

# The Orality of Dialogue

No, only the self-controlled have power to consider the things that matter most, and, sorting them out after their kind, by word and deed alike to prefer the good and reject the evil.

And thus, he said, men become supremely good and happy and skilled in discussion. The very word "discussion," according to him, owes its name to the practice of meeting together for common deliberation, *sorting*, *discussing* things after their kind: and therefore one should be ready and prepared for this and be zealous for it; for it makes for excellence, leadership and skill in discussion.<sup>1</sup>

Xenophon thus ends one of his short dialogues intended to show how Socrates encouraged self-control (*sophrosyne*) as the key to good business. The Athenian gentleman who wanted to excel in affairs had first to learn self-control, which Socrates taught by example and by dialogue. Self-control in turn gave the gentleman the freedom from slavish desires that allowed him to sort things and select the best. In other words, self-control allowed the gentleman to prioritize issues.

It is notable that Socrates draws the attention of his listeners to the etymological connection between *dialego* (classify) and *dialegomai* (discuss.) This etymological connection seems peculiar to us today. What does conversation have to do with classification? Why would Socrates or Xenophon deliberately draw our attention to the connection between classification and conversation held in the word dialogue as if it were obvious once mentioned? The answer lies in the centrality of dialogue in an oral philosophical community like the Socratic circle. When Guthrie discusses this passage in

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<sup>1</sup> Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV. v. 11-12.

his work on Socrates, he notes the importance of classification to definition.<sup>2</sup>

Classification was an important part of the Platonic strategy for defining terms. I will therefore use this anomaly to look at oral dialogue, the second sense of dialogue that this work looks at to define dialogue. This anomaly is a hint that we should try to make sense of the connection. To do so we will have to recover the character of philosophical practice in an oral environment. Once we understand the place of conversation in oral philosophical practice we can understand why this connection would make sense. To do that we have to concentrate on oral dialogue exclusively, being careful not to map aspects of written dialogue onto oral practice, something most discussions of dialogue have failed to do.<sup>3</sup> Rather than tackle the question of oral dialogue in all its manifestations I am going to concentrate on one oral philosophical community, the Socratic circle. The conclusions I draw from oral dialogue will then be carried forward and compared to the written dialogue to see if we can define the two as one thing.

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<sup>2</sup> Guthrie, *Socrates*, p. 120. Guthrie attributes this connection to an assumption that there are forms under which things can be classified.

<sup>3</sup> The discussion of dialogue in general, and our understanding of Socratic dialogue in particular, is haunted by a failure to look at the nature of oral dialogue, and to distinguish between oral dialogue in a literate culture against dialogue in an oral community. While a number of writers have admitted the importance of oral practice to the character of written dialogues, few have looked exclusively at oral practice before asking about its relationship to written practice. Even fewer have taken into account the character of primarily oral philosophical cultures. There is a wealth of literature about written dialogues and their interpretation; everyone these days admits that one cannot read Plato's dialogues without taking their form into consideration, but few go the next step and ask about the relationship between the written form and the oral practices that influenced them. Fewer still have considered what it meant to do philosophy in an oral culture. This is understandable given the absence of evidence about such cultures other than what is written. With little independent evidence of oral practice how do we dare go beyond the written?

The major problem we face when understanding an oral philosophical community, especially one that no longer exists, is the problem of evidence. How do we know about such communities? In the case of the Socratic circle we have written evidence. This evidence is, of course, problematic. Written evidence of an oral community would almost seem a contradiction. If there is contemporary written evidence the community can hardly have been entirely oral. Only with living oral communities can anthropologists collect the sort of evidence that would be entirely satisfactory. This inescapable problem of written evidence and oral communities is tied to the nature of the subject of study – orality. Until the invention of information technologies like the tape recorder we had no other way of gathering (and publishing) evidence of oral cultures. As a result the only oral cultures for which we have evidence (a demand that only makes sense to literate cultures) are those that are still living, or those which existed at the threshold of literacy like the Socratic circle. Our knowledge of oral cultures that are not still alive is perforce limited to those that could be written about.

There is a second problem with evidence that is specific to this project. The bulk of our evidence is written dialogues and plays, namely those of Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon. It would seem circular to look at an oral community through written dialogues in order to understand how oral dialogue is different from written dialogue. To escape this circularity I could have focused on oral philosophical cultures like those still alive in India, or communities for which there is evidence other than dialogues, like the circle of *philosophes* in 18th-century Paris. There is, however, a virtue to concentrating on the Socratic circle. We have to deal with the way that Socratic oral practice, as represented in Plato's and Xenophon's dialogues, has influenced oral practice in philosophy ever since, something that other oral communities have not done to the same degree. Whatever the real Socratics did, the perception that they dialogued in the fashion recorded has had an impact on the discipline: witness the Renaissance attempts to recreate the Academy and

the practice of "symposiums" today. Whatever approach we take, we have to deal with the effect that written dialogues about the Socratic circle have had as records of oral practice. For this reason, I will reconstruct the practice of oral dialogue in the Socratic circle that a reader would notice who took these dialogues as reasonable windows on oral practice.

Recognizing the circularity, however virtuous, of this approach, I will digress to discuss orality in general, drawing heavily on Walter Ong's book *Orality and Literacy*. This digression is designed to reorient the subsequent discussion to those facets of the written dialogues that truly represent oral practice. I will borrow from Ong a scheme for understanding oral communities and apply it to the interpretation of written records. This will help us avoid the problem of reading written dialogue for evidence of the difference between oral and written dialogue. The scheme borrowed from Ong helps us escape the interpretative circle.

