

CROSS-EXAMINING  
SOCRATES

*A Defense of the Interlocutors in Plato's Early Dialogues*

JOHN BEVERSLUIS

*Butler University, Indianapolis*



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## CHAPTER I

### *The Socratic interlocutor*

The term “interlocutor” is standardly used in referring to the people with whom Socrates converses in the early dialogues.<sup>1</sup> According to the *O.E.D.*, an interlocutor is “one who takes part in a dialogue, conversation, or discussion” – an etymological definition which slices the term into its Latin derivatives: *inter* (between) and *loquor* (to speak). Interlocutors are people between whom there is speech; less clumsily, they are people who talk to each other.

This does not take us very far. There are all kinds of conversations and all kinds of interlocutors, though in ordinary language the term is seldom used. Few would refer to the person with whom they chatted on the morning train as their interlocutor. It is a stiff and uncolloquial term, a term that elicits raised eyebrows, suggesting affectation and alerting those within earshot that they are in the presence of a stuffed shirt. In short, it is a term to be avoided – unless, of course, one is writing about Plato, in which case one can hardly get along without it.

Even some students of Plato reject the term “interlocutor” in favor of less pedantic alternatives like “partner,” “respondent,” or “answerer.” But these remedial substitutes are equally problematic. “Partner” fosters the illusion of intellectual equality between participants who are, in most cases, spectacularly unequal and, on occasion, mismatched. “Respondent” errs in the opposite direction by reducing one participant to a completely passive role. “Answerer” is unsatisfactory too; Socrates’ interlocutors do much more than answer questions. What is needed is not a new term or even a better definition of an old term, but an elucidation of the concept of the Socratic interlocutor which clarifies his dialectical

<sup>1</sup> The Greek equivalent is προσδιαλεγόμενος – a term Plato uses sparingly (see *Pr.* 342e4; *Th.* 161b3, 167e8; *S.* 217d1–2, 218a1, 268b4; and *Laws* 887e1).

and philosophical functions. Accordingly, I will retain the term “interlocutor.” In spite of its terminological awkwardness, it best captures the announced philosophical goals and methodological principles which underlie the Socratic elenchus<sup>2</sup> and are allegedly operative throughout the early dialogues.

Although Socrates never systematically formulates these goals and principles, they can be extracted from what he periodically does say by way of contextual explanations, rebukes, expressions of puzzlement, directives, and asides. They will emerge even more clearly if we approach the early dialogues indirectly and briefly highlight some important differences between Socratic interlocutors and the very dissimilar non-Socratic interlocutors who appear in dialogues written by philosophers other than Plato. There are not many of them. Most philosophers have opted for the prose treatise as the preferred vehicle for the dissemination of philosophical ideas. Comparatively few have written dialogues; of these, fewer still have done so effectively.<sup>3</sup>

Since philosophers who write dialogues presumably do so for a reason, some commentators think it is impossible to understand the Platonic dialogues until we have discovered that reason. Hence the notorious question: Why did Plato write dialogues? This question, which has given rise to a kind of sub-field in Platonic studies, implies that Plato’s decision to write dialogues cries out for explanation. Numerous answers have been given – many of them based on the controversial (and usually unargued) assumption that “the dialogue form” is *sui generis* and that “dialogical” content cannot be communicated “non-dialogically” owing to the fact that Plato never speaks *in propria persona*.<sup>4</sup>

Everyone agrees that there are important differences between a piece of reasoning advanced by an author in a prose treatise and a piece of reasoning advanced by a character in a dialogue. However, before trying to coax esoteric doctrine from this, two points should

<sup>2</sup> Although Socrates says next to nothing about his philosophical method – the term “method” (μέθοδος) does not appear until *Ph.* 79e3 (see Robinson, 1953: 67; and Vlastos, 1983a: 28, n. 5) – and although he employs ἐλέγχω more or less interchangeably with a variety of other verbs (e.g., σκοπέω, ἐρευνάω, ἐρωτάω, ἐξετάζω, σκέπτομαι, and ζητέω) and their various compounds to describe his dialectical role *vis-à-vis* his interlocutors, the term “elenchus” has become permanently entrenched in Anglo-American scholarly parlance.

<sup>3</sup> Burnyeat, 1987: 24, thinks the only philosopher who even approaches Plato is Hume.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Griswold, 1988: 1; Bowen, 1988: 58–63; and Sayre, 1988: 94–95.

be noted. First, the distinction between the prose treatise and the dialogue is not exhaustive. Philosophers have set forth their views in a wide variety of literary *genres*: poetry (Parmenides and Xenophanes), confessions (Augustine and Rousseau), the question-and-answer format (Aquinas), meditations (Marcus Aurelius and Descartes), geometrical proofs (Spinoza), diaries and pseudo-autobiographical narratives (Kierkegaard), novels and plays (Camus and Sartre), aphorisms (Nietzsche), “remarks” and “*Zettel*” (Wittgenstein), and so on. Second, the distinction between the prose treatise and the dialogue is not sharp. Philosophers who do not write dialogues often employ interlocutor-like figures as pedagogical devices: to anticipate objections, to bring ambiguities to light, to forestall misunderstandings, and to show how easy it is to get things wrong. Even philosophers who do write dialogues often insert long speeches during which the interlocutor is mute and all-but-forgotten. Plato himself is a case in point. The middle and late dialogues make copious use of the method of continuous exposition in the form of elaborate (and virtually uncontested) chains of reasoning, myths, historical narratives, quasi-scientific discourses, and legal promulgations. Although dialogues in name, they read more like extended monologues with occasional audience participation. Even the early dialogues contain long speeches during which dialectical interaction is temporarily suspended. I conclude that, in spite of weighty pronouncements about “the dialogue form” with which some commentators afflict us, an empirical approach to the Platonic corpus reveals that the Platonic dialogue is not a unitary, *sui generis*, and consistently employed alternative to the prose treatise, but a *carte blanche* stylistic format which assigns high priority to sustained dialectical interaction but is not restricted to it. In this book, I will proceed on the assumption that Plato did not write dialogues for mysterious reasons, but rather because, given his Socratically influenced conception of philosophy as a collaborative enterprise, the dialogue form was the ideal vehicle for celebrating his mentor and conducting his own philosophical investigations.

