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Eric A. Havelock  
*Yale University*

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The Socratic Problem: Some Second Thoughts

Eric A. Havelock  
Sterling Professor Emeritus, Yale University  
October 1979

In the three decades following the conclusion of the second world war, scholarship surrounding the Socratic Problem has adopted three positions. The scepticism of Gigon and Chroust has argued that the problem is inherently insoluble because of the poetic not to say mythic nature of our sources. In opposition there stands a firm faith, expressed in a volume on the Philosophy of Socrates edited by Gregory Vlastos, and in one on Socrates written by G. X. Santas, that the historic Socrates is identical with that figure represented in Plato's "early" dialogues. For K. J. Dover, on the other hand, who gives the problem succinct treatment in the introduction to his edition of the Clouds, and for W. K. C. Guthrie, who offers an exhaustive account of the Socratic life and teaching in his magisterial history of Greek Philosophy, this is not enough. Their reconstructions require the addition of Xenophon, and for Guthrie the Aristotelian testimonies are also vital. It is fair to say, however, that for all but the sceptics "early" Plato remains the touchstone of evidence, with Plato's Apology occupying the place of honour. As for Aristophanes, his rejection by recent authorities is unanimous.

I would like to offer a reversal of this verdict, but first, because of the peculiar dominance of the authority of "early" Plato in all recent accounts of Socrates both professional and popular, it is pertinent to point to a few of the difficulties in the way of using this criterion. What, for example, is meant by "early"? There are serious scholars who have subjected the whole tripartite division of Plato's work to challenge and rearrangement. And for those who accept it, when in the presumed Platonic series was the Gorgias written, or the Protagoras? Could the Apology have been written after both? If Symposium and Phaedo belong to the "middle" period, with Phaedrus hovering uneasily on its fringe, these are presumably to be excluded from the Socratic canon. Why, then, are they drawn on so liberally by all those who would cling to "early" Plato as their guide? How does it come about that even the Theaetetus "despite its late date . . . still has much of" the spirit of the Socratic dialogue "containing as it does the comparison of Socrates to a midwife . . . so apt for what seems to emerge as our general picture of Socrates"? I quote here from Lacey's chapter in the Vlastos volume on "Our knowledge of Socrates". Dover, using more stringent logic to exclude Theaetetus from the canon, appears to regard the midwife comparison as a commonplace, "neglected by Plato in his earlier representations of Socrates . . . and exploited, at a comparatively late date, in one dialogue alone". This judgment allows him to dismiss the apparent parallel at Clouds 137 (with 139, which he does not discuss) as also non-Socratic.

A comparison of the sources exploited by Vlastos and Santas respectively is instructive. They unite in relying on Apology, Charmides, Crito, Euthyphro, Gorgias, Hippias Major, Laches, Meno, Protagoras. Santas would add Hippias Minor and Lysis. The Vlastos volume draws on more formidable additions, namely Euthydemus, Phaedo, Republic, Symposium, Theaetetus. Both authorities ignore the Ion, an interesting omission which I will notice later. A major portion of both reconstructions of the Socratic philosophy rests upon the Gorgias and Protagoras, ignoring the possibility that these are not "early" dialogues. As the Vlastos additions indicate, "early" Plato is a shifty criterion on which to rely. What is the use of arguing that in certain selected texts Plato writes out of a close and recent memory of Socrates and a desire to preserve it, while in others he has moved away from the memory in

