

Nicholas D. Smith

Socrates in the Agora: Some Thoughts about Philosophy as Talk

Abstract. *The topic of this paper is Socratic philosophizing. In particular, the author considers some of the features of Socrates' way of doing philosophy that seem extremely odd, relative to other philosophers and the ways in which they philosophized. One of these strange features is the feature his fellow Athenians found so insufferable that they felt they simply could not permit it to continue: all that unbearable, relentless, and incessant talking*

Key words: *Socrates, philosophy as talk, dialogue.*

Resumen. *El tema de este trabajo es la manera socrática de filosofar. En particular, el autor examina algunos de los rasgos de esa manera de filosofar que, comparados con las maneras en que otros filósofos filosofaban, parecen ser bastante extraños. Uno de estos rasgos es el que sus compatriotas atenienses encontraban tan insufrible que simplemente no podían permitir que continuara: su incesante, insoportable e incansable hablar.*

Palabras clave: *Sócrates, filosofía como conversación, diálogo.*

In his *Lectures on Psychological and Political Ethics*, John Dewey proclaimed:

...the deliberative process itself is not the final criterion of moral value; but it has to be tested by passing into action, and it is that action which reveals its worth. (Lecture of February 7, 1898)

We have a saying: "Still waters run deep." The ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, however, thought otherwise. He was a talker—he claimed that he was on a mission from God to talk with people... and the ancient evidence, which conflicts on all sorts of other issues concerning Socrates, speaks in one voice on *this topic*: Whether or not he really regarded it as a religious mission, he was very committed to talking. Socrates, it seems, did an awful lot of talking... all the time, any chance he got. Socrates compares himself to a stinging insect, "a kind of gadfly" (Plato, *Ap.* 30e), and he actually boasted to his fellow Athenians that "I never cease to rouse, persuade, and reproach each one of you ceaselessly, all day long and whenever I am among you" (Plato, *Ap.* 30e-31a). His admirers followed him around and loved to witness his conversations. His detractors, on the other hand, found him both tiresome and extremely annoying: To quote from Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Socrates often seemed to be "a man who can chop logic 'til it's so smooth it's slick, a walking castanet, who can grind subtleties of speech to the finest powdery dust!" (*Clouds*, 260). In 399 B.C., of course, the Athenians silenced this ceaselessly chopping, grinding, clattering castanet by putting him to death.

My topic in this paper is Socratic philosophizing, and in particular, I shall consider some of the features of Socrates' way of doing philosophy that seem extremely odd, relative to other philosophers and the ways in which they philosophized. One of these strange features I will try to explain is the feature his fellow Athenians found so insufferable that they felt they simply could not permit it to continue: all that unbearable, relentless, and

incessant talking. Why did Socrates feel he had to *talk* all the time? What did he think was so terribly important about talking?

* * *

Most philosophers—not just in ancient Greek times, but even now—spend lots of time reading and writing. We read to study and to learn the wisdom of others. And when we feel that we have some wisdom of our own to share, we write it down, so that other philosophers—or at least others who appreciate philosophy—can study and learn our wisdom. Writing is what allows us to communicate our ideas to many people, most of whom we may never have a chance to meet in person, to students who will never take our classes, to philosophical colleagues with whom we cannot talk, whom we do not and may never know, to generations of wisdom's friends who may live long after we are dead and gone.

Writing takes a great deal of patience and thought. It requires lots of time alone, undistracted by others, in which the writer can focus his or her thoughts and turn these thoughts into words, which must then be considered and shaped in such a way as to express the thoughts in just the right ways. And then, having written them, the writer is still not done, for now he or she must read them over and over again, changing and editing and polishing the words until either the writer is satisfied, or at least until he or she cannot bear to do anything more with the words. Writing is an odd form of communication, in a way—in order to communicate well, as a writer, one needs to *get away* from other people... during which time one remains *incomunicado*, as it were.