Since philosophers who write dialogues do so in very different ways and for very different reasons, the concept of the interlocutor cannot be elucidated *in general*. We must examine each interlocutor – Socratic and otherwise – on his own terms and in relation to the philosophical goals and methodological principles of the philosopher in whose dialogue he appears. Since limitations of space

prohibit a full-scale comparative study, I offer the following remarks as illustrative.

I begin with Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio*. In the course of refuting the errors of his interlocutor, Evodius, Augustine does not employ any single method of argumentation. However, his dialectical procedure often bears a striking resemblance to that peculiarly Socratic method of argumentation which Aristotle calls "peirastic" in which the interlocutor is refuted "from [his] own beliefs" (ἐκ τῶν δοκούντων τῷ ἀποκρινομένῳ, *S.E.* 165b3–4; *T.* 100a29–30). For example, asked why he judges adultery wrong, Evodius replies that it is because he would not tolerate adultery on the part of his own wife; and whoever does to another what he does not wish done to himself does what is evil (1.3.6). Augustine responds with the counterexample of the aspiring adulterer whose desire is so overpowering that he offers his wife to the husband of his prospective partner in sin – an action which Evodius also judges wrong. Alas, retorts Augustine, not according to the principle he has just espoused; for in the counterexample the aspiring adulterer is willing to do the very thing Evodius abhors.

Scattered examples of "peirastic" argumentation aside, *De Libero Arbitrio* consists mostly of extended monologues in which Augustine is neither refuting Evodius nor (apparently) even conversing with him.<sup>5</sup> In these passages, the dialogue form is purely external and the interlocutor's role becomes increasingly perfunctory and, in the end, non-existent. Highly visible and actively involved in the discussion throughout Book I, Evodius gradually recedes from view. The eclipse of Evodius continues in the succeeding books, where his participation is minimal, and he vanishes altogether during the last nineteen pages of the "dialogue." Augustine's propensity for monologue and conspicuous neglect of Evodius suggest that, in his hands, the dialogue form is little more than a pedagogical device which enables him to expound positive doctrine.

Anselm also wrote dialogues for primarily pedagogical purposes. That this is so is clear from the preface to *Cur Deus Homo*:

[I]ssues which are examined by the method of question-and-answer are clearer, and so more acceptable, to many minds – especially to minds

<sup>5</sup> A tendency about which he is a trifle self-conscious and for which another interlocutor, Adeodatus, profusely thanks him: "I am specially grateful that latterly you have spoken without the interruption of questions and answers, because you have taken up and resolved all the difficulties I was prepared to urge against you" (*De Magistro* 14.46).



that are slower . . . Therefore . . . I shall take as my fellow disputant the one who has been urging me to this end more insistently than the others, so that Boso may ask and Anselm answer. (3: 49–50)

Although Anselm often replies to Boso's questions with questions of his own, his purpose is not to draw him into philosophical debate, but to pave the way for his own forthcoming solution of the difficulty at hand by eliciting Boso's assent to other propositions on which the solution depends. For example, asked whether men would have died had they not sinned, Boso replies, "As we believe, [they] would not, but I want to hear from you the rationale of this belief" (3: 61). He adds that he fears he would be sinning were he to say anything else (3: 68). In prefacing his reply with the locution, "As we believe" – a locution which occurs frequently throughout *Cur Deus Homo* – Boso is not appealing to prevailing orthodox opinion. Although his "we" denotes the collective body of believers, it is not the empirical fact that these propositions are believed that recommends them to Boso. They are not theological *endoxa* – religious beliefs common to all the faithful – but unassailable truths appropriated by faith independently of and prior to philosophical investigation. If they were merely theological *endoxa*, Boso's dissent would only be atypical and not, as he fears, sinful.

As an interlocutor, Boso is a generic stand-in for the religiously committed but intellectually perplexed believer. What he wants from Anselm is not truth – he already has that – but understanding: "We believe it, but I would like to have a reason for it" (3: 74). Yet although Boso is already in possession of truth, it is truth imperfectly grasped. Understanding is not the condition of belief, but it is a coveted *desideratum*; and the intellectually conscientious believer makes every effort to augment his understanding (1: 1; 2: 50). That God became man is beyond dispute; Boso merely wants to know why. Anselm's explanation follows, set forth dialectically by means of question-and-answer, so as to render the Doctrine of the Incarnation intelligible "to minds that are slower."