## Oral Philosophical Culture

We take literacy for granted when trying to understand orality.<sup>4</sup> To understand an oral philosophical culture we cannot simply take our literate philosophical culture, subtract books, and call oral what is left; we need to ask how philosophy was done without books to read, or paper to write out one's meditations. We need to ask what philosophy was like before it became conscious of its textual tradition. This involves a

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<sup>4</sup> "We — readers of books such as this — are so literate that it is very difficult for us to conceive of an oral universe of communication or thought except as a variant of a literate universe." Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 2.

paradigm shift. Given the possibility that our way of thinking is based on literacy, it may be a shift of which we are not entirely capable.<sup>5</sup>

There are two issues that will drive this characterization of orality. The first is the self-perpetuation of oral communities (how an oral culture perpetuates itself without permanent records). For Walter J. Ong, much of the intellectual effort of an oral culture is shaped by the need to maintain its knowledge. Not only is the practice of oral philosophy different, but the content of oral work is adapted to the exigencies of oral perpetuation. Asking how an oral culture can perpetuate itself without writing is one way to see the implications of the absence of literacy. The second issue is that of presence; how does the physical (and temporal) presence of the other that is characteristic of orality, affect the thought and words of oral communities? To understand orality, we need to ask about the spatial and temporal relationships between people. Who is present and how are they present? How does talking to someone, face to face and at the same time, affect the character of the exchange?<sup>6</sup> These two issues can help us understand our own culture in a way that allows us to shift to understanding a profoundly different one.

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<sup>5</sup> One of the extraordinary things about the discussion around orality today is the variety of different disciplines that are interested in it. Anthropologists, Communication Scientists, Information Scientists, Historians, Classicists, Linguists, and Computer Scientists are all interested in different aspects of orality and their discussions are driven by different concerns. I believe a common element to the interest is a perception that we are going through a shift in information technology comparable to the shift from orality to literacy. We are returning to a form of technologically mediated orality where the written text no longer dominates discourse. Orality itself (and to an extent Dialogue) is one of the ways academia is coming to terms with the changes around it. Orality, if you will, is an issue driving the discussion of the relationship between changing media and messages.

<sup>6</sup> Readers should not confuse my discussion of presence with that of Derrida, who has made it the crux of his problems with the metaphysical tradition and Heidegger.

## Research and Teaching

Knowledge is perpetuated today by means of published research and teaching. A distinction between research and teaching, which is fundamental to the way we organize our philosophical institutions, would have been alien to oral communities like the Socratic circle because the distinction is based on the availability of the technology of writing. Our community has expanded beyond the point where we can meet (be present to each other) in oral dialogue as the Socratics did; thus we depend on writing to communicate new ideas through time and space. It is not surprising that research is measured by publication; original thought that is not published has hardly any chance of surviving. Oral means of communication, on the other hand, are reserved for teaching where the demand for accuracy and communication with distant colleagues is not present.<sup>7</sup> This distinction between teaching and research, an organizational artifact that deserves more attention than I can give it here, would not make sense to an oral community — without writing, neither does research, measured in publication, make sense to an oral community. Without writing the distinction ceases to be useful for classifying philosophical activity. To do philosophy, for Socrates, meant to do it with others, in dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> One might argue that I am ignoring the conference where original positions are presented orally. If we look closely at this phenomenon we see that it has more to do with writing and publication than orality. Most conference presenters "read papers." They do so largely with a view to refining their ideas for publication.

<sup>8</sup> Only with Descartes' story about a solitary meditation do we get a compelling alternative model for what it is to do philosophy, one which is built on the retreat from others. The Cartesian story shows philosophy being done in a scientific fashion, where one retreats from others to do research. Today's academic philosophy is built largely on this Enlightenment model of doing philosophy by research. This applies not only to those philosophical traditions that are fascinated with the model of science, but, also to those, like

We can now begin to understand the relationship between classification and dialogue that Xenophon reports. Classification, which would tend to be called a research skill today, and conversational ability, which is of use primarily in teaching, appear unrelated when research is presented mostly in writing. More importantly, today we tend to devise and represent classifications graphically with charts and tables that can be duplicated and circulated, not in dialogue.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, in dialogues like the *Statesman* and the *Sophist* we see how the two are connected in an oral community. The Eleatic Stranger, in both dialogues, presents his classifications in conversation. Socrates asks the Stranger if he would prefer to give a long speech or "to use the method of asking questions, as Parmenides himself did on one occasion in developing some magnificent arguments in my presence..."<sup>10</sup> The Stranger remarks that it is easier to present through questions if the interlocutor is "tractable and gives no trouble..."<sup>11</sup> The Stranger is offered Theaetetus as a tractable young man with whom to spin out his definition/classification.

The *Sophist* and the *Statesman* today seem dry and artless compared to other Platonic dialogues. It is assumed that Plato forced classifications into the garment of dialogue

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Gadamer, who attempt to return to dialogue as a model for philosophy. Gadamer's vision of philosophical dialogue is built on the solitary writings of Plato, not on a recovery of oral practice.

<sup>9</sup> Ong, in *Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, argues that with the advent of printing it became possible to reproduce charts and tables accurately. This led to a change in teaching practice where graphic schemas were used to show students information rather than teaching by dialogue. Schematization became a method by which any subject could be appropriated quickly. Ong speculates that this technological/educational shift prepared the ground for the scientific advances of the 18th century. In effect, the Enlightenment was based on new visual methods for representing knowledge and a technology that allowed these views to be published. The light of the Enlightenment was seen in tables like those at the beginning of the *Encyclopedie* which show schematically the totality of human knowledge.

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, 217c.

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, 217d.

because he could not imagine writing in some other fashion. If he were writing today he might have presented the classification with a graphic or in point form. This ignores the possibility that he represented classifications this way because that was how they were done in the Socratic circle. Such classification makes for dull reading but did it make for uninteresting listening to those interested in complex ideas? Even if the listening were not entertaining, oral communities have no choice if they want to pursue such classifications. Did the Socratics have any other way of presenting such classifications?

### **Oral Events**

For oral cultures, words are events or actions. We tend to think of words as information that sits passively in libraries waiting to be "looked up." The activity around information today is its research, creation and interpretation. In an oral culture, information can't be looked up; it has to be **remembered** and **rearticulated**. Even the maintenance of information is an activity, that of retelling or rhapsodizing.<sup>12</sup> The distinction between original creation of information (research) and its maintenance (teaching) becomes blurred when both creation and maintenance are tellings.

Because oral stories have to be constantly retold to be maintained they are constantly being reworked in subtle ways. It is doubtful if there exists anything like static information in an oral culture.<sup>13</sup> (The word "information" is of limited use in describing the knowledge of an oral culture.) There is no canonically "correct" version of an oral tale in a book against which each telling can be compared. Each telling is both creation and maintenance, or research and teaching at the same time and in the same place. Philosophy

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<sup>12</sup> Ong points out that the word *rhapsodein* means 'to stitch songs together' in Greek. (p. 13) The rhapsode would weave a new song at each telling to suit the context.

