these problems, identifying the question of the benefit of this regime as the second wave and the question of its possibility as the third wave.

¹⁰¹ On Socrates' military career see "[Socrates as Hoplite](#)."

¹⁰² This is the third wave. The possibility of the regime depends upon the possibility of the rule of the philosopher(s), which is finally addressed from 499a to 502c.

¹⁰³ With this Socrates has finally successfully confronted the third wave.

- 526c-527c: Plane geometry.
 527c-528e: Solid geometry.
 528e-530d: Astronomy.
 530d-531d: Musical harmony.
 531d-535a: Dialectic.
 535a-540c: Who should be exposed to these studies, and at what ages they should progress through the various subjects.
 540d-541b: The possibility of this regime; purge of those over ten years of age.

BOOK VIII

- 543a-545b: Return to the types of regime and soul.¹⁰⁴
 545b-548d: Origin and nature of timocratic regime.
 548d-550c: Origin and nature of timocratic individual.
 550c-553a: Origin and nature of oligarchic regime.
 553a-555b: Origin and nature of oligarchic individual.
 555b-558c: Origin and nature of democratic regime.
 558c-562a: Origin and nature of democratic individual.¹⁰⁵
 562a-569c: Origin and nature of tyrannic regime.

BOOK IX

- 571a-576b: Origin and nature of the tyrannic man.
 576b-580c: *First proof* that the just life (which corresponds to aristocracy or monarchy) is happiest and the unjust life (which corresponds to tyranny) is unhappiest, based upon the existential facts of the lives in question.
 580d-583b: *Second proof*, based upon experience, prudence, and argument.
 583b-588a: *Third proof*, based upon pleasure.
 588b-592b: Summary of conclusions by way of an image of the soul as a combination of hydra, lion, and human.

BOOK X

- 595a-608b: Imitation: Truth and knowledge, virtue and vice.
 608c-612a: The immortality of the soul.
 612a-614a: Consequences of justice in this life.
 614a-621b: Consequences of justice in the after-life: Myth of Er.
 621b-d: Final exhortation to a life of justice.

¹⁰⁴ Here the conversation returns to the trajectory abandoned at the end of Book IV/beginning of Book V.

¹⁰⁵ This section includes an important distinction between necessary and unnecessary desires (558d ff).

DIALOGORUM PERSONAE¹⁰⁶

Adeimantus: one of Plato's older brothers. He is a primary interlocutor in the *Republic*. He is present at Socrates' trial.

Agathon: Athenian tragedian and one of the main speakers in the *Symposium*, which is set at his home. He is Pausanias' beloved, with whom he appears as a young man in the *Protagoras*.

Alcibiades: a notorious and controversial Athenian personality and sometime associate of Socrates. He delivers the final speech of the *Symposium*, which is set just one year prior to the disastrous events surrounding the Sicilian Expedition. He appears also in the *Protagoras*. Alcibiades was assassinated in 404 after a brilliant and frenzied political and military career during the Peloponnesian War.

Anytus: one of Socrates' three accusers. He participates briefly in the conversation depicted in the *Meno*. He is named in the *Apology* as prosecuting Socrates on behalf of the craftsmen and the politicians.

Apollodorus: narrator of the *Symposium*. Apollodorus was a young and enthusiastic associate of Socrates. He is named among those present at Socrates' trial and on the day of his death.

Aristodemus: accompanied Socrates to the gathering depicted in the *Symposium*. He later related the evening's events to Apollodorus.

Aristophanes: famous Athenian comic playwright. He is one of the principle speakers in the *Symposium*. Socrates refers to his work the *Clouds* in the *Apology*.

Callicles: a student of Gorgias. He is the final and most formidable of Socrates' three interlocutors in the *Gorgias*. He is otherwise unknown.

¹⁰⁶ Most of the information included here is available in the dialogues themselves. We have included only those figures who have major roles in the dialogues and/or who recur in several dialogues. For more detailed accounts of these and other figures who appear in Plato's dialogues consult Nails, *The People of Plato*.

Callias: rich Athenian at whose house the conversation depicted in the *Protagoras* takes place. He is described by Socrates in the *Apology* as a man who “has spent more money on sophists than everyone else combined” (20a5).