Almost all of the great philosophers were prodigious writers. Anyone who has read their works—or tried—will surely be struck by how much each of these philosophers is able to say in a single sentence. And yet, see how many sentences each manages to write! We often describe the works of the great philosophers, for this reason, almost as if they had a kind of physical presence. How would I describe Kant's writings? I think of them as "massive" works, "heavy stuff," "thick," "dense," "ponderous," "weighty." One does not just breeze through Kant, for there is just too much there. One must go slow, and it will take a long

time. But Kant is a great philosopher, and so, the time spent is richly rewarded. Just as it will take lots of time alone and undisturbed to read Kant's works, we can be equally certain that Kant was not able to write what he did by spending all his time chatting with other people. He, too, spent lots of time, undisturbed and alone with his thoughts and his words, just as we must be, if we are to read those words and understand those thoughts. Writing and reading are a form of communication... that requires lots of solitude.

Socrates, on the other hand, never wrote philosophy. We are told that, in his last few days in prison, he tried his hand at poetry—putting Aesop's fables into verse, and composing a hymn to Apollo (Plato, *Phaedo* 60c-d)—but these works, if the story is true, did not survive. At any rate, we know that he never bothered to write—apparently never even considered writing—*philosophy*.

At his trial, Socrates flabbergasted his jurors by telling them that the famous oracle at Delphi had once told Socrates' friend, Chaerephon, that no one was wiser than Socrates. Socrates himself confesses to having found this news astonishing, for, he says, he counted himself as a man who had no wisdom at all. In attempting to discern the true meaning of the oracle, however, Socrates claims he discovered that he had a strange sort of wisdom, after all: More than anyone else he met, Socrates was aware of his own lack of wisdom, and this awareness actually made him superior to everyone else, since we are all miserably deficient in wisdom, he claims, but tend not to realize the extent of our deficiency. At least partly as a result of this realization, Socrates dedicated his life to being a *philosophos*—a "friend of wisdom." It is an odd friendship, however, for Socrates' friendship looks like the cravings of a Tantalus—as much as Socrates pursued this "friend," it always receded from him.

It is a good thing, if the philosophizing of Socrates continues to have any value, as I think it does, that his most famous follower, Plato, was such a good and prolific writer, since—apart from their literary and philosophical merits—most scholars agree that it is in Plato's works that we get the most reliable and most interesting information about Socrates. Plato wrote dialogues,

at least for the most part. Some of the dialogues are really mostly monologues (the *Apology* and *Symposium*, in particular), and in addition to the dialogues, some thirteen letters, and several other very short pieces—a dictionary of 185 philosophical terms, and 18 epigrams—have also been attributed to Plato, but there continue to be disputes over which, if any, of these things are actually by Plato himself. At any rate, most of the writings that are attributed to Plato, and certainly the vast majority of those works now generally regarded as authentically Platonic, are dialogues. In these dialogues, the main speaker is almost always Socrates. Because Plato wrote dialogues, Plato shows us a Socrates doing what we know that the real Socrates did all the time: talking.

Socrates talked, and Plato wrote. But even Plato wanted his readers to talk, and thought that philosophizing was talking rather than writing or reading. Plato did not run around with a stenopad, writing down Socrates' words as he spoke. I think it is highly unlikely that Plato wrote any of his famous works until after Socrates was dead. But Plato did write, and what he wrote, at least in his first several writings, I believe, was supposed to be "Socratic" in tone and in content. Plato tried to do, in a somewhat peculiar way, what Socrates never bothered to do—to capture and preserve for people who did not and could not *talk* with Socrates, what Socratic *talk* was like, what it was *about*, how it went. Plato thought it was important enough to preserve, lucky for us. But it is worth noting that Socrates himself made no effort to preserve his own words or thoughts, even when given opportunities to do so. There is an irony here: We labor to study and to understand Socrates and Socratic philosophizing; and yet Socrates himself was given ample opportunities to help us to do this, and decided not to bother.