<sup>13</sup> Havelock describes the knowledge carried in the Homeric epics as an encyclopedia.



in such a culture is not a body of ideas and arguments, assigned authors, subject headings, and dates for purposes of classification, but a gathering of characters and oral events, such as trials and memorable conversations.<sup>14</sup>

The trial of Socrates is not an anomaly from the perspective of oral culture; oral communities gather around such epic moments and their retelling. The trial made the conversations of Socrates memorable in two ways. First, the pathos of the event made not only the trial itself memorable, but also all the conversations around Socrates. Would Socrates have been remembered if he had not been put to death for his beliefs? Second, the judgment, attended as it was by a large number of adult male Athenians, and being controversial, provided grist for conversation for years. The community, as it continued to discuss the justice of the judgment, looked to those who could retell it to make the relevant events present. The demand for the relevant conversations may have led to their being written down.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to speculate on the relationship of an oral philosophical community with its past. I suspect there is less call for the maintenance and classification of all ideas, thinkers, and subjects. Instead every philosophical event is, at the same time supposed to come from a distant past (in the sense that it embodies age-old wisdom), and is a fresh weaving suited to the context.

<sup>15</sup> Xenophon's *Memorabilia* begins with an introduction where he wonders "by what arguments those who drew up the indictment against Socrates could persuade the Athenians that his life was forfeit to the state." I.I.1. Many of the conversations reported by Xenophon are explicitly designed to prove that he was innocent of the charge of impiety or corruption of the youth. The *Memorabilia* seems designed to set the record straight in a continuing discussion. One wonders what effect written reports like those of Xenophon and Plato had on the discussion.

## Orality and Thought

Another point Ong makes is that "in an oral culture, restriction of words to sound determines not only modes of expression but also thought processes."<sup>16</sup> Ong connects knowing with the ability to recall information. As he puts it, "you know what you can recall."<sup>17</sup> In literate societies we tend to recall information visually; we make use not only of written words (which are skimmed visually) but also of diagrams, pictures and so on.<sup>18</sup> We also tend to devote less time to remembering information and more to learning information-retrieval skills such as library skills. The idea is that you do not need to remember something so much as to remember where to locate it. In an oral society, everything is built around gesture and speech, both of which are time-dependent media, which vanish as they happen. The demands of continuous retelling constrain the character of what is known. Anything that can only be remembered and retold with written or graphic aides is lost.<sup>19</sup> Thus the character of what is known, and can be thought about, is constrained by memory. For Ong, even the activity of thinking itself, as we perform it today, cannot be sustained without memory aids.

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<sup>16</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Ong is interesting on this in *Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*. As the title suggests the introduction of graphic schemes that could be reliably reproduced led to the decay of dialogue in education.

<sup>19</sup> In the *Timaeus* (23a-c) Critias describes the short memory of cultures without writing. "Whereas just when you and other nations are beginning to be provided with letters and the other requisites of civilized life, after the usual interval, the stream from heaven, like pestilence, comes pouring down and leaves only those of you who are destitute of letters and education, and so you have to begin all over again like children, and know nothing of what happened in ancient times, either among us, or among yourselves."

How, in fact, could a lengthy, analytic solution ever be assembled in the first place? An interlocutor is virtually essential: it is hard to talk to yourself for hours on end. Sustained thought in an oral culture is tied to communication.<sup>20</sup>

The possibility that the character of thought in an oral culture is different from ours, and that the difference can be tied to dialogue, should remind us again of the problem of classification and dialogue. The Stranger in the *Sophist*, as mentioned above, feels more comfortable developing his "magnificent arguments" by posing questions to a tractable young man. The tractability is important — Theaetetus is chosen because he will help the Stranger deliver himself of his thoughts on the nature of the Sophist. Theaetetus' role is that of a convenient womb from which the Stranger can draw his child.<sup>21</sup> In the dialogue named after Theaetetus Socrates suggests that thinking is a dialogue the mind holds with itself.<sup>22</sup> It would make sense then that a dialogue with a tractable fellow would be a way to represent the original dialogue of the mind. (Where else can one find tractable characters?) It should also be noted that in both the dialogue within and that with the tractable fellow the intended audience of the thought is not the interlocutor but those who listen to the event.

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<sup>20</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> In the *Theaetetus* Socrates suggests that his role is that of the midwife who delivers people of their ideas and then judges the value of the ideas. (149-50) This is a slightly different midwife role than that of the Stranger who has a tractable interlocutor. The Socratic midwife is not just there to assist with the birth, but acts as a doctor and judge after the birth, examining the child and judging it. Theaetetus is a tractable womb, at the service of the father of all ideas, unlike the mothers that Socrates deals with, so there is less need for post-partum judgment. Socrates works with people who should not be pregnant; he takes control of the birthing, inducing babies where there may not have even been anything, and then critically offering them up for public examination. The Stranger places his seed in a carefully selected mind and draws out his children confident they will be healthy.

<sup>22</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 189e.

### Poetic Character of Oral Thought and Communication

The study of Greek orality grew out of attempts to understand the uniqueness of the Homeric epics.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the romantic idea about the "genius" of Homer, Parry and subsequent scholars suggested that "virtually every distinctive feature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition."<sup>24</sup> In order to think-know-recall, oral societies have to organize information into memorable patterns, formulae and activities. Their information is sung rhythmically using various poetic devices to reinforce memorability. Sustained oral works use rhythm, rhyme, and metre to make them easier to recall. Such poetic characteristics restrict the possibilities of what can be sung in a verse, thereby making it easier to remember the next word, line, or phrase. Even the physical performance of the work, involving as it does the entire body, is harnessed to the task of remembering. By acting out the work, the student, who is learning the performance, adds physical clues to what is sung that can later assist in the recall of the work. The performance of a sustained oral work can thus involve the complete person, to the point where the person becomes the character portrayed in order to remember better. One can imagine feeling that something was speaking through you in a successful performance.