The philosophical function of the Anselmian interlocutor, like that of his Augustinian counterpart, is largely pedagogical: he asks questions which Anselm answers, he expresses confusions which Anselm dispels, he poses objections which Anselm demolishes. His humble contributions are dialectically uneventful and rarely influence the direction of the discussion. His responses are unfailingly

docile and characterized by a studied passivity: “It is up to you to explain and up to me to pay attention,” “You have satisfactorily answered my objection,” “I am ashamed for having asked that question.” And so it continues for hundreds of pages. In *De Veritate* the interlocutor is so anonymous that he lacks even a name. Identified simply as “Pupil,” he earnestly implores “Teacher” to impart truth and promises to be a good listener (2:77). Discussion with such interlocutors is almost wholly devoid of philosophical excitement. There is little sense of intellectual struggle, even less dialectical give-and-take, and never the slightest possibility that the interlocutor might remain unpersuaded. We know from the very first page whose view will prevail. Tame and tractable throughout, Evodius, Boso, and “Pupil” comport themselves like well-behaved catechumens in the presence of a revered authority, gratefully embracing the truths vouchsafed to them and devoutly resolving never again to be overtaken by doubt or error.

If the dialogues of Augustine and Anselm are little more than thinly-disguised monologues and if their interlocutors are rather too accommodating, Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are genuinely confrontational and Cleanthes, Demea, and Philo are not interlocutors at all. They are rather philosophical protagonists – flesh and blood proponents of divergent points of view which they defend with considerable acumen. Hume is very sensitive about this point. Speaking through Pamphilus, he says:

[T]hough the ancient philosophers conveyed most of their instruction in the form of dialogue, this method of composition has been little practiced in later ages, and has seldom succeeded in the hands of those who have attempted it . . . To deliver a *System* in conversation scarcely appears natural; and while the dialogue-writer desires, by departing from the direct style of composition, to give a freer air to his performance, and avoid the appearance of *author* and *reader*, he is apt to run into a worse inconvenience, and convey the image of *pedagogue* and *pupil*.<sup>6</sup> (1983: 1)

In Hume, the participants are intellectual equals – “[r]easonable men [who] may be allowed to differ where no one can reasonably be positive” (1–2).

<sup>6</sup> On the differences between the “pedagogical” dialogue (as employed, e.g., by Cicero, Augustine, Anselm, Galileo, Malebranche, Schopenhauer, and Shelley), which presupposes the inherent inequality of the participants, and the “dialogue of relative equality” (as employed, e.g., by Descartes, Berkeley, and Hume), see Levi, 1976: 1–20. See also Koyré, 1962: 17–19, esp. 18, n. 4.

The traditional dialectical roles disappear: there is neither a designated questioner nor a designated answerer – no specific participant whose views are singled out for sustained scrutiny and who must bear full dialectical responsibility for them. Sustained scrutiny there is, but of arguments antecedently formulated and delivered for the occasion, not of theses contextually elicited and jointly explored. The method of criticism is also significantly different from that of Augustine and Anselm. A representative example occurs in Part III where Philo sets out to discredit Cleanthes' formulation of the Argument from Design. His critique does not take the form of a joint exploration in which Cleanthes is required to assent to each step; instead, he proceeds cumulatively with a series of objections which continues uninterrupted for several pages. But he pays a high price for this strategy. Having gone on at considerable length and, as he thinks, brought into play his heaviest artillery, he is more than a little disconcerted when Cleanthes disputes an earlier premise on which the entire chain of reasoning depends but to which he never assented. Having undercut Philo's argument, Cleanthes disparages it on the ground that it proceeds "from too luxuriant a fertility which suppresses [his] natural good sense by a profusion of unnecessary scruples and objections" (26). The rejection of this single premise enables Cleanthes to circumvent the massive critique launched by Philo who is left "a little embarrassed and confounded" (26).

By contrast, Berkeley's dialogues are genuine dialectical exchanges, and Hylas is an authentic interlocutor and the designated answerer to Philonous' questions. Unlike his Augustinian and Anselmian counterparts, the Berkeleyian interlocutor is not a rapt disciple eager to imbibe wisdom from a revered sage. The champion of common sense, Hylas enters the discussion with strongly held opinions, which he defends with considerable acumen, and with clearly formulated objections, which he advances with clarity and force. As for Philonous, he is remarkably attuned to these objections and takes them very seriously. Unwilling merely to silence Hylas or to settle for his grudging acquiescence, he strives for genuine persuasion, considering his objections one by one, ignoring his trivial inadvertences, refusing to put words into his mouth, and allowing him time for stocktaking during which he may review the arguments which have been deployed against him and examine them for possible logical flaws. Realizing that the hold of custom

is strong, that people often remain wedded to beliefs after acknowledging them to be indefensible, and that what is needed is not just a refutation of false beliefs, but an explanation of their apparent plausibility, Philonous leaves no stone unturned and will not rest until he has dispelled Hylas' doubts.

Unlike Hume, Berkeley makes extensive use of "peirastic" argumentation. Philonous continually requires Hylas to assent to each step of the argument and continually reminds him of his previous admissions (see, e.g., 227, 231, 234, 239, 240–41, 243, 246–47, 261), so that he will be "convinced out of [his] own mouth" (270). However, Berkeley's purpose is not purely negative. Like Augustine and Anselm, he is not just bent on refuting error; he also wants to expound positive doctrine – in particular, the "immaterialism" he had set forth in his previously published but largely ignored *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. Disappointed by its lukewarm reception, he resolved to try again by presenting his views in more accessible form. The result was the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* which "introduces [his] notions . . . into the mind in the most easy and familiar manner" (220) in hopes of inducing the reader, presumably sympathetic to Hylas, to abandon his own materialism as he witnesses its champion going down to defeat. In that sense, Berkeley's dialogues are as pedagogically motivated as Augustine's and Anselm's.