order to develop his own system, when some of the more personal representations (I will not call them reports) occur in these "later" works? Critics like Vlastos prone to focus on what is regarded as the "gospel" of Socrates and his supposedly charismatic personality are particularly vulnerable to this objection. It offers less embarrassment for Santas, for his "Socrates" is that of the modern school of analytic philosophers, who find in the dialectic of the so called "aporetic" dialogues, with their search for definitions, a welcome Socratic model for their own logical preoccupations. This difference in emphasis partially recalls the difference between Heinrich Maier, upholding in 1913 a vision of Socrates as a moral reformer, who restricted himself to this role, and those who in the preceding years, relying on Xenophon and Aristotle, had insisted on attaching to Socrates a "Begriffsphilosophie". Maier's restriction was founded upon the hypothesis that neither Xenophon nor Aristotle furnished independent testimonies. The contrary and magisterial view, one might say, was the one which as early as 1846 Zeller had sought to establish. Guthrie's synthesis, presenting in Socrates a man inspired by a mission, which however takes the form of using logic for purposes of moral enlightenment, relies on a similar combination of sources, and essentially goes back to Zeller. Dover's rejection of Aristophanes would appear to be based on concurrence with the same synthesis.

In connection with the missionary aspect of the Socratic Problem, it is notable how central to the reconstructions of all but the sceptics stand Plato's Apology, Crito and Gorgias, all three essentially protreptic works in which dialectic though present takes second place to exhortation. Remembering who wrote them, rather than the names chosen by the writer for the speaking parts, one would be tempted to classify these works as exercises in a Platonic form of rhetoric, an observation also applicable to the Phaedrus.

These difficulties and others - there are many - in the way of accepting either "early" or "middle" Plato as a viable criterion for the solution to the Socratic Problem originate, so it seems to me, in a critical mistake of judgment as to the character of all those works known in the fourth century as Socratic logoi. These are referred to in a familiar passage early in Aristotle's Poetics as a genre of mimesis within the larger field of mimetic poesis, the "Mimes" of Sophron and Xenarchus being also members of the genre, for which however a common suitable title has not yet been devised. Guthrie's attempt (pp. 332-333) to evade the implications of this statement does not seem to me to be successful. They require us to assume that the logoi not only have a formal resemblance to mimes, but are "mimetic" in Aristotle's sense, that is, "poetic", also in Aristotle's sense. It did not occur to Aristotle to include "history" or historical writing, let alone biographical writing, in this category. For Aristotle, therefore, the "Socrates" of all the logoi, Platonic or otherwise, should appear within quotation marks, to use a modern convention. The name speaks as a "character", a creation of his creator, we would say, as would a speaker in a mime or a drama. This of course does not exclude "realism"; on the contrary, realism is required but it is a realism of art not historical reproduction. It is amazing how many readers of Plato can get hung up on a confusion between the two, as though dramatic realism was a sign of historical fidelity.

To apply Aristotle's canon to the logoi of Plato is to conclude that these are written to reveal the purposes of Plato, not the history of Socrates, and there is not so much as a sentence in any of them which is not Platonic in construction and intent. Why then did he not expose his intention directly in his own person in the manner of Aristotle? This raises questions to which in this place there is room for only summary answers. If his intentions are philosophical, and not merely designed to gratify an

audience, why employ a mask as it were for himself? Is he borrowing from stagecraft and thinking of himself as the actor behind the mask? For the persona of this mask, why choose a historical figure now dead? In choosing such a figure, is it likely that the writer mingles with his own purposes reminiscences of the figure he has selected? that the minds of two men are intermingled to some extent?