Because I do trust Plato, I rely on Plato to reveal to me what Socrates had to say about what he did, and why he did it. And so, it strikes me, when I read Plato, to find out that Socrates spent a whole month in prison, before he was executed, during which time he says (according to Plato) that he *did* do some writing, only it was verse and hymn, rather than philosophy. This is certainly not the sort of decision we would expect

from any *other* philosopher. When *he* was in prison awaiting his execution, for example, Boethius wrote his most famous philosophical work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Socrates, on the contrary, dabbled in poetry.

Socrates seems almost to anticipate such consternation, when he imagines his jurors wondering why he simply refuses to give up his life of talking all the time, in favor of other pursuits. After he was found guilty, Athenian legal procedure in cases of this sort provided that the convicted party could propose an alternative penalty to what the prosecutors had already proposed, when they made their indictment. In Socrates' case, the prosecution had proposed the death penalty. In the second speech in Plato's *Apology*, we find Socrates musing about what he might offer as an alternative to the death penalty.

How about exile? You'd probably propose that for me. I'd really have to be in love with living to be so illogical not to be able to reason that if you, who are my fellow citizens, weren't able to bear my activities and arguments—but they became so burdensome and odious that you are seeking now to be rid of them—yet others will endure them easily. I think that is far from the truth, Athenians. Would I have a good life, if I went away at my age, going from one city to the next, always being sent into exile? You can be sure that wherever I go, young people will listen to what I say. If I drive them away, they themselves will send me into exile once they have persuaded their elders. But if I don't drive them away, their fathers and relatives will send me into exile for their sakes.

Perhaps some of you might say, can't you leave us to live and keep quiet and *not talk*? This is the most difficult thing to convince you of. If I say that this is disobedience to the god and that is why it is impossible to keep quiet, you will think I am not being serious. And if I say that this really is the greatest good for human beings, to engage in discussion each day about virtue and the other things which you have heard me talking about and examining myself and others, for a human being ought not to live an unexamined life, you'll be persuaded even less by what I say. These things are true, as I say, but it is not easy to persuade you. (Ap. 37c-38a)

Socrates imagines his jurors finding it hard to believe that he couldn't just go away and stop all the talking. We might add our own question to

their wonderment. Why couldn't Socrates retire from the *agora* and his other haunts (in Athens, or in other cities, in exile), and *write* philosophy, rather than insisting on all that *talking* all the time?

I think in what Plato has written about Socrates, we can see what Socrates' answer to such a question would be, and also why it is that, when given the opportunity and encouragement to write, Socrates does not think to write philosophy. It has to do with what Socrates thinks philosophy consists in. In a way, the passage I just quoted already tells us the answer: Socrates thought that philosophy consists in talking every day about virtue. Writing is not the same as talking, plainly. So if philosophy requires *talking*, then it is no mystery why it would not occur to Socrates to *write* philosophy. What we need to figure out, then, is why Socrates would think that philosophy requires *talking*.

Now, it is clear that Socrates did not think that *just any* talking can be philosophy. Plato's dialogues—especially the *Gorgias*—also make it clear that, in general, Socrates had a very low regard for talk that is not *conversation*. He often complained when those with whom he talked began to make long speeches. He claimed that he had a short memory and could not keep up with this kind of talking. In general, he scorned talk that was mainly *performance*, or that aimed primarily at pleasing the listener. Nor did he care for the kinds of conversation in which those engaged in the discussion aim more at winning arguments, rather than at trying to gain some access to the truth of the matter.

And yet, readers of Plato's works are often left with the impression that Socrates is not fair to his interlocutors, or that he is, in some sense, competing with them. When one of them accuses him of such tactics, however, Socrates is quick to disavow it, and to emphasize what his real goals are:

How can you think, if I am trying most of all to refute you, that I do so on account of anything other than the fact that I would wish to understand what I say, fearing that I might overlook something, thinking I know something when I do not? Therefore even now I say I am doing this: I am investigating the reasoning most of

all for my own sake, but perhaps also for my other friends.