Cebes: a Pythagorean philosopher from Thebes. Along with Simmias he is one of Socrates’ main interlocutors in the *Phaedo*. He is named in the *Crito* as having contributed money toward Socrates’ escape.

Cephalus: a rich Athenian metic at whose house the conversation depicted in the *Republic*, in which he himself briefly participates, takes place. He is the father of Polemarchus, Euthydemus, and Lysias.

Chaerephon: a long-time friend and associate of Socrates. It was Chaerephon who inquired of the Delphic oracle regarding Socrates’ wisdom. He is a speaker in the *Charmides* and the *Gorgias*. As Socrates notes in the *Apology*, Chaerephon predeceased the philosopher.

Charmides: first cousin and ward of Critias, associate of Socrates, and Plato’s maternal uncle. In the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War he served as one of the board of directors who ruled the Piraeus in association with the Thirty Tyrants. He is one of Socrates’ main interlocutors in the *Charmides* and is present for the conversation depicted in the *Protagoras*.

Clinias: a handsome young Athenian in the *Euthydemus*. He is a member of Alcibiades’ family (but not to be confused with either Alcibiades’ father, Clinias II, or his brother, Clinias IV).

Critias: first cousin and guardian of Charmides, associate of Socrates, and relative of Plato. He was later a leader of the Thirty Tyrants. He is one of Socrates’ main interlocutors in the *Charmides*, and he appears in the *Protagoras*.

Crito: a long-time friend and associate of Socrates. It is he to whom Socrates' narrates the *Euthydemus*. He is present at Socrates' trial, during which he pledges to contribute money toward Socrates' fine. In the *Crito* he pleads with Socrates to escape from prison. He participates in the conversation depicted in the *Phaedo*.

Ctesippus: an associate of Socrates. He appears in the *Lysis* as well as the *Euthydemus*, in which dialogue he is presented as an admirer of Clinias. He is named in the *Phaedo* as one of those present for Socrates' death.

Dionysodorus: from Chios and Thurii. He is the brother of Euthydemus and one of the principal speakers in the *Euthydemus*. Like his brother he is an eristic dialectician who professes to be a teacher of virtue.

Diotima: a (perhaps fictitious) woman from Mantinea (Peloponnese) who, as the philosopher relates in the *Symposium*, initiated Socrates into the mysteries of Eros and metaphysics.

Echecrates: a Pythagorean from Phlius (Peloponnese). It is to him that Phaedo recounts the events of Socrates' final day in the *Phaedo*.

Eryximachus: an Athenian physician and possible lover of Phaedrus. He is one of the principal speakers in the *Symposium*. He is present with Phaedrus for the conversation depicted in the *Protagoras* and is mentioned in the *Phaedrus*.

Eudicus: a speaker in the *Lesser Hippias*. He is mentioned in the *Greater Hippias* but is otherwise unknown.

Euthydemus: from Chios and Thurii. He is the brother of Dionysodorus and one of the principal speakers in the *Euthydemus*. Like his brother he is an eristic dialectician who professes to be a teacher of virtue. (He is not to be confused with the brother of Polemarchus and Lysias who is mentioned in the *Republic*.)

Euthyphro: a self-professed seer and prophet. He is Socrates' principal interlocutor in the *Euthyphro*. He is mentioned in the *Cratylus*, but is otherwise unknown.

Glaucon: one of Plato's elder brothers. He is one of Socrates' primary interlocutors in the *Republic* and appears in the opening frame of the *Symposium*.

Gorgias: a teacher of rhetoric from Leontini (Sicily). Along with his students, Polus and Callicles, he is one of Socrates' three interlocutors in the *Gorgias*. He is mentioned in several dialogues, including the *Phaedrus*, the *Meno*, and the *Apology*.

Hippias: a sophist from Elis (Peloponnese). He is Socrates' principal interlocutor in the *Lesser Hippias*. He is present for the conversation depicted in the *Protagoras*.

Hippocrates: a young friend of Socrates who in the *Protagoras* is eager to study with the great sophist. (He is not to be confused with the famous physician from Cos, who is mentioned in the *Protagoras* and the *Phaedrus*.)