Possible answers to these questions require one to put together certain facts about Greek literature of the fifth and fourth centuries which are familiar in themselves but not usually connected up. The facts concern the stylistic conventions of poiesis employed in this period. We observe that Athenian tragic drama in the personalities of its choruses and dialogues exploits the names of characters both legendary and historical, represented as living and speaking in the present. There is no "once upon a time". The comic drama may also do this, but shows a preference for identifying its choruses and characters as types with humorous names and/or identities. The prose writers appear to have preferred the comic convention. The histories of Herodotus and Thucydides follow the same modalities of composition when they include within the chronicle portions of their writing public addresses and dialogues placed in the mouths of participants in the action. The sophists who were Socrates' contemporaries published some of their doctrines in the same way, as dialogues or addresses involving legendary heroes like Palamedes or Hercules, though they also developed a format in which the address was given in the writer's first person, in the dramatic context of an occasion either legendary or contemporary. The last case provides an example of peculiar embarrassment to those protagonists in the Socratic debate who would defend the authenticity of the early Platonic "Socrates". The Apology of Socrates written by Plato, the most familiar and congenial of all supposedly "Socratic" documents, has a design which reproduces, to the extent of verbal reminiscence, an Apology of Palamedes composed by Gorgias perhaps twenty years earlier. James Coulter's careful examination of this problem has been generally ignored, understandably so by protagonists of "early" Plato. Once the existence of this striking fact is recognized, it gives reasonable support to the hypothesis that Plato wrote his Apologia of Socrates as a genre piece designed to expound Platonic doctrines, using a convention which his readers would immediately recognize, just as Gorgias had used the figure of Palamedes to expound Gorgian doctrines. Alternatively, one can argue that Plato's Apology, while addressing itself to a correction or refutation of Gorgian doctrines, uses the life and doctrines of the historical Socrates for this purpose. The first alternative destroys the historicity of Plato's Apology, the second at least renders it unlikely that it resembles anything actually said in court. Before dismissing the first alternative as incredible or at least intolerable (which for many true believers in Plato's historical purpose is the same thing), one should remember that Isocrates towards the close of an active career as a publicist composed in his turn an Apologia pro vita sua - his Antidosis - modelled closely on Plato's Socratic Apologia; Isocrates, that is, speaks (or rather writes) as though he were a "Socrates" placed in the same legal position as that portrayed in Plato's Apology and responding to it in the same way, - we might even say with the same ploy. Is such a literary choice explicable except on the assumption that Isocrates knew Plato had employed a convention, knew that his readers knew this too, and saw no reason why he should not employ it himself, but now in a first person which blends the dramatised Socrates with his own personality?

To expound and defend in detail a critical perspective covering all the conventions within which the Socratic logoi were written is a task for which no space is here available. But if the perspective as so far suggested is

accepted, it follows that all of Plato is essentially Plato; the name Socrates in his writings is a mask for his own thinking. Possessed of a uniquely powerful philosophic mind, he was also an astonishingly effective literary artist - an unusual combination, which since his day has not been matched. Neither of these roles is compatible with the notion that he was also a historian in the modern sense, or interested in the task of historical reconstruction as we conceive it. As a thinker his role was to manipulate, arrange, interpret, correct and deduce. As an artist his aim was to produce agreement with his own thinking by any means available; the main means employed being powerfully dramatic. If he employs a historical figure for this purpose, it will be because some things about the man's career made him appropriate for this purpose, as for example Xenophon employed the figure of Cyrus the Great. In Plato's particular case, he had known the man, had liked him, had found his mind sympathetic to his own, had in some respects felt close to him, as he grew up - for there was a great difference in age between them and it was only in the closing years of the older man's life that the two became acquainted. Even Isocrates, chronologically speaking, had had a better chance to know Socrates than Plato did, or Xenophon. The corpus we know as Plato's works was written by Plato, all of it, after the historical figure who supplied his dramatis persona was already dead, and much of it long after. It is sometimes necessary to restate the obvious, in the face of much popular writing which beguiles the reader into thinking he has been allowed to listen to a historical Socrates speaking. The corpus in fact is Plato. He would not exist in the history of philosophy, except as a shadowed mentality, if the corpus did not exist. Parts of this corpus employ a mask borrowed from a historical Socrates, for reasons closely connected with what was current literary convention. In doing so, it is inherently likely that by accident or design the corpus includes reminiscences of the historical figure, particularly because in this case the writer had known him personally. Since the writer is a philosopher, his interest in the historical figure is likely to be philosophical. But since everything he writes is his own, addressed to his own philosophical purposes, such reminiscences as there are will not be amenable to mechanical segregation, as though every now and then he took time off from his own philosophical speculations in order to indulge in biography. If there is a mind of Socrates discoverable in the writings of Plato, it is intermingled with them chemically, and is as likely or unlikely to appear in one place as in another, in an early or a later dialogue, in the Republic just as much or as little as in the Apology or Crito.