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<sup>23</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, see the chapter entitled, "The modern discovery of primary oral cultures."

<sup>24</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 21. This extreme position has since been challenged by scholars. Hugh Lloyd-Jones provides a useful survey of the debate in "Becoming Homer," *The New York Review of Books*, March 5, 1992, p. 52-7. The debate, if one considers the exchanges that followed this survey (May 14, 1992, June 25, 1992) is a civilized example of the sort of written dialogue that can traverse journals and reviews. Considering the sophistication of the discussion among classicists around orality it is surprising that few classical philosophers have risen to the challenge of Havelock's *Preface to Plato*. Why are we not interested in the character of oral philosophy the way the classicists are in the issues of orality and the epic?

Another facet of oral memory is the way works are woven out of memorable sayings. Sustained oral works are modular, made out of standard themes, formulaic expressions, and epithets. The rhapsode does not memorize a work verbatim, but weaves each telling out of standard units to suit the occasion and the metre. Instead of remembering original material for each occasion, the rhapsode can reuse standard material, over and over.<sup>25</sup> This facet of oral performance is at odds with today's emphasis in philosophy on originality, avoidance of repetition, proper quotation, and clear references. In scholarly works at least we expect credit to be given where material is borrowed and encourage fresh expression over the formula.

The poetic character of oral work is to a degree functional; it assists the rhapsode in retelling the tale.<sup>26</sup> The poetic character is tied to the memorability of the work, and hence its age. The more "poetic" a work, the more memorable it is. The more memorable a work is, the better its chance of being remembered, and the longer it lasts. Thus we end up with a correlation between poetic character and age.

In a curious way this relationship between poetic character and persistence is also reversible. Oral work, or work designed to appear oral, is often given the character of

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<sup>25</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, "The oral poet had an abundant repertoire of epithets diversified enough to provide an epithet for any metrical exigency that might arise as he stitched his story together - differently at each telling, for, as will be seen, oral poets do not normally work from verbatim memorization of their verse." (p. 21)

What is interesting is that, "Moreover, the standardized formulas were grouped around equally standardized themes, such as the council, the gathering of the army, the challenge, ... " (p. 23) To what extent were Greek dialogues built around standard themes? Certainly over time certain themes emerge, like the Symposium, and the Dialogue of the Dead.

<sup>26</sup> This does not belittle the beauty and artistry of the Homeric epics. While there may be a functional aspect to their poetic structure there is still the room for genius in how that is played out.

"age-old wisdom." Such work presents itself as coming from a distant past, gods, or other cultures (of even older pedigree). Part of the poetic character of oral work (or work designed to sound like oral work) is this ageless, and authorless, quality. In certain cultures, not just oral ones, this quality gives the work authority, which in turn encourages the proliferation of works that appear to be ageless and authorless. Where original creations are not valued, and ageless wisdom is, the poets and philosophers are less concerned with scholarly questions of reference, often imitating the characteristics of oral epics.

In an oral community the issue of authorship does not appear as it does in ours. Where intellectual and poetic work are presented in oral events there is no doubt as to the identity of the author/performer. There is no need in an oral event, which by definition involves the authors of the event, to stamp the event with their signature. Performers might introduce themselves; they probably will say their performance is inspired by others (especially gods), but there is no call for keeping track of authors. Instead in an oral community a performer might attribute their words to other authorities to give it credibility.

Philosophical dialogue can inherit some of this dynamic. First, dialogue can have a modular character, inheriting common units like the banquet (symposium) or the battle (of minds). Another parallel to the modularity of the dialogue is the incorporation of stock ideas and definitions. Many of the Socratic dialogues play out the implications of stock formulaic definitions of the virtues like the definitions of piety produced in the *Euthyphro*.<sup>27</sup> One can even see in the characteristic "yes Socrates" an oral refrain or

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<sup>27</sup> Aristotle argues that this is the point of dialectics - to know what the common opinions are and to know how to use them to lead people to the truth. In so far as dialogues are representations of dialectical practice they are by definition built on common opinions or stock philosophical formulae. A variation on this

breather. Having a tractable interlocutor who could be counted on to answer appropriately might have given a rhythm to the performance of Socrates or the Stranger.<sup>28</sup>

Dialogues can also have an ageless and authorless character. Heidegger was hinting at this in his redefinition of dialogue. Heidegger asks us to see how a dialogue is defined by that which is sought and hence, in some sense, authored by the sought. The sought in turn should be the ageless truths that came from the gods, inspired the poets (the oral poets like Homer) and were passed down as "sayings." Writers such as Cicero and Hume distance themselves from their dialogues, trying to give them the character of authorless wisdom.

### **Additive rather than Subordinative<sup>29</sup>**

In oral works there is a tendency not to subordinate ideas but to concatenate them. Ong gives as an example the passage in Genesis I:1-5 which can be translated, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and

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principle is found in Cicero who argues that oratory has to be couched in everyday language. While philosophy understandably has to develop a jargon, oratory, whose purpose is moving people, has to work with the common language and that includes the philosophical expressions and clichés in circulation. Most dialogues, in fact, are refreshingly free of jargon.

<sup>28</sup> This comparison should not be pushed too far. The Socratic circle was, as far as we can tell, committed to truth and would not have subsumed the content to poetic constraints. The dialogue as an oral event and later written form is at the threshold of oral wisdom and literate philosophy; the poetic constraints are largely abandoned, in part because writing can handle the problem of perpetuation.

<sup>29</sup> Many of the subsequent headings are borrowed from Ong.

darkness was upon the face of the deep; ..." <sup>30</sup> Today we would avoid introductory "ands", but in an oral culture there isn't the time or opportunity to reflect on the precise relationship between the ideas and subordinate them.