Hippothales: a young man infatuated with Lysis who appeals to Socrates for help in the *Lysis*.

Ion: a successful itinerant rhapsode from Ephesus. His is not otherwise known.

Laches: a general who fought beside Socrates during the Athenian retreat from Delium (424).¹⁰⁷

Lysias: a famous Athenian orator, son of Cephalus and brother of Polemarchus and Euthydemus. He is present for the conversation depicted in the *Republic*, which takes place in his father's home. He wrote the speech recited by Phaedrus in the *Phaedrus*.

Lysimachus: son of Aristides "the just." In the *Laches* it is he who has asked Laches and Nicias to offer advice concerning the education of his son. Socrates refers to Aristides' education of Lysimachus in the *Meno*.

Lysis: a handsome young Athenian who appears in the *Lysis*.

¹⁰⁷ On Socrates' military career see "[Socrates as Hoplite](#)."

Melesias: son of Thucydides I (who is not to be confused with the historian). He and Lysimachus seek the advice of Laches and Nicias about the education of their sons in the *Laches*. Socrates refers to Thucydides' education of Melesias in the *Meno*.

Meletus: one of Socrates' three accusers. He is named in the *Apology* as prosecuting Socrates on behalf of the poets.

Menexenus: a later associate of Socrates for whom the *Menexenus* is named. He is one of the main speakers in the *Lysis* and is named in the *Phaedo* as one of those present for Socrates' death. (He is not to be confused with Socrates' son of the same name.)

Meno: a young man from Thessaly who is Socrates' principal interlocutor in the *Meno*. His later life and death are recounted in Xenophon's *Anabasis*.

Nicias: one of the principal speakers in the *Laches*. He was an Athenian general for whom the "Peace of Nicias," which temporarily halted the Peloponnesian War, was named. He was executed during the Sicilian Expedition after surrendering to the Syracusans.

Pausanias: one of the principal speakers in the *Symposium*, in which dialogue he is depicted as Agathon's lover. He is present for the conversation depicted in the *Protagoras*.

Phaedo: from Elis (Peloponnese). He later found the so-called Elean school of philosophy. Brought to Athens as a prisoner of war in 401, he was ransomed and later became a member of Socrates' circle. He is the narrator of the *Phaedrus*.

Phaedrus: a young admirer of rhetoric. He is Socrates' interlocutor in the *Phaedrus* and the first to deliver a eulogy of Eros in the *Symposium*. He is named as present for the conversation depicted in the *Protagoras*.

Polemarchus: one of Socrates' principal interlocutors in Book I of the *Republic*. He is the son of Cephalus and brother of Lysias and Euthydemus. In the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War Polemarchus was executed by the Thirty Tyrants.

Polus: a student of Gorgias and himself a teacher of rhetoric. He is one of Socrates' three interlocutors in the *Gorgias*.

Prodicus: a famous teacher from Ceos. A specialist in the use and meanings of words, he is author of the famous story of Heracles at the crossroads (recounted in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*). He speaks briefly in the *Protagoras* and is mentioned in several other dialogues.

Protagoras: Socrates' principal interlocutor in the *Protagoras*. He is a famous sophist from Abdera and author of the maxim "Man is the measure of all things."

Simmias: a Pythagorean philosopher from Thebes. Along with Cebes he is one of Socrates' main interlocutors in the *Phaedo*. He is named in the *Crito* as having contributed money toward Socrates' escape.

Sophoniscus: father of Socrates (not to be confused with Sophroniscus II, Socrates' son).

Stranger: appears and speaks with Crito and criticizes philosophy at the end of the *Euthydemus*. He is thought by many scholars to represent Isocrates, an Athenian orator and teacher of rhetoric. His school seems to have been a rival of Plato's Academy. Isocrates is mentioned by name at the end of the *Phaedrus*.

Thrasymachus: a sophist from Chalcedon (near the Black Sea), fragments of whose works survive. He is Socrates' primary dialectical opponent in Book I of the *Republic*.

Xanthippe: Socrates' wife. She is depicted in the *Phaedo* as visiting Socrates on the last day of his life.