I conclude that, without some criterion external to Plato, no separation of elements constituting a Socratic mind and language is possible. It is my present preference that the problem restrict itself to what might be of interest to philosophers, namely, the identity if any of Socraticism considered as a system of thought, to which the problem of the Socratic biography is germane but secondary, as are all biographies associated with the history of philosophy. Are this language and this mind recoverable? To which one adds a further question. Why in their own day were they controversial, whereas ever since they have been regarded, whatever they were, as part of the philosophical establishment? The evidence that they were controversial is contemporary, not posthumous, and ideally speaking one needs a contemporary answer to both questions, not a posthumous one. A modern classical student is liable to receive his introduction to Hellenism, after mastering the grammatical elements, by reading Xenophon and some "early" work of Plato, preferably the Socratic Apology. If he continues, he reads perhaps one of Demosthenes' easier speeches, perhaps some easier passages of Thucydides and/or Herodotus, and then a play, preferably one of the easier ones of Euripides; and then graduates to Homer and maybe the lyric poets. His mature years of study are likely to revert to Thucydides and Plato and



be considerably preoccupied with them. This at least represents a typical "Oxbridge" curriculum. This means that he reads the history of Greek literature backwards, from Attic to Ionic, from prose to poetry, from the literacy of the fourth century B.C. to the non-literacy of the Homeric age. There are some signs that even professional scholars never get over the effects of this experience. The assumptions which guide our understanding of earlier Hellenism are borrowed from the later. The vocabulary, or shall I say idiom, in which it is described is that which had become congenial by the time of Aristotle. If I may be allowed to quote myself: "The effect is to foster the unconscious assumption that the Greek experience from Homer to Aristotle forms a cultural constant capable of being represented by a sign system of great variety, to be sure, but consisting of sets of interchangeable parts."

I have offered elsewhere some conclusions about the character of the Greek cultural experience in the fifth century which may prove to have a direct bearing upon the Socratic Problem. The Athenians, so I have argued, did not become fully literate until the closing years of the century. This achievement, which coincided with the arrival of what we would call a reading public, depended upon the introduction of letters (grammata) at the primary level of schooling, not at the secondary; the issue turned on the availability of instruction not in writing as such but in fluent reading; the two are not synonymous. This is unlikely to have taken place until approximately about the time when the Clouds was produced, or maybe ten years earlier. In Greece overseas, on the other hand, both in Ionia and the West, various evidences point to an achievement of literacy at an earlier date. The mainland in this one respect lagged behind, possibly with advantage to certain creative energies which have an oral component. A period which in Athens extends from the age of Pisistratus to say the aftermath of Salamis could be described as either proto-literate or craft-literate, depending on one's point of view, with corresponding effect upon the styles of its art forms, particularly the verbal ones. Further back, in the eighth and seventh centuries, Greek culture was essentially an oral one, and in a general sense Homeric. The alphabet was practised as a craft, and of course used in this way to transcribe the poetry of the period, but not as a medium of general communication. One common sense way of putting it is to say that there was not enough of it around to make it worth while for most people to learn to read it as a habit. These views have proved controversial, but I detect some movement in the direction of their acceptance as representing something at least not far from the truth.

Cultures whether oral or literate preserve their identities in part by the use of communication which is preserved and stored for re-use. In the oral and semi-oral varieties this is a formidable task achievable only by the use of memorisable forms of speech. These will be rhythmic in a general sense, whether or not strictly metrical, and in this sense will constitute a "poetry", the content of which it is a mistake to judge wholly by the standards of a literate society, in which poetry has been relegated to a non-functional category. Greek "literature" so called to the death of Euripides can be regarded as a continuing essay in the practice and preservation of important oral communication, which becomes increasingly modified in style and substance as it is alphabetised and as it is gradually and increasingly read as well as recited. The use of the alphabet rendered language visible, with the result that what we might call documentary modes of composition intruded into what had been acoustic ones, i.e. mnemonic ones. The practitioners of this kind of communication were those poets who were to become the targets of the Platonic dialectic. Were they also the target of a Socratic dialectic; and if so, why?