(Plato, *Charm.* 166c-d)

Even if Socrates does not talk just to win arguments, there can be no doubt that his talk is *always* refutative. But why does he do this, and why would he think that this is what philosophy consisted in, at least for him?

When Socrates heard of the oracle at Delphi's claim that no one was wiser than he was, he says he was mystified. But because, he says, it is not possible that the god should lie, Socrates went out to try to refute the obvious or surface meaning of the oracle, in order to discern what it might really mean. So, he sought out those who had a reputation for wisdom, to try to find someone clearly wiser than he was. He says he went first to the men who were active and famous in politics, but was impressed in his questioning of them not with their wisdom, but with their startling *lack* of it. And not only this, each of them was hugely puffed up with the false assumption that he was wise, when he was so obviously *not* wise.

Socrates then went on to the poets, knowing that they often say wonderful and profound things. But when he questioned them about what they said, they seemed less able to explain their own words than many of their far more modest readers. But they, too, were much impressed with their own wisdom when in fact they had none. Socrates concluded that their wonderful poetry must be the result of divine inspiration, for it seemed obvious that it could not be the result of any wisdom the poets had. And finally, he went to the artisans and craftsmen, whom he recognized as having at least the wisdom of their crafts—in contrast to Socrates himself who lacked even this much wisdom. But even though they did have this wisdom, he also noticed that the craftsmen, like the politicians and poets, were filled with ignorance of their own ignorance—they thought they were very wise about what Socrates called “the most important things,” when, in fact, they were not at all wise about such things. Socrates says he concluded, on behalf of the oracle, that he was actually wiser than these people, too, for even though he did not have the wisdom that they did

have, he also did not have their even greater ignorance—at least he recognizes and appreciates the full extent of his own ignorance, and this made him better off.

This realization, he said, revealed to him what his unparalleled wisdom consisted in: his recognition of his own ignorance, a recognition shared by no others. In this odd way, then, the oracle was telling the truth, just as Socrates knew it had to, without at first understanding it. But now he did understand it—truly, no one was wiser than Socrates, for all suffered from terrible ignorance of their own ignorance.

The ignorance of others was so terrible because it was ignorance of what Socrates calls “the most important things,” and this ignorance (which, after all, Socrates shared) was compounded and made more dangerous by the fact that the ignorant were ignorant of their ignorance. Some ignorance is not so bad. Some ignorance is just trivial, or perhaps just silly or laughable. People have all kinds of weird belief. But most of the time, these beliefs are at, as it were, the periphery of people’s lives. People can lead productive and happy lives even though they earnestly believe that their neighbor was abducted by aliens, or that they have seen a marble statue drink milk, or that there is a plesiosaur in Loch Ness—to mention just a few I have heard expressed by people who seemed quite capable of functioning in other ways. I admit that I am deeply skeptical of such things, but I also realize that the people who believe them do not base their whole lives on such beliefs. Of course, *some* people do put such beliefs closer to the core of their lives, and insofar as such beliefs are wrong, as I suppose, such people end up damaged by beliefs that are for other people fairly harmless ones. So it is how *close* to the *core* of one’s life that one’s ignorance and cognitive errors—and ignorance of one’s own ignorance—are to be found that makes all the difference.

This is why Socrates was struck by the fact that, even though he considered his own ignorance virtually complete, others were worse off precisely because they had this compounded ignorance of “the most important things.” In Greek philosophy, and in even ordinary Greek

thinking, “the most important things” consist in the principles and judgments by which and in accordance with which one forms and shapes the only life one has to live. Although the Greeks had some hopeful stories of the afterlife, these seemed mostly to depend less upon how they lived their lives in general than on whether or not they had been initiated into the right Mystery cults. So even if one’s cult initiation would secure a good afterlife, life itself was precious, and not just as a preparation for what comes afterwards. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, for example, when Odysseus goes to Hades, he finds his dead comrade Achilles there, who says that when he was given the choice of a short but glorious life, or a long, but ordinary one, he picked wrongly—he should have taken the long and ordinary one.