For these philosophers, the dialogue form is not a methodological necessity, but a stylistic option – a pedagogical device which enables them to set forth their views in a comparatively untechnical and undemanding way. Since, for them, philosophical truth can be presented either dialectically (in dialogues) or non-dialectically (in prose treatises), there is only a contingent connection between the end of expounding positive doctrine and the means by which it is expounded. The choice of means is, in fact, secondary – an afterthought, a purely strategic matter to be determined by the intellectual capacities of one's audience.

It is time to sum up this brief survey of non-Socratic interlocutors. First, however different in other respects, the Augustinian, Anselmian, and Berkeleyian interlocutors are alike in that they are all, to varying degrees, spokesmen for, and dramatic embodiments of, error; and error must be refuted. Second, in spite of the considerable amount of space allotted to refutation, it is only a preliminary. Simply to have refuted the interlocutor is not

enough; his false beliefs must be replaced with true ones. Finally, since refutation leads the interlocutor into perplexity and uncertainty – states of mind which Augustine, Anselm, and Berkeley regard as regrettable and potentially dangerous – if the interlocutor cannot find his way out of his difficulties, they stand ready to come to his aid.

In turning to Plato's early dialogues, one enters a different world. Here, too, are interlocutors aplenty and refutation by "peirastic" argumentation. But Socratic interlocutors bear little resemblance to their non-Socratic counterparts.

For one thing, the philosopher with whom they have to do operates with radically different motives. Unlike Augustine, Anselm, and Berkeley, Socrates is not interested in expounding positive doctrine – not because he is indifferent to truth, but because he has none to impart. However, although devoid of wisdom, he claims to be a lover of it – a searcher in search not only of truth, but also of other searchers. The early dialogues reflect the Socratic conception of philosophy as a collaborative enterprise – a joint search for truth. By a "joint" search, Socrates does not just mean a discussion between two (or more) participants. The dialogues of Augustine, Anselm, and Berkeley satisfy *that* criterion; but they are not joint searches in Socrates' sense. In these dialogues only one participant is searching for truth; the other participant already has it. The interlocutor plays no vital role in the discovery; he merely provides the occasion for the author of the dialogue to communicate the truth he has already discovered – "[t]o deliver a *System*," in Humean phrase. Socrates has no system. Anyone who claims to have one disqualifies himself as a philosopher.

Second, unlike Augustine, Anselm, and Berkeley, Socrates does not refute his interlocutors in hopes of replacing their false beliefs with true ones, but in hopes of convicting them of ignorance and replacing their false beliefs with a *desire* for true ones. The proximate end of philosophizing is not the discovery of truth, but the realization that one does not have it. The etymological definition of "philosophy" as the love of wisdom has become so hackneyed through repetition that it is easy to forget that it originally meant something important. As a lover of wisdom, the philosopher dissociates himself from all who claim to *be* wise. But although philosophy is, in that sense, a means to an end – an activity which (one hopes) will culminate in the discovery of truth – it is also, for Socrates, an end in itself – an activity which enables one to live

an examined life. It is in living that life, rather than in enjoying the epistemic benefits which result from living it, that the highest human happiness is to be found:

[T]he greatest good for a man [is] to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men. (*Ap.* 38a1–6)

In short, the activity of philosophizing is not a *means* to happiness, understood as an end distinct from philosophizing and contingently connected to it as a causal consequence; it *is* happiness.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, unlike Augustine, Anselm and Berkeley, who deplore perplexity and uncertainty as regrettable and potentially dangerous states of mind and do everything in their power to uproot them, Socrates prizes perplexity and uncertainty as desirable and potentially salutary states of mind and does everything in his power to inculcate them. If the interlocutor cannot find his way out of his difficulties, Socrates will not bail him out; he is on his own.

Unlike Evodius and Boso, the Socratic interlocutor is not a rapt disciple who has come to sit at the feet of a revered sage.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, insofar as Socrates denied having ever taught anyone anything (*Ap.* 33a5–6, 33b5–8), he had no disciples (μαθητής).<sup>9</sup> He did, however, have intimates,<sup>10</sup> many of whom were present at his exe-

<sup>7</sup> In this life and possibly the next. It is precisely the opportunity of talking endlessly about virtue which makes the prospect of immortality so attractive to Socrates (*Ap.* 41c2–4).

<sup>8</sup> The interlocutors encountered by Xenophon's Socrates are very different. Excruciatingly aware of their intellectual inadequacies and embarrassingly susceptible to his instant "wisdom," they have much in common with the Augustinian and Anselmian interlocutors and would have found them kindred spirits.

<sup>9</sup> In referring to Socrates' interlocutors, neither Plato nor Xenophon uses the term "disciple" (μαθητής). Socrates calls Chaerephon his companion (ἐπαῖρος, *Ap.* 21a1), and Xanthippe alludes to his friends (οἱ ἐπιτήδευοι, *Ph.* 60a6). Xenophon typically employs τοὺς συνόντας (*Mem.* 1.2.64, 1.1.4, 1.2.8, 1.2.17, 1.6.3, 4.3.1, 4.4.25), although he occasionally substitutes τοὺς συνδιατρίβοντας (1.2.3, 1.3.15, 1.4.1), τοὺς ἐπιτηδείους (1.1.6), τοὺς ἀποδεξαμένους (1.2.8), and τοὺς συγγιγνομένους (1.2.61).