This tendency to addition can be seen on a larger scale in the earlier "Socratic" dialogues of Plato. In the *Euthyphro* there are four definitions of piety given by Euthyphro. Each discussion around a definition is relatively independent; the dialogue is, in effect, made up of the addition of four smaller modules (along with an introduction and conclusion). The *Symposium* also has a modular character, though it might not be considered an "early" dialogue. This is in contrast to longer Platonic dialogues like the *Republic* where individual parts are subordinate to the larger task of proving the superiority of the just life. In the *Republic* there is a nesting of issues, where, in order to understand justice in the individual it shifts to a discussion of justice writ large in the state.<sup>31</sup> If you think about it, in everyday conversations such subordination is difficult to achieve; one is far more likely to try to discuss first one thing *and* then another. Even when one returns to issues, the return cannot be as controlled as the deliberate nesting an author is capable of. Unless one writes down what was said before, it is difficult to return neatly to the original theme. Likewise it is more likely that written dialogues that have an additive structure are reports of what happened than the ones with more complex

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<sup>30</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 37. Ong quotes the same passage from two translations of the Bible. In the Douay version of 1610 (quoted above) the additive character is preserved. In the *New American Bible* of 1970, the "ands" have been replaced by "when," "while" and "then."

<sup>31</sup> It is interesting that Socrates, when he proposes to examine justice in the state as an alternative procedure, gives as an analogy the example of trying to read small letters: "we should employ the method of search that we should use if we, with not very keen vision, were bidden to read small letters from a distance, and then someone had observed that these same letters exist elsewhere larger and on a larger surface." 368d.



structures. Not surprisingly the Platonic dialogues that have an additive structure tend to be the ones considered earlier, and probably more representative of actual Socratic practice.<sup>32</sup>

### **Redundant and 'Copious'**

When reading we can always turn back a page if we lose track of the argument — not so in an oral presentation. For this reason, in oral discourse, even today, we repeat

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<sup>32</sup> I suspect one could use the characteristics of oral dialogue to distinguish the "Socratic" and "Platonic" dialogues. Given that Socrates did not write his dialogues, and that we can clearly distinguish oral from written dialogue, it would follow that written dialogues that were inspired by oral practice (or report it) would be distinguishable from the ones that were invented in writing. This also assumes that Plato did not draw on other oral sources like conversations within the Academy for the later dialogues. Nevertheless such a method of categorization would have the virtue that the criteria used to distinguish the dialogues would be independent of the dialogues themselves and would not depend on a theory about what Socrates thought. Such a distinction between orally inspired (or reported) dialogues and written (invented) dialogues also gets at one interesting difference between Socrates and Plato. One of the few things we can be certain of is that Socrates was a conversationalist who entered into dialogue, while Plato wrote his dialogues.

If I am right, in the transition from the reported to the invented dialogues we can see the dialogue form being explored by Plato. Initially he sticks to what could have happened and draws from experience. By the end when we get to a work like the *Laws* he feels entirely free to invent characters and situations to suit didactic purposes different from those that drove Socratic practice. One might argue that the distinction between reported and invented dialogues might not map cleanly onto the distinction between earlier and later dialogues.

Vlastos in *Socrates; Ironist and Moral Philosopher* lists the earliest Platonic dialogues as: *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic* book I. (Vlastos p. 46.) His division is based on the content of the dialogues not the oral or written character.

ourselves to make sure that our listeners can follow.<sup>33</sup> This problem of following an argument is made worse if the argument is an accurate philosophical one. For this reason we find in oral dialogue, and to an extent in written dialogue, a tendency to repetition. The difference in presence of the author/sayer leads to a difference in content.

An example of redundancy in oral dialogue is the way Socrates always has to explain more than once the type of definition he wants at the outset. In the *Euthyphro* Socrates begins by asking:

State what you take piety and impiety to be with reference to murder and all other cases. Is not the holy always one and the same thing in every action, and, again, is not the unholy always opposite to the holy, and like itself? And as unholiness does it not always have its one essential form, which will be found in everything that is unholy?<sup>34</sup>

The question already includes unnecessary (from a written perspective) redundancy, and there is more repetition to come. Euthyphro, instead of stating what he thinks piety is, answers the final question affirmatively; so Socrates has to ask again, "Then tell me. How do you define the holy and the unholy?"<sup>35</sup> The first answer he gets is not really a definition, so he has to ask again (6c) and again (6d) and again (6e). It could be argued that Socrates has to put the question so many times because Euthyphro doesn't understand what is wanted, but that is exactly the point; the misunderstanding is oral and is therefore represented in dialogue. In oral dialogue there is redundancy that need not be represented in a written work unless the written work is designed to reflect oral practice. If Plato

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<sup>33</sup> In a similar fashion data communications systems use redundancy to insure reliable communication. As we design new communication systems for everyday environments we are beginning to appreciate the characteristics of existing ways of communicating, especially oral communication.

<sup>34</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, 5c-d.

<sup>35</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, 5d.

simply wanted to show the misunderstanding between Socrates and Euthyphro he could have summarized the discussion: "Euthyphro, at first did not understand the question ... eventually he defined piety in the following way ..." Instead Plato chooses to *show* the redundancy that is part of everyday orality, where we misunderstand each other repeatedly (or redundantly).

### **Conservative and Traditionalist**

Oral cultures have to invest so much effort in maintaining information that there is little incentive to experiment with novelty. Instead novelty is introduced in the reworking of the oral tradition that takes place in every telling. Oral cultures have to be conservative in the sense of conserving what has been learned. A culture that does not preserve its traditions has none and can lose its cultural identity. By contrast in a culture where there is writing, preservation and experimentation can coexist.

There is throughout the Socratic project a tension over the issue of preservation and experimentation. Since this is not the place to tackle such a large issue extensively, I will confine myself to a few comments: Socratic practice clearly de-emphasizes the preservation of poetic wisdom in favor of analytic wisdom. At the same time we see within the Socratic circle the tendency to want to preserve the words of the master Socrates in both oral and written form. Socratic practice was designed to emphasize the truth over preservation of truths, but that practice itself was preserved with a veneration that may have been out of character.

It is also worth noting that Socratic practice may have only been possible thanks to the introduction of writing. Socrates himself seemed unwilling to embrace writing, but the technology relieved Athenians of the need to preserve the oral tradition which in turn

gave them the time to experiment with analytic approaches.<sup>36</sup> Socrates in the *Phaedrus* is critical of the value of writing as a memory aide, but, if Ong is right, his praxis was made possible by writing. To add to the irony, our knowledge of his oral practice is also due to Platonic writing.