At any rate, only the later Christians would have thought that a poor and wretched life might be redeemed by rewards in the afterlife. The Greeks took the value of a good life more seriously. So, “the most important things” were the kinds of things that I was talking about earlier as being at the core of one’s life. How should I live? What values are the most important ones? In a case of conflict in my values, which ones should I cling to, even at the risk of having to make sacrifices in the others?

Some of those who talked with Socrates realized that this was his emphasis—that he was always talking and trying to get others to talk in ways that would get to the core of their lives, and to reveal whatever compounded ignorance that might infect and jeopardize the core of someone’s life. In Plato’s *Laches*, one of Socrates’ friends warns another friend about Socrates’ goals:

You do not seem to know that whoever is closest to Socrates and draws near into a discussion with him, if he would but begin to discuss something else, will necessarily not stop being led around by him in the discussion until he falls into giving an account of himself—of the way he is living now and of the way he has lived in the past. (Plato, *Laches*, 187e-188a)

So philosophizing, for Socrates, was talking about how one lives, and how one has lived. It is, accordingly, deeply personal and also profoundly practical. It is not just some subtle logical game

played upon abstractions. Most people tend to think that philosophy does not matter all that much to the very practical concerns of getting through a human life. But in Socrates' conception of philosophy, nothing could matter more. This is why he said what he did in the first longish quote I included earlier in the paper, that it

really is the greatest good for human beings, to engage in discussion each day about virtue and the other things which you have heard me talking about and examining myself and others, for a human being ought not to live an unexamined life...

Socrates believed, and thought he had divine support for believing, that others were suffering from compounded ignorance about how they should live, and about what values they should have, and which values were more important than others. He noticed that most people lived as if wealth, or how other people thought of them, was more important than being virtuous. And this, he was sure, was mistaken. Worse, not only did people suffer from such ignorance, they regarded themselves, in thinking such things, as being quite wise, and thus their ignorance was compounded and secured in the cores of their lives, as it were, by their failure to recognize that they were ignorant about these most important things. I think that Socrates' diagnosis of the situation was, in fact, exactly right. At his trial, he pleaded with them one last time to reconsider their priorities, and he makes clear what it is that he was doing all this time, for which he now found himself on trial:

For I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your bodies or for wealth more than for the perfection of your souls. (Plato, *Ap.* 30a-b)

But the Athenians, suspicious and tired of all that talking, decided it would be better to kill the troublesome old man than to have to listen to him any longer.

Socrates thought that the deadliest forms of ignorance could only be addressed by *talking*. When he engaged others in his conversations, he often had to plead with his partners in the

conversation to say only what they themselves really believed. Of course, as soon as someone does this, the conversation becomes *personal*—one is no longer given the security of abstractions and just “seeing where the reasoning takes them.” Imagine being confronted by someone who thinks it is his divine mission to expose your ignorance—and not just any old ignorance, but ignorance at the core of your life—and then you are forced to respond to his questions in a very personal way, and not just with “what about this,” or “I could say that,” but with only what you yourself really believe. And then, if, as Socrates predicted and as the oracle seemed to promise, your beliefs proved to be false or poorly formed, you would be exposed as someone who was living the only life you will ever be given to live in a way that was ignorant.