<sup>10</sup> In view of their allegedly close proximity to Socrates, one would expect Xenophon and Plato to be authoritative sources about the members of the Socratic inner circle. But their lists are strikingly different. Interestingly, neither includes the other. Xenophon's writings contain only one oblique allusion to Plato (*Mem.* 3.6.1), and Plato never mentions Xenophon. Diogenes Laertius attributes this mutual chilliness to the intense rivalry between them (2.57, 3.34). Athenaeus also reports that Plato and Xenophon were envious of each other (*The Deipnosophists* 504e4–f6). He adds that Plato was inimical (δυσμενής, 506a6) and filled with malice (κακοηθείας, 507a8–10) towards everyone: "[T]he day would fail me if I should wish to proceed with all who were abused by the philosopher" (507a1–3).

cution.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, which depicts endless conversations between Socrates and these people, Plato's early dialogues depict only one – the celebrated exchange with Crito.<sup>12</sup>

But if the Socratic interlocutor is not a rapt disciple like Evodius and Boso, neither is he an independent thinker like Hylas. The typical Socratic interlocutor is no intellectual and, in spite of Critias' application of the term φιλόσοφος to the young Charmides (*Ch.* 154e8–155a1), none is a philosopher. Unlike the “Socrates” of the *Phaedo*, who surrounds himself with philosophers, and the “Socrates” of the *Republic*, for whom philosophy is a specialized discipline reserved for the select few and then only after years of intensive preliminary immersion in mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics, the Socrates of the early dialogues thinks it is open to anyone and everyone to philosophize and is willing to debate all comers – young or old, foreigner or fellow citizen (*Ap.* 30a2–4). The prerequisites are minimal: one need only speak Greek and possess a modicum of intelligence, though it is arguable that some of his interlocutors lack even that.

Socrates' interlocutors fall into three fairly distinct categories: they are either young men (Charmides is a mere boy), established professionals (Nicias and Laches are generals, Polus is a rhetorician, Euthyphro is a theologian, Ion is a rhapsode, and Gorgias,

<sup>11</sup> See *Ph.* 59b6–c6. Diogenes Laertius (3.35–36) reports that many of the Socratics were ill-disposed towards Plato and that some were openly hostile. Antisthenes attacked him in a dialogue entitled *Sathon*; Aristippus criticized him for not being present at Socrates' execution, “though he was no farther off than Aegina”; and Aeschines claimed that the arguments advanced in the *Crito* in favor of Socrates' escaping from prison were actually his own and that Plato put them into the mouth of Crito because he despised Aeschines for being poor – a remark which Burnet, 1924: 173, dismisses as “a piece of spiteful Epicurean tittle-tattle.” If even a fraction of the gossip, rumor, and innuendo reported by Diogenes Laertius is true, the Socratics were a petty and quarrelsome lot who not only disagreed monumentally among themselves about Socrates' philosophical views but also intensely disliked one another.

<sup>12</sup> The others are occasionally alluded to – albeit usually unflatteringly. This unlikely group included Aristodemus, who worshiped Socrates and went about barefoot in imitation of him (*Sym.* 173b1–2); Apollodorus, who lamented his pre-Socratic years as wasted and wretched (*Sym.* 172c2–173a3); and Chaerephon, who behaved like a wild man (μυρικός, *Ch.* 153b2) whenever he was in the presence of Socrates and who considered himself so adept at his method that he would cross-examine people on demand (*G.* 447c9–448c3). Although Xenophon never tires of recounting how Socrates improved his companions by teaching them to master their passions, Plato's portrayal suggests that he improved few and that his own inner strength and stability of character were conspicuously lacking in his intimates: Chaerephon was impulsive (*Ap.* 21a3), unpunctual (*G.* 447a7–8), and overly-susceptible to physical beauty (*Ch.* 154c8–d5); Aristodemus could not hold his liquor (*Sym.* 176c1–3); and Apollodorus lacked self-control (*Ph.* 59a7–b4, 117d3–6).

Protagoras, and Hippias are sophists), or prosperous employers of manual laborers (Cephalus and Polemarchus owned what was probably the largest shield factory in the Piraeus, and Crito is an urban dweller who owns several farms).<sup>13</sup>

Socrates' interlocutors are comprised of a comparatively narrow sociological group. For one thing, they are all men. Women appear infrequently and fleetingly in Plato's dialogues. At *Sym.* 176e4–10 Socrates unceremoniously enjoins a female flutist to vacate the premises so the men can talk philosophy in peace.<sup>14</sup> Except for (the probably mythical) Diotima, whose remarks are narrated by Socrates (*Sym.* 201d1–212a8), and Aspasia, whose speech he repeats for the benefit of Menexenus (*Men.* 236d4–249c9), the only woman in the whole Platonic corpus who actually says anything is Xanthippe; and she is allotted only one sentence which is narrated by Phaedo: "Socrates, this is the last time your friends will talk to you and you to them" (*Ph.* 60a5–6). Although Phaedo pillories her remark as "the sort of thing that women usually say" (60a4–5), I find it quite touching and, in view of her reputation, decidedly unshrewlike.<sup>15</sup> But it falls on deaf ears. Absorbed in philosophical reflection about the mixed sensations of pleasure and pain in his chained legs, Socrates has no time for irrelevancies. He responds to his wife with a stony silence and instructs Crito to have her escorted from the cell forthwith – which he does, with Xanthippe wailing and beating her breast. Moments before his execution she makes another appearance accompanied by their three sons and "the

<sup>13</sup> For an illuminating survey of the walks of life from which Socrates' interlocutors are drawn, see Vidal-Naquet, 1984: 273–93.