Finally, the Socratic project has a conservative dimension itself. Socrates was reacting against the excesses of the Sophists who in their experimentation lost sight of fundamental (aristocratic) virtues. Havelock places the Socratic and Platonic projects in a continuum with the "pre-Socratics"; what distinguishes them is their invention of a philosophical language and method for dealing with abstract ideas. I would add that what distinguishes Socrates is his return to the epic virtues. He innovates in order to recover the traditional aristocratic virtues. He is adapting the aristocratic virtues in order to preserve them in the face of the new sophistic technology which has been released by the introduction of writing.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> According to Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens*, the *Metroön* or city archives were established around 405 B.C. It should be mentioned that Thomas differs from the technological determinists, like Ong and Havelock, who believe technological changes, like the introduction of writing, lead to rationality, objective thought, logic, and individuality. I do not want to suggest that the introduction of writing was the only factor in the philosophical changes of the 5th century B.C.; nor do I believe that such technological changes inevitably lead to intellectual changes. I am only suggesting that the spread of writing made it possible to shift intellectual resources away from the preservation of the oral culture.

<sup>37</sup> In a similar fashion we may be experiencing a technological shift as dramatic as the introduction of writing. There is some of the same enthusiasm in information science and computing today that one senses among the sophists of Socrates' time. Computer vendors advertise their technology as "empowering" and "liberating." Philosophers need to challenge these claims and participate in the debate around the ethical implications of the new technologies.

### **Close to the Human Lifeworld**

Havelock and Ong argue that oral cultures do not think in abstractions. An oral community relates everything to everyday experience, or as Ong puts it, to the "human lifeworld." Where we would use abstractions (or possible worlds) oral cultures have myths and characters that can be applied by analogy to other situations. Their stories embed the wisdom in a memorable and human context.

This is one of the more obvious oral characteristics of dialogue. The connection between the theoretical and the human lifeworld is twofold in a dialogue. First, dialogue as conversation is itself a human, everyday event. In philosophical dialogues the content is packaged in a pedestrian context - that of a conversation that takes place in a space and time that is accessible and "human." Second, the characters and their lives are often connected to the philosophical issues discussed. In the better-written dialogues, we see the philosophical issues tied to the dramatic context of the speakers. To adapt the phrase "think globally, act locally," such dialogues show characters thinking philosophically and acting locally. For example, in the *Euthyphro* the discussion of piety is occasioned by, and thematically connected to, Euthyphro's prosecution of his father (and the prosecution of Socrates). Socrates and Euthyphro run into each other in the royal porch right before Euthyphro has to prosecute his father and Socrates is to be charged. The context (the meeting of two people who have business with the courts) at first glance is a chance event with little relation to the content of the dialogue. When we look closely, the reasons for both characters' being there are related to the philosophical theme. The theme of piety is tied to domestic issues (Euthyphro's relationship with his father), and the tribulations of trials in Athens. The prosecution of Euthyphro's father by his son is comparable to the prosecution of the wise father of Athens, Socrates, by the young child of Athens, Meletus. The prosecution of elders (or betters) is, of course, a perversion of one of the basic forms of piety: respect for one's elders and betters.

In Xenophon's dialogues we see another facet of the pedestrian concerns of Socrates, namely his concern for everyday morality. He rebukes friends for not helping each other, he rebukes gluttons for eating too much rich food. Socrates' thinking is linked to everyday morality and illustrated by it. No doubt Xenophon emphasized the pedestrian morality of Socrates to counteract the claim that he corrupted his companions; nevertheless, the method Xenophon illustrates of teaching morality through shaming rings true.

One would think that works limited to a "human" context would be philosophically impoverished, but the opposite seems to be true. The closeness to the human allows for a correspondence between context and content that makes such works more accessible. Few Platonic scholars would argue that the everyday settings and characters of Plato's dialogues detract from the dialogues' value. Quite the contrary; most interpreters today argue that the context of the dialogues is part of the fabric of meaning. It is, if you will, the warp of the rhapsody of meaning. As pointed out above, Euthyphro's prosecution of his father can be compared to the prosecution of Socrates by younger men like Meletus, and to the mock education of Socrates by Euthyphro. The prosecution/education of older "father" figures by a younger generation is a secondary theme of the dialogue that enriches it and is connected to the primary theme of piety. I have put the theme abstractly. In the dialogue the theme is largely carried by the context of the dialogue — a context that adds to the meaning, instead of limiting it.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> One might also argue that this connectedness of content and context is only a feature of composed works and not oral dialogue as it takes place. In other words, the closeness to the human is a character of the reported or written dialogue, not the live oral one. I suspect that a composed dialogue (be it composed for oral recital or written) can maximize the fit between context and content, but that it is a natural inclination in living dialogue to relate what is being said to one's context. It is a characteristic of oral exchanges that abstract issues are related to the moment and the people around. It is frequently the case that

The closeness to the human can be seen not only in the form of the dialogue, and as in the case of Xenophon, in the content of Socratic dialogues, but also by the nesting of dialogues within Socratic dialogues. While Socrates often insists on abstract definitions for the virtues that he is interested in, he also uses myths and stories. Stories are more accessible and more memorable than abstract definitions. They also personalize issues. A fascinating example, discussed in depth in a following chapter, is the story of the invention of writing told by Socrates to Phaedrus in the *Phaedrus*. Socrates makes his point about writing by recounting a story that is itself a mini-dialogue. While the characters in the mini-dialogue are gods, the atmosphere is still human and intimate. The gods sound like colleagues discussing administrative issues. The content is carried by a conversation that one can imagine having (if one were a god in the position to introduce technology to humanity). Such story telling is a characteristic of oral cultures, where even technological issues are couched in human terms. Ong points out that oral cultures can reapply such stories to other situations without having to resort to abstractions.

The interesting question in this regard is about the nature of the lifeworld in which dialogues take place. Can we generalize about the context of dialogue beyond pointing out its everyday humanity? Since dialogue depends on the presence (or a mode of presence) of the interlocutors, does that have implications for the context of the dialogue? Does it have implications for the content? I will later, in chapters five and six, try to answer these questions by looking at the time and space (chronotope) deployed in the dialogue. The chronotope will help to differentiate types of dialogue and help show the constraints placed on content.