The language of orally preserved speech is governed by certain rules which are subject to gradual change as such speech is rendered visible and readable. Simplifying a complex process, we can say that the difference is exposed by comparing Homer's vocabulary and syntax with Plato's. In my Greek Concept of Justice, I have sought to expound an example of this change as it occurs in the linguistic management of the two Greek terms dike and dikaiosune, illustrating a movement away from dike symbolising a procedure between parties, which is externalised, towards dikaiosune identifying a conceptual principle, which can be internalised. An alteration in the name used, which occurs in this case, is not essential. In the realm of the physical environment as it is experienced, for example, soma referring to a dead body in orally framed speech can become 'body' in general, i.e. tangible matter, in documented speech. The pressure for changes of this sort begins building up in the so called physical philosophers who preceded Socrates. Indeed their entire enterprise can from one point of view be described as an attempt to replace an oral, i.e. Homeric and Hesiodic language of description, by one which is conceptual and abstract, rather than applying a ready made abstract language to the formulation of cosmological systems.

The names of things alter their reference only as they are connected to each other in syntactical systems which also alter. Memorised speech tends to be narrativised. It is the story-form that is memorisable, not the thesis-form. It prefers subjects and objects which act on each other rather than stay in fixed relationships to each other. In documented speech, as the pressure to memorise is reduced, they can take up static postures, in which a definition replaces an activity, that is, an event. If I may cite a somewhat simple-minded illustration I have used before: orally preserved speech is likely to be unfriendly to such a statement as "The angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles". To say however that "The triangle stood firm in battle, poised with its two legs on the ground, fighting resolutely to protect its enclosed two right angles against the attacks of the enemy" you would be casting Euclid backwards into Homeric dress, giving him a preliterate form. One interesting thing about this example, which I did not think of when I first used it, is that the oral version works best with an isosceles triangle. That is, orally memorised speech may show a preference for images which have some symmetrical correspondence about them. But this opens up a question which lies beyond my present discussion.

Grammatically, the change becomes most evident, as this example indirectly may indicate, in the usage of that verb one translates in English as "is" and "are", the so called verb "to be". Orally preserved speech is not friendly to the "is" statement when it performs a logical, i.e. conceptual function. This means that Greek literature before Plato is not friendly to it either. A large part of Plato's writings can be considered as devoted to the task of establishing the status and importance of "is" statements, particularly as they can be used to define common norms of human conduct.

The encouragement that a growing literacy gave to the formation of abstract statements was indirect, the result of lifting the pressure to memorise, which meant to phrase language in memorisable form. It produced also a more direct result, and a rather simple one. In a culture of oral communication, what is spoken exists only as it is uttered by a speaker and absorbed by a listener. This situation discourages the members of the culture from conceptualising language itself as a thing, an object with an identity separate from the persons who use it. But with progressive alphabetisation, as more and more of the Greek tongue assumed visible, i.e. inscribed form, it became possible to identify the existence of language as such in separation from the user of it, and to think about it and make



it an object of discourse. Language begins to be exploited in such a way that it can talk about itself, and analyse its own elements, identify its own grammar; a word which etymologically speaking recognises words only as they become written grammata. One is compelled to say that an intellectual advance, a new discipline, is brought to birth by a shift in the use of the physical senses, as the vision of the reader is called on to supplement or replace the hearing of the listener. It is precisely in the fifth century and in Athens that we encounter the first appearance of this new discipline, introduced by the intellectuals who preceded Plato, and who were foreigners. The thing they were talking about fascinated them: it was so new: it seemed to open up endless possibilities of exploitation. What were they to call it? Glotta, the 'tongue', phone, the 'voice', phatis and epos, the 'utterance' - these were the traditional terms, the Homeric ones, by which the act of speech and its sounds were recognised. But their genius was oral, and moreover they symbolised precisely that style and substance of speech which the new movement towards abstraction was trying to get away from. There was a better candidate to fill the required role, namely logos, which for Plato's predecessors became not only an instrument but a disembodied force, the language of argument, analysis and persuasion combined, a new power in the land.