<sup>14</sup> Actually, it is hard to tell whether she is banished because she is a female or because she is a flutist. Plato had an inordinate dislike for the instrument because of its wide harmonic range (*R.* 561c6–d2), and he excluded flutes, flutists, and even flute-makers from his ideal society (*R.* 399c7–d6).

<sup>15</sup> Xanthippe's reputation as a shrew derives largely from Diogenes Laertius who reports that she regularly scolded Socrates and once tore his coat from his back in the marketplace and then proceeded to drench him with water (2.36–37). (One suspects that many interlocutors would have liked to do the same thing.) In response to Alcibiades' criticism of his wife as an intolerable nag, Socrates sagely confides that he puts up with her for the same reason that riders put up with spirited horses: just as, having mastered these, they can more easily cope with docile creatures, so he, owing to the society of Xanthippe, can more easily cope with humanity at large. Diogenes solemnly adds that it was to such words that the Pythian priestess bore witness when she declared that no one is wiser than Socrates (2.36–37). The only commentator known to me who interprets Xanthippe's remark in the *Phaedo* as that of a shrew is Brun, 1960: 25: "Dès que Xanthippe nous eut aperçus, ce furent des malédictions et des discours tout à fait dans le genre habituel aux femmes."



women of his household” (αἱ οἰκεῖαι γυναικες, *Ph.* 116b2), but is again quickly dispatched. Not only are there no female interlocutors in the early dialogues, Plato never portrays Socrates conversing with a woman.<sup>16</sup> Although willing to enter into philosophical debate with anyone and everyone – “young and old, foreigner and fellow citizen,” he does not add “man or woman.”<sup>17</sup>

Socrates’ interlocutors are comprised of a comparatively narrow sociological group in a second way. Although the early dialogues abound with allusions to skilled craftsmen whose expertise, grounded in an understanding of the rational principles underlying their *technai*, serves as a model for the moral expertise for which Socrates is searching, and although Socrates numbers the craftsmen among those he interrogated during his search for someone wiser than himself, Plato never portrays him conversing with a craftsman.<sup>18</sup> However his interlocutors may differ in age, background, and education, they all move in the higher echelons of society – Athenian and otherwise.

Unlike their non-Socratic counterparts, who participate eagerly in philosophical discussion and often initiate it, Socrates’ interlocutors typically become embroiled unwittingly and against their better judgment. A casual remark, instantly rued, about being on the way to court (or something equally humdrum) suddenly acquires momentous importance, and they quickly find themselves being drawn into a discussion for which they have little relish and less competence. Socrates’ method of argumentation is coercive. He tries to force his interlocutors to a particular conclusion – “to get [them] to believe something, whether [they] want to believe it

<sup>16</sup> Xenophon, on the other hand, portrays him conversing with the beautiful and scantily clad hetaira Theodete (*Mem.* 3.11.1–18) and reports another conversation with Aspasia (2.6.36).

<sup>17</sup> However, he does add that in the hereafter, if there is one, it would be a source of “extraordinary happiness” to examine the men *and women* there (*Ap.* 41c2) – a remark which prompts Vlastos, 1991: 110, n. 15, to conclude that women were not excluded, in principle, from philosophical debate and that their absence from the early dialogues is traceable to the fact that they were “not in the public places where Socrates could reach them” – a sociological barrier which is removed in the next life. Vidal-Naquet, 1984: 282, is less apologetic: “Les femmes sont citoyennes de la *République*, elles ne sont pas reçues dans la société platonicienne des dialogues.”

<sup>18</sup> Neither does Xenophon. However, he does depict a conversation between Socrates and Euthydemus that takes place in a cobbler’s shop where Socrates and his companions often gathered (*Mem.* 4.2.1).

or not.”<sup>19</sup> But although his method of argumentation is coercive, his manner of engaging his interlocutors in discussion is not: participation is voluntary (*Ch.* 158e3, *La.* 188a6–c3, and 189a1–3). At the same time, it is all-but-impossible to avoid. Socrates’ unfailing urbanity, combined with his willingness to discuss any subject, however trivial, and his uncanny ability to judge character, enable him to lure people into discussion in spite of their misgivings.

But if Socrates’ interlocutors enter into philosophical discussion voluntarily, they also enter into it blindly, advised neither of the constraints which govern the Socratic elenchus nor that its purpose is refutation. Lysimachus is one of the few who is forewarned about this – albeit not by Socrates but by Nicias:

You don’t appear . . . to know that whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation must necessarily, even if he begins by conversing about something quite different . . . keep on being led about by the man’s arguments until he submits to answering questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived hitherto. And when he does submit to this questioning, you don’t realize that Socrates will not let him go before he has well and truly tested every last detail. (*La.* 187e6–188a3)<sup>20</sup>

The typical Socratic interlocutor is unaware of all this and is told only that he must refrain from making long speeches and say what he really believes. Some are not even told that.