Surely, if one was *aware* that one really did not know how to live, one would make this question one's first priority. What good, indeed, is wealth or fame or prestige if one does not know what to do with it, if one is ignorant of what makes such things really valuable? Certainly we all know of people who “had it all,” where by this we mean only that they had all of *these* kinds of things, but whose lives turned out to be models of wretchedness and despair—Jimi Hendrix, O. J. Simpson, Marilyn Monroe. And we have also known, or heard of people who seemed to have very little of what Jimi Hendrix and these others had in super-abundance, and yet seemed to live lives that—if we had the vision, or the courage, we might admit to ourselves that we, too, wish we could live: Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Ghandi.

Of course, not *everyone* can be a hero. Not *everyone* can be great. But if we really recognized that we were clueless about how we should live and about what we might think and do that could make our lives more valuable, then our recognition of this shocking lack would surely drive us to make finding out how to live our first priority, and we would not give up this priority until we felt we knew well enough what to do, and how to do it. Without this, anything else in our lives cannot redeem our lives or make them worthwhile.

But how many of us actually *do* make this inquiry our first priority? Socrates did. Do we? No, we are busy with other things. This reveals our priorities. But since we would have to be *insane* to hold anything in higher regard, or to put a higher priority on anything, if we thought we did not know what made life valuable—and for all we knew, we were going about it in fundamentally the wrong way—then we must think that we actually know this. If we *are* ignorant, then, our ignorance is compounded ignorance, just as Socrates supposed the oracle showed him.

Socrates believed that only in *conversation*, and only if we said what we really believed without hiding or masking our true beliefs, and only if we examined these beliefs relentlessly, could we ever have any hope of avoiding the deadly pitfall of compounded ignorance. We must *talk*, in other words, and our talk must be in earnest, not for sport, or play, or entertainment, but talk that amounts to searching self-examination by allowing our most basic beliefs to be critically examined and our errors and ignorances exposed. *That* is what philosophy was, for Socrates. And even if we do this, as human beings, we are sure never to achieve the sort of wisdom that only a god can have. We may find that we will continue to make errors and fall short. Socrates never supposed that he achieved his goal of wisdom—he did his utmost to preserve and maintain what he calls his “human wisdom.” Even if he remained ignorant all his life, at least he avoided compounding the problem; at least he always had his priorities straight and was never blinded by the worthless things that so many people treat as if they were the ultimate treasures to be coveted. How would we stack up, measured against such a model?

Socrates insisted that we had to talk, and that the talk had to consist in putting our most basic beliefs on the line all the time. Talking like this really is personal, and can be really painful and psychologically threatening and upsetting—and really *tiring*. What does it feel like to have one’s most basic beliefs exposed as ignorance, to find that when one’s most basic beliefs are exposed and under attack, that one has *nothing* one can say to defend them, and thus to defend the life that is formed and shaped by them? This

kind of conversation does not just put certain *ideas* on trial, as it were—it puts us on trial, our lives on trial, every time we do this. People reading Plato’s *Apology* often feel that Socrates does not take his desperate circumstances seriously enough, does not seem to be as concerned about the risk he faces as we feel he should be. But look at how he lived! He says he has been having this kind of conversation whenever he could, all the time, with whomever he could, for so many years now! It takes remarkable strength of character and courage to have conversations like this—most of us do our best to avoid them as much as possible! And we would *never, ever*, do something so dangerous and personally threatening with anyone we might happen to meet, with perfect strangers. But Socrates did. If we take seriously what his life would be like, we might find his calm in the face of death less surprising. We all die eventually. And the rest of the time, we try to stay away from things that cause too much discomfort.

Can you imagine what it would be like to have some stranger come and insist that you have such a conversation with him, and who would not let you go and would shame and humiliate you in front of your friends and family if you tried to avoid it—and then he showed you in front of your friends and family not only that you had no idea how to live, but also that you have spent your life trying to hide that ignorance from them, and even from yourself? No *wonder* the Athenians couldn’t *stand* any more of it! And yet... and yet... shame on us for hiding what is so unworthy, and for wanting to be rid of anyone who might risk everything to relieve us of what surely spoils and ruins our lives.