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the issues that are raised are those relevant to the living concerns of the interlocutors. The author of a composed dialogue has time to make the connection more artistic though he is less likely to have the reflex to connect the two, given that the context of writing is not that of the dialogue.

### **Agonistically Toned**

To maintain interest and make oral stories memorable they are frequently presented as contests. As Ong puts it, oral work often has an agonistic tone. It is easier to remember something if it involved a struggle or battle between opposing forces. This is less true of abstract works, though writing manuals still suggest that presenting ideas agonistically improves readability. The agonistic tone of oral work carries through to dialogue. A dialogue, because it involves more than one character, offers an opportunity for competition in a way that a monologue does not. The co-presence of the interlocutors (their being in a space and time that allows them to face each other and talk) affords the opportunity for wrestling. Dialogues that do not present differences in competition, like the one on truth by Anselm that reads like a catechism, tend to be the least interesting. By contrast the typical Socratic dialogue often pits Socrates against a pompous antagonist in competition for the minds of those around. Occasionally the contest/battle is even mentioned explicitly, as in the *Phaedo*. Socrates comments to Phaedo that like the Argives he should make a vow not to let his hair grow until he has "defeated the argument of Simmias and Cebes in a return battle." (89c) It is also interesting, in this regard, to consider the similarities between oral dialogue and the contests in the courts before a jury. Oral philosophical contest is even today considered a preparation for law school and the courts.

In the dialogues of Xenophon we can see that there were real stakes in the intellectual contests of the sophists and philosophers. Xenophon prefaces a dialogue with, "Antiphon came to Socrates with the intention of drawing his companions away from him, ..." <sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I. VI. 1. One wonders if Socrates also drew students away by challenging their teachers? Could that be one of the dramas in the *Protagoras*?



Socrates and the sophists were battling over aristocratic students who could both pay for instruction, and bring prestige to the winner. Socrates got the handsomest prize of them all, Alcibiades... at least for a while. If today we measure philosophical might in terms of publications, in those days it was in terms of friends, students, and companions.

These battles also had a legitimate philosophical dimension; the major characters, including Socrates, represented important and different philosophical positions. Their contest of words was a peaceful method of resolving these issues. It is tempting to say that the philosophical reputation of Socrates (as compared to that of the sophists) is due to his conversational skills (or the artistry of his student Plato) not the depth of his thought. I suspect that such cynicism misses the philosophical dimension of his conversational skills. Socrates is reported to have won his arguments because he was committed to the truth, not financial success. The contest was not just a game for a living; Socrates was willing to die for what he believed. In the *Theaetetus* (165d-e), Socrates compares the sophist to a mercenary who captivates his audience with a show of arms/words and then holds them for ransom. The captives in the war of words are not the combatants; they are the bystanders, the children. Socrates may have seen himself as a citizen-soldier (guardian) whose job was to defend Athenian youths from the sophist-mercenaries, with his life.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The agonistic character of dialogue may be one reason why women are so rarely found in dialogues or author them. The aggressive combativeness that characterizes Socrates and his line has been questioned (with good reason) by feminist philosophers. As a character in C. D. Reeve's dialogue *The Naked Old Women in the Palestra* puts it, "I worry still, though, that philosophy is so agonal and competitive, so much like fighting, so – if you'll forgive me – *male*." (p. 35)

### **Empathetic and Participatory rather than Objectively Distanced**

The retelling of oral knowledge is not necessarily a simple matter of reciting things in a dry and matter-of-fact fashion. We should think of the retelling as closer to a dramatic monologue where the rhapsode imitates that of which he speaks. It is more accurate to describe the performance of a rhapsode as an act, complete with movement and gesture, than as a strictly auditory event. He is not merely reporting what was said but bringing the other before us - making the character portrayed present. This has interesting repercussions. Havelock and Ong argue that in oral cultures the performers of oral works empathize with their characters and beliefs when performing. Performers of an oral work would, in acting out the work, imagine themselves to be the characters being imitated so as to better remember their words (act). In modern terms, they enter the role so as to act it out better and the line between their personality and that of the character blurs. Empathy with the target character is the ultimate memory aide. Everything, including their personality, is sacrificed to the perpetuation of the oral work.

This is what Havelock believes Plato was objecting to in the *Republic* when he objected to the poets. The poetic educational tradition taught the epics through such acted empathy with the subject. One learned to become the characters of the oral tradition in order to preserve the oral tradition.<sup>41</sup> Plato, according to Havelock, objected to such education by empathy because of the effect that imitating disreputable characters would have. The alternative was education by dialogue where classification, not imitation was emphasized.

Whether or not one agrees with Havelock, it is nonetheless important to understand how in oral performance the performer is not clearly detached from the character

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<sup>41</sup> Havelock, *Preface to Plato*.

portrayed. This problem in various forms haunts dialogue in general.<sup>42</sup> In everyday conversation, especially gossip, as Bakhtin points out, we are always taking on characters as we speak. When we tell stories and report conversations (a large part of oral speech) we subtly wear the characters we present. When we are ironic we speak in the voice of another in a fashion that mocks that other, but nevertheless involves portraying the other. If we take Socrates' image of thought as a conversation, our speech, when it reflects such thought, resembles a conversation orchestrated from various characters within. One of the things that sets Socrates apart is his ability to orchestrate conversations among those around him (and from within). He may object to being possessed by distasteful people but he certainly had a host of interesting people within, at his disposal.

This returns us once more to dialogue and classification. The classification of which Socrates speaks, and of which we have an example in the *Sophist* is but one of two skills that Socrates identifies with the dialectician in the *Phaedrus* (265d-266b). Classification is the ability to "divide into forms, following the objective articulation" (265d). Combined with the second skill (that of bringing things together under a form) the dialectician can define things, as the Stranger does. In an oral culture the process of definition is best carried out in dialogue. We should not be surprised at how many Socratic dialogues are driven by the attempt to define something as this reflects oral practice. That is not to say that definition is a characteristic of oral communities. Definition through dialectical dialogue is the Socratic alternative to the oral educational system that promotes empathy with the traditional heroes/heroines (and even anti-

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<sup>42</sup> It is never clear in a written dialogue who, if anyone speaks for the author. At times we can only say that the author empathizes with all the characters, finding something of each within himself/herself. Another way of putting it is that each character carries something of the author. The same might be true of the reader.

heroes). Socrates is at the threshold of a change in philosophical education. Unlike his oracular predecessors he encourages his students to dialogue and classification. It allows them to sort out what is right and wrong without getting possessed by ignoble characters.