Separation of language from the speaker had a second effect of making the speaker separately recognisable as the source of the language. As source, he seemed to be more than lips, tongue and larynx. Was there not something else in him which devised the language, and purposively utilised it? Did not the recognition of language as a separate object call for the recognition of the human consciousness as a separate subject? What name, in this period of new names and new applications of old names, should we give to this thing in man in general, or in 'me' and 'you' personally? Homeric usage offered several possibilities, the most comprehensive of which was psyche, because it embraced the sense of a man's "life". Homerically, this psyche was denied the use of language, at least in its disembodied state in Hades, though even in this regard, its status was ambiguous. Could it be revived, reinvigorated, as the symbol of that total consciousness which expresses itself in language? The fifth century intellectuals were not sure of this. They saw psyche as something which responded to the persuasion of logoi, as being acted upon, but could it act, plan, decide, think? Democritus might perhaps say Yes and Gorgias No and Protagoras and Prodicus maybe were not interested.

What however they all seem to have realised is that changes of linguistic usage of the sort they were experimenting with were symptoms of changes in the way they were thinking or, more accurately, of a new way of using the mind which we can identify with sheer "intellection"; a new level of consciousness. All terms for psychic activity are slippery, never more so than in the fifth century. One can say in general that as the century advances, the Homeric terminology covering aspects of the human consciousness becomes more specialised, in particular through a growing need to identify those particular powers that were being mobilised to produce the logos of abstraction. This movement in vocabulary had begun with the Presocratics and became intensified in the activities of the sophists. The verbs noein and phrontizein and their corresponding nouns take on new levels of emphasis and significance. The age of the "thinker" is dawning, ushered in by the age of literacy.

If the hypothesis previously offered about the inception of Greek literacy is correct, changes in linguistic usage and modes of consciousness must have been coming to something like a crisis in Athens to the fifth



century before Christ. Hegel and Nietzsche in the last century perceived the change in consciousness and connected it with the Socratic Problem. Julius Stenzel in this century perceived that the Socratic Problem was intimately connected with the powers of the logos. It is due to the genius of Plato to say that he uniquely grasped what had happened in the realm of language and mind, grasping it as a dynamic process rather than formulating it in the rigidities of an achieved system, and set it down on paper. In so doing, he laid the foundations of modernity, creating the first model of literate European man, ready to seek and search, formulate and understand, by the light of concepts and categories systematically arranged in fixed relations. Whether such an understanding is inferior to the Homeric one is a question lying beyond the confines of my text. In this enterprise his writings associate the name Socrates with himself. But the historic Socrates belongs to a preceding generation, the period of the crisis, not its resolution. Are there means to determine what role if any he played in it? That role to have significance must have been primarily linguistic; it is likely also to have been psychological, in the sense of identifying some part of the mental habits that were being called into play in the interests of the new language. But what criteria can separate his contribution from (a) the philosophical processes and positions either dramatised or described in Plato's writings? (b) the intellectual or linguistic activities attributed to his contemporaries and those who preceded him?

The initial one, I suggest, is also the simplest, hitherto regarded not as a clue but as an obstacle to finding any clues. The historical Socrates by common consent left no written account of his ideas or teaching. There is no hint of the existence of so much as a paragraph or memorandum, let alone essay or monograph. This fact, taken in the context of an assumed literacy for most Athenians throughout the fifth century, has inevitably been put down as an eccentricity or as a deliberate choice to refrain from doing what he might normally have done. Gigon for example (pp. 17-18), correctly discerning the importance of the fact, calls it something "which in itself need mean anything or nothing. What is required is to determine the philosophical-poetic motive which elevates the mere fact to the level of a significant decision. Here we have the deliberate renunciation of the written word as an inadequate means for expressing the special essence of philosophical thought." If Socrates did not document his ideas, it is assumed that this marked a deliberate break with what was normal fifth century practice when he grew up.