At any rate, notice that reading—even reading philosophy, and even reading about *Socrates*—cannot do this for us. Reading does not put us “in the line of fire,” as it were. Reading does not put our own beliefs right on the line, does not hold lives up for such searching scrutiny. Even reading, of course, can be somewhat risky—especially reading something that is well designed to calling our beliefs into question. But we can still remove ourselves from the discomfort at any time. If I do not like what I am reading, I can simply put the book

down. The book will not protest, or follow me and pester me to return to it. Of course, if I get too uncomfortable, I can also walk out on a conversation. But it is harder, more awkward, more embarrassing to do this. Plenty of those who talked with Socrates did this, for sure. But it is a very difficult moment—much more difficult than putting a book down.

This is why Socrates talked the way he did. And this is why he did not think to write philosophy, when he was given the option to go into exile, or when he spent his last month in prison. How would one do this sort of thing in writing? We would not have to read it or put our own beliefs on the line even if we did read it, and if it got too uncomfortable, we could always put the book down and never pick it back up again.

When we feel threatened, we tend to react in ways that reveal our characters—and our weaknesses—more evidently and more tellingly than the ways we might talk or act under other circumstances. We feel that real character is tested only “when the chips are down,” as they say. Most of us read about Socrates, and find him irritating, or amusing, or interesting—whatever—and then go on with our lives. It strikes us as strange—even perhaps barbaric—that the Athenians killed him just for being such a talker. It was a long time ago, and this was an ancient culture, after all, not so sophisticated and advanced as we are now. Of course, we wouldn’t do that, but they were primitive and didn’t know any better. It is so easy for us to feel so superior, because so little is at stake, for us. We don’t have Socrates in our faces all the time, so relentlessly revealing our shames publicly every day, every day. He was always *talking*, and he made it a point to entrap everyone he could into talking with him. And then the *kind* of talk he insisted upon! It was really painful, this talking. It was difficult, and embarrassing, and so very revealing, so very personal, this talk. He was sure that this was the only way for anyone to avoid compounded ignorance, and I think he was right about this. Reading is too safe, too private, too passive. Reading does not put us so much right out there, on the line, with a bullseye right on our most personal beliefs. I can be disturbed by what I read, but I never feel just

devastated by something I read. Conversations can be so much tougher, so much more personal, so much more dangerous for us—especially when we are not allowed to resort to masking subtleties, superficial witticisms, or safe generalities, but are forced to say only what we really believe. Of course, we wouldn’t kill someone who forced us to do this every chance he could, and was tireless and irresistibly driven to reveal our ignorance to us and everyone else, would we? No, we’re not primitives, we’re so much more advanced than this. Easy for us to say—all we do is *read*. Actually, most of us don’t even do much of this—instead, we watch TV, which is *even less* threatening.

Anyway, Socrates is dead, so what are we supposed to do? One who must have asked himself this question is Plato, who followed Socrates around for many years, it seems, and who must have felt the power of this man, and the strength of his character, and his courage, and his vision, and must have felt that he could not just allow all this to die, just because his fellow Athenians could not endure any more of it. In his maturity, Plato came to believe that ultimate reality consisted in eternal, supra-sensible entities called Forms, and that everything that we experience through our senses is like shadows of these things, images which have some share of the characters of these ultimate originals, but only in ambivalent, unenduring, and somewhat unreliable ways. But he says that if we recognize these images as images, we can use them to catch at least a glimpse of the originals. In the famous divided line passage of Plato’s *Republic*, he shows that there can also be images of the images, and then in the parable of the cave, which follows the divided line, we find that there can be images of *these* images of images. Each new layer of images tends to obscure the ultimate original more than to reveal it, and yet each will continue to have some semblance of its character. If we take care to see the image as an image, and if we always strive for the original, Plato promises, we might be able to climb to the highest heights, and conquer ignorance.

So Plato wrote dialogues, I am suggesting, to create images of Socrates for us, and also images