Although seemingly spontaneous and even desultory, the Socratic elenchus is, in fact, highly rigorous. Having been lured into discussion – often on false pretenses (Euthyphro is flattered into believing he can be of genuine assistance) – the Socratic interlocutor has no idea of what he is in for. Entering into disputation with Socrates is like inadvertently strolling into a minefield. By the time he realizes what is happening, it is too late. The refutation is as swift as it is unexpected. His astonishment is compounded by the fact that the refutation is apparently self-inflicted. At each step of the argument, he is pointedly asked whether he assents to the propositions proposed for his assent. Dissent is not only possible, it is invited. But he does not dissent. The propositions seem perfectly

<sup>19</sup> Nozick, 1981: 4. For a different view, see Irwin, 1986: 49–74.

<sup>20</sup> At *Ap.* 29e3–30a2 Socrates describes his treatment of his interlocutors in almost identical terms.

innocuous – even truisms. Yet once his assent is given, it assumes a life of its own and quickly becomes the instrument of his undoing. Although freely offered, his every utterance binds and fetters him; his every assertion negates something else he has said or wants to say. It is an unpleasant and unnerving experience – the experience of the interlocutor as dialectical target and of refutation not only as annihilation but, apparently, as *self*-annihilation.

Embellishing the *O.E.D.*'s definition, a Socratic interlocutor is “one who takes part in a dialogue, conversation, or discussion” which is conducted for the surreptitious but allegedly salutary purpose of refuting him “from his own beliefs,” thereby exposing his false conceit of knowledge and infusing him with self-knowledge. From Socrates' point of view, an interlocutor is someone who mistakenly (and often arrogantly) supposes that he knows something which he does not know. Such persons are deluded and in need of having their delusions exposed. In thus engaging his interlocutors, he claims to be caring for their souls and discharging his divine mission.

A further insight into the concept of the Socratic interlocutor may be gained by reviewing how Socrates came to believe he had this mission. As we have seen, when confronted with the astonishing – and, to his mind, dubious – Delphic pronouncement that no one is wiser than he, Socrates had initially tried to refute it by interrogating various people with a reputation for wisdom in hopes of finding someone wiser. Having found such a person, he had intended to appear before the Pythia and confront her with living proof of her error: “This man is wiser than I, but you said I was [the wisest]” (*Ap.* 21c2).<sup>21</sup> In short, he had treated the Delphic pronouncement like any other dubious claim. Although not an interlocutor in the strict sense, since he cannot be directly inter-

<sup>21</sup> Contrary to what Socrates implies, the oracle did not say that he is the *wisest* of men, but that no one is *wiser* – a claim which is compatible with others being as wise insofar as they, too, acknowledge that they have no wisdom and which seems to entail that these other hypothetical wise men would have the same divine mission. I say “seems to entail” because Socrates goes out of his way to explain that his belief in his divine mission was not based solely on the oracle's pronouncement, but also on dreams, commands, and every other way in which the gods make their wishes known to human beings (*Ap.* 33c4–7). In any event, he does not object to others behaving as if they had the same mission. Without a trace of disapproval and even with a trace of amusement, he approvingly alludes to certain young men who, with him as their model, go about examining people who think they know something when, in fact, they know little or nothing (*Ap.* 23c2–7).

rogated, the god is nevertheless treated as a kind of interlocutor – an interlocutor *in absentia* – and his claim is targeted for refutation. The search for someone wiser than Socrates is on.

Unlike Socrates' typical allusions to wise men, these remarks should not be taken ironically. The search was undertaken in complete seriousness and in hopes of refuting the oracle, that is, in hopes of demonstrating that, on any straightforward interpretation, the proposition “No one is wiser than Socrates” is false. This proposition can be false only if there *is* someone wiser than (or as wise as) Socrates. And it can be *known* to be false only if Socrates can find him. Hence his disappointment upon discovering that the very people thought to be the wisest were, in fact, the most deficient in wisdom (*Ap.* 22a1–4). This was not a mere corroboration of what he had expected all along; it was a genuine empirical discovery. The search for a counterexample with which to refute the oracle had failed.

Since the class of persons wiser than Socrates is now known to be a null class, it would be the height of folly to continue searching for its members. And Socrates did not. Unable to demonstrate that the oracle's claim was false, he concluded that it was true, reinterpreted its meaning, and concluded that he had been commanded to live the life of a philosopher (φιλοσοφοῦντά . . . δεῖν ζῆν, *Ap.* 28e5), examining himself and others, thereby *helping* the god's cause (*Ap.* 23b4–c1). The hitherto dubious claim that no one is wiser than Socrates has been pronounced irrefutable (ἀνέλεγκτος, *Ap.* 22a7–8),<sup>22</sup> and the purpose of the divine mission is to vindicate it. The serious search for someone wiser than himself has been replaced by tongue-in-cheek irony about pretenders. The Socrates of the early dialogues has been born.

There is another “kind of interlocutor” in the early dialogues – an omnipresent, sinister, and undifferentiated entity which darkens Plato's pages and hovers over them like a menacing cloud. This entity is “public opinion” and it is embodied in the views of “the Many.” Like the god at Delphi, it cannot be directly interrogated; but it is sometimes indirectly interrogated with some unfortunate

<sup>22</sup> Those who translate ἐλέγχω as “examine” or “test” (rather than as “refute”) are committed to translating ἀνέλεγκτος as “unexaminable” or “untestable” – thereby foisting on Socrates the decidedly odd (if not self-contradictory) claim that his purpose in testing the oracle was to demonstrate that it is untestable.

interlocutor serving as its representative. I say “unfortunate” because it is axiomatic in the early dialogues that the opinions of “the Many” are, at best, muddled and, at worst, false. Any interlocutor foolish enough to answer on their behalf has dug his own dialectical grave.