But suppose it was not normal practice? The case then alters. Suppose his abstention from the written word was a function of his non-literacy, or, putting the matter less extremely, that he wrote and read slowly and rarely and did not regard these activities as having importance. This could be true even of Plato's "Socrates" (I am here discounting Xenophon's altogether). There are three passages where this "person" might be interpreted as one who reads or writes, but only ambiguously, as we might expect of an oral mask worn by a literate author. If Socrates was an "oralist", at least the latter part of his life and teaching was conducted within the context of a literate revolution which came to be consummated not by himself but in the writings of his pupil. The contemporary thinkers whom he may be supposed to have known, and whose association with him is portrayed in comedy and the later Socratic logoi, were writers, all of them. But the older ones were Greeks from overseas, where, as I have proposed, they had had a head start. They had all been schooled in letters at the elementary level before puberty. When it came to Plato's turn, Athens was equipped to teach him on the same lines, but that was forty years later, and Plato records the experience in a dialogue written perhaps eighty years later.

The initial step to take in any reconstruction of a possibly historical Socraticism is to assume that he was a partner with his intellectual peers in the attempt to fashion a vocabulary and syntax for conceptual discourse, but a very unusual partner. What could his oralism contribute when placed in partnership with their literacy? The answer I propose is found in the need for, what I call the "interrupting question", even one might say the disruptive question. The abstract nouns forming the subjects of conceptual statements had been initially wrested so to speak out of their subordinate roles in orally preserved communication, in particular out of the epic. These were intended to be non-agents, non persons, but they continued to behave as though they were still persons acting and acting upon. The incipient process can be perceived at work in Hesiod's treatment of dika. It persists in post-Hesiodic Greek poetry - for example, Pindar and the tragic drama. To compel these names, of virtue and courage and justice and wealth and love and war and peace and the like, to stop behaving and start "existing", in a veridical sense, not necessarily a metaphysical one, required the administration of shock tactics, applied to the actual syntax of all poetised speech. It was difficult to do this in the fifth century in writing, because writing tended to reproduce the narrative format already familiar, that is, Homeric myth and rhetoric. This tended to happen when the sophists wrote anything. The process needed the help of cross comparison and contradiction, i.e. the collaboration of two personalities, and this could only be readily supplied by an oralist, who, listening (in accordance with custom) to a pronouncement or a quotation from a poet, could say "What does 'it' (or 'you') say?" (i.e. mean; the same Greek word in both senses); "Say that again". The alternative version would never reproduce the original. The two could then be matched, contrasts drawn, producing doubt or hesitancy, leading to the further question "What is it we are talking about?" And with the intrusion of the verb to be there is insinuated the pressure to resort to "is" statements in what has become a dialectual situation. Such statements are elicited by the erotesis out of the existing "Homeric" discourse - there is nowhere else to get it from - which has not hitherto been using the "is" syntax as a method of connecting one abstraction to another. It is difficult to see how in the circumstances an analytic discourse could have been forced out of an oral-poetic one and fully realised by any other method, but equally, it would still have been impossible if the intellectualism of the Presocratics and sophists had not already begun to wrestle with the problem. One can form the paradoxical hypothesis that a cultural collaboration between sophistic literacy and Socratic non-literacy was brought to its completion in the written dialectic of Plato. In saying this however it is a mistake to exclude the possibility that the sophists also practised the oral approach.

One thing more must be said. The construction of such logoi, whether of the sophistic or Socratic type, could not possibly be conducted as a casual affair. It involved some disciplined procedure, some shared language, whether as one listened to a discourse or partook in an erotesis-apokrysis, a question and answer session. The process had to have some continuity to get anywhere; the persons involved had to share some time together, for which the current term was diatribe, in a kind of linguistic partnership, for which the term was sunousia. Consequently it was unavoidable that the procedure should take on the appearance and the actuality of an educational experiment - a paideusis. The type of instruction in Socrates' case may have been novel; it might be claimed for him later that it was not really instruction, in the sense in which sophistic exposition was. But instruction it certainly was, and it is difficult to see how it could have avoided a relationship we would define as that between teacher and pupils or at least associates. What in fact the literate revolution created was a felt need for what might be called

the conceptual management of affairs, political, commercial and personal, an ability to analyse and arrange, using language for this purpose - a design which achieves its extreme form in Plato's Republic. The need could be met only by a new type of educational curriculum, and if we are to take seriously the possibility that a meaningful relationship existed between Plato and Socrates, we cannot avoid the conclusion that Plato's preoccupation with education, the single most powerful motive behind his writings, was anticipated in the activities of the man whose mask he borrowed.