I said earlier that I would retain the term “interlocutor” because, in spite of its terminological awkwardness, it best captures the announced philosophical goals and methodological principles which underlie the Socratic elenchus and are allegedly operative throughout the early dialogues. One final principle needs to be mentioned.

Socrates sometimes suggests that there is an important and peculiarly Socratic kind of reciprocity between himself and his interlocutors. This reciprocity is easily overlooked if we attend only to their respective roles as questioner and answerer. Superficially considered, the questioner seems to enjoy all the dialectical advantages. Everyone knows it is easier to pick apart someone else’s position than to set forth a coherent position of one’s own. According to Socrates, however, there is a deeper dimension to the Socratic elenchus which reveals that this initial impression is false. What it is may be seen by recalling that his announced goal is to care for the souls of his fellows by convicting them of their ignorance and motivating them to take up the philosophical quest. Hence arises the view of the interlocutor as a person whose life is on the line – the patient, the defendant, the accused, who is (in Jaeger’s phrase) intellectually “stripped.”<sup>23</sup> According to official Socratic elenctic theory, one cannot pursue philosophy with maximum profit by oneself in isolation from others. One needs a questioner, an examiner, a critic – someone to save one from oneself, from one’s ignorance, complacency, and sloth by calling into question one’s deepest certainties and revealing that one does not know what one thinks one knows.

However, if the early dialogues show anything, they show Socrates’ monumental failure. The recalcitrant and unpersuaded interlocutor is not a phenomenon peculiar to some of the dialogues, but a phenomenon common to most of them – to all of them if Vlastos is right in claiming that Socrates *never* manages to “win over” an opponent. Hence if Socrates’ announced goal is his only

<sup>23</sup> 1943–45, I: 34. Socrates uses the same metaphor at *Ch.* 154e5–7.

reason for living the life of a philosopher, why, in view of his universal (or all-but-universal) failure, does he continue to believe it is a worthwhile activity – not to mention the highest form of human happiness? Why does he not abandon his divine mission as a singularly hopeless and thankless task? What are we to make of his apparently inexplicable willingness to invest such inordinate amounts of time and energy in the company of these unresponsive and seemingly impenetrable interlocutors?

A possible explanation is that he persists because he understands that the examined life is difficult and is not unduly discouraged by failure. A second possibility is that he persists because, although he never completely “wins over” an opponent, he occasionally makes marginal progress. Yet another possibility is that he persists out of obedience to the god of Delphi.

Although each of these explanations has a certain plausibility, Socrates gives a different one. It is this explanation which reveals the allegedly deeper dimension of the Socratic elenchus. According to Socrates, he persists in the face of universal (or all-but-universal) failure because caring for the souls of his fellows is *not* his only reason for living the life of a philosopher; it is not even his most important one. Although Socrates’ divinely appointed task is to examine his interlocutors and deprive them of their false conceit of knowledge, the Socratic elenchus is neither wholly adversarial nor wholly altruistic. Socrates seeks out interlocutors: not just for their sakes, but also for his own sake. If his interlocutors need him, as he manifestly believes, he needs them, too. Elenctic examination is always *self*-examination (*Ap.* 38a4–5).

Rebuked by Critias on the ground that he is just trying to refute him, Socrates replies:

[H]ow could you possibly think that even if I were to refute everything you say, I would be doing it for any other reasons than the one I would give for a thorough investigation of my own statements – the fear of unconsciously thinking I know something when I do not. And this is what I claim to be doing now, examining the argument for my own sake primarily, but perhaps also for the sake of my friends. (*Ch.* 166c7–d4)

Similarly, before refuting Gorgias, Socrates expresses the hope that his interlocutor is the same kind of man as he:

And what kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute

anyone who says anything untrue; one who, however, wouldn't be any less pleased to be refuted than to refute. For I count being refuted a greater good, insofar as it is a greater good for oneself to be delivered from the worst thing there is than to deliver someone else from it. (*G.* 458a2–7)

In short, the deeper dimension of the Socratic elenchus consists in the fact that, in examining his interlocutors – and, presumably, improving their souls – Socrates is simultaneously examining himself – and, presumably, improving his soul. To philosophize by oneself in isolation from others is to deny the necessity and to decline the risk of scrutiny by others. These passages shed further light on the concept of the Socratic interlocutor and the indispensable dialectical and philosophical functions he allegedly performs. It is, in fact, no exaggeration to say that the whole Socratic philosophical enterprise is unalterably grounded in the necessity of having interlocutors. Without them, the enterprise collapses, and the possibility of philosophizing in the deepest and potentially most beneficial sense is lost. Without a questioner, fraudulent claimants to wisdom are deprived of what they need most – a critic. But without an answerer, the questioner is deprived of what he needs most – an interlocutor against whom his own views can be tested. If the answerer has access to the *logos* only when subjected to interrogation, the questioner has access to it only when provided with an answerer. In the process, the views of both are tested: the answerer's by the questioner and the questioner's by the *logos*.

This, then, is the concept of the interlocutor which underlies the Socratic elenchus. At least, it is the “official” view. Socrates is hard on his interlocutors, but for excellent reasons – he is improving their souls – and he is equally hard on himself. This announced goal is at once noble and puzzling: noble, because it bespeaks a deep moral seriousness; puzzling, because it is (for the most part) a misdescription of his actual goal – which is not to improve anyone, but simply to win arguments. In the following chapters, we will see that, and how often, this is the case.