One therefore is tempted to visualise a historical Socrates as: first, an orally minded man who knew his poets, having had the normal education in music, which is attested in the posthumous sources, and was deeply entrenched in previous and traditional habits of speech and thought; but who, secondly, had become aware of the vocabulary of new names or of old names exploited in a new way, as they were occurring in new types of discourse thrown about by his literate contemporaries; and aware, thirdly, of their awareness that some new psychological effort was needed in these procedures, an effort let us say of intellection; and aware, fourthly, that the entire procedure also involved a new type of language, which he like them preferred to call logos; but who, fifthly, because of his traditional upbringing, reconverted the fruits of literacy back into oral form, making himself his own discourse, thus producing a new living word devoted to the dispossession of the previous living word, a paradox indeed, one which might give deep offense just because of its deceptive closeness to traditional habits; lastly, a man who, since he had committed himself to a method which only worked in partnership with other persons, found himself compelled to organise their participation on some kind of formal basis, thus turning himself into something more than a private citizen, becoming in fact a recognised educator like his professional contemporaries, though on novel lines.

This is at once the outline of the mind of a man, and of the mind of an age - the one in which he lived. It can be filled in, tentatively, imperfectly, never completely; - the testimonies do not allow more - if a methodology of some strictness and nicety is followed. None of the main testimonies are historical in intention. If any one of them contains historical information, this can be elicited only by cross comparison with other non-historical testimonies, and then only with partial certainty. One starts with what was contemporary in preference to the posthumous, as a strictly historical method requires. Of the contemporary, one document - the Clouds - directly dramatises a character with the name "Socrates". This usage is supplemented by a few passages from other comic plays; points of agreement need not be historical - they may reproduce only the constant prejudices of playwrights - but again they may be. Within these testimonies, we are particularly on the lookout for exercises in terminology and syntax, with a flavor of conceptual abstraction, such as would fit the intellectual atmosphere of the age, but in particular the role of our hypothetical Socrates in that age. Second, there are the testimonies reporting the content of the professional context in which he lived or which he inherited; the reports and remains of the language used by pre Platonic thinkers, whether we call them scientists or sophists. These will contain elements with which he may have expressed kinship, or from which he borrowed, and others with which he disagreed or which he rejected - could we but know which they were. If we did, this would furnish some extra clues to the character of his own thinking. Again, such elements are likely to be identifiable as types of verbal usage rather than systems or beliefs. His association with such thinkers is required by our previous hypothesis that all were variously involved in a common enterprise, set in motion by the transition towards literacy. It is also consistent with the fact that such



an association is dramatised in comedy, with some consistency. Third, there is Plato, the posthumous source, meaning all of Plato, as I have said, or else none of him - who could know, or be quite sure, were it not for the contemporary testimonies? Their combined diction has to be carefully matches against anything that looks like correspondence or echo in Plato's writings, with the objective of constructing three classifications: first, data which occur both in pre Platonic thinkers, in comedy, and in Plato: Tentatively, this combination may be taken to be common ground shared by Socrates and his contemporaries. Second, data shared only by comedy and Plato: this may represent, again tentatively, a specifically Socratic vocabulary or method. Third, there are the data peculiar to Plato and therefore peculiarly his.

Using this methodology, I propose the following reconstruction of Socraticism as a pre Platonic phenomenon, appending to it a table of comparative testimonies from the sources:

Space forbids that I complete this account, on which I hope to receive comment and criticism.