Believe me, Phaedrus, I am myself a lover of these divisions and collections, that I may gain the power to speak and to think, and whenever I deem another man able to discern an objective unity and plurality, I follow 'in his footsteps where he leadeth as a god' (Odyssey 5.193). Furthermore – whether I am right or wrong in doing so, God alone knows – it is those that have this ability whom for the present I call dialecticians. (266b)

### Summary of Orality

To conclude this reorientation to orality we should, when trying to understand oral philosophical dialogue, remind ourselves that oral dialogue is an activity; that the character of the thought of oral communities can differ from ours; that there is a poetic dimension to dialogue; that oral dialogue is additive rather than subordinative; that it is redundant; that it is conservative; that it is close to the human lifeworld; agonistic; and empathetic. The following table will serve as a chart through Socratic oral dialogue:

Oral	Written
Event	Information
Dialogical Thought	Contemplation and Meditation
Poetic	Expository
Ageless	Dated
Authorless	Created
Additive	Subordinative
Redundant	Explicit
Conservative	Original
Situational	Abstracted
Agonistic	Balanced
Empathetic	Objective

## Oral Socratic Dialogue

Having reoriented ourselves to the nature of oral thought and oral communities, it is time to look at oral dialogue in the Socratic circle. The general question before us is: What is the nature of philosophical oral dialogue? The specific question is: What was the nature of Socratic oral dialogue? Before answering these questions, there are two problems we have to address. First, was the Socratic circle an *oral* community such that we can learn about oral dialogue from it? Second, was the Socratic circle a community at all?

The secondary literature is weak on the subject of the Socratic circle. Writers like George Grote, author of *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, are interested primarily in the philosophy of Socrates or that of individual followers of Socrates, especially Plato. The same is true of Rankin in *Sophists, Socratic and Cynics*. Neither treats the circle as something more than the sum of the companions. The same can also be said for Guthrie (*Socrates*) who has an interesting section on the effect of Socrates on others, but does not consider this effect within the social context of a community. Kerferd, in *The Sophistic Movement*, has a chapter on "The sophists as a social phenomenon" that discusses the importance of patronage to the sophistical circles. He does not, unfortunately, ask about the social dimension of the Socratic circle and how it might have been different from the sophistical circles. Micheline Sauvage, in *Socrate et la conscience de l'homme*, reproduces some interesting Greek images of dialogue, but does not discuss them. In the imaginative reconstruction of the life of a fictional Socratic follower, *The Last of the Wine*, Mary Renault provides a picture of what it would have been like to be associated with Socrates; but she is more interested in the love of her character for Lysis, and the history of Athens through the eyes of a citizen, than in the daily life of the circle around Socrates.

This absence of discussion is more than offset by an excellent contribution by Livio Rossetti. In an essay entitled "Il momento conviviale dell'eteria socratica e il suo significato pedagogico," Rossetti discusses the evidence for a loose philosophical club around Socrates that gathered regularly, sharing food and ideas.<sup>43</sup> He is particularly interesting on the pedagogical dimension of this club; much of my discussion here is based on his.

### **The Orality of the Socratic Circle**

Most of the points above about the nature of orality draw from Ong's discussion of entirely oral communities, which the Socratic circle was not. The Socratic circle was not a "primary oral community," in Ong's sense of a community untouched by literacy. The Socratic circle formed in a time of transition; many members of the circle could read and write, but they did not conduct their business that way. The Socratic circle was a philosophical community at the threshold between oral wisdom and literate philosophy. They were freed to do philosophy by the increase in literacy, which reduced the need for the educational system to focus exclusively on maintaining the received wisdom and culture. Nevertheless, they philosophized orally, passing stories down ... until they were

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<sup>43</sup> This essay appeared in *Ancient Society*, 7, 1976, p. 29-77. Rossetti also notes the absence of research on the social role of Socrates. (p. 31) I suspect one reason for the absence of discussion of the Socratic circle is because most of the evidence is to be found in Xenophon and Aristophanes neither of whom are as interesting philosophically as Plato. Because Plato is far more interesting for us to read we tend to take him as the better historian of Socrates. Plato brings us into the circle of Socratics, while Xenophon describes a cranky Socrates who was concerned with the personal problems of people long dead. As for the picture of Socrates proposed by Aristophanes, it has been soundly discredited by essays like Dover's *Socrates in the Clouds*.

written.<sup>44</sup> In so far as there was a large oral component to the business of the Socratic circle while Socrates was alive, I think it is fair to look at it for an understanding of oral dialogue in general.

### **The Character of the Circle**

As for the existence of something that can be called the Socratic circle, we are better off asking what is the nature of the collection of friends that Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes describe.<sup>45</sup> Obviously this circle did not have a formal, institutional existence unless we take seriously Aristophanes' depiction in the *Clouds* of the Socratic "think-tank"; instead what emerges from both Xenophon and Plato is that there was a group of men who had the leisure to spend lots of their time with Socrates and consequently were associated with him. Rossetti finds in Xenophon evidence that they regularly ate together as a club, sharing their food at Socrates' house. Such clubs were common in Athens at the time, though they tended to be political organizations rather than philosophical. There does not seem to have been any formal mechanism for joining the circle or leaving it; Socrates was readily available to those who enjoyed his

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<sup>44</sup> Livio Rossetti, in *Aspetti della letteratura socratica antica*, goes into depth about the exceptional literary production of dialogues by the Socratics after his death. He points out that for half a century the Socratics published around three dialogues a year of which at least one dealt with Socrates. This production of dialogues came after the death of Socrates; his death was the turning point between oral and written dialogue. Havelock in "The Orality of Socrates and the Literacy of Plato" makes a similar point regarding the shift from an oral community to a literate one.

<sup>45</sup> All three write as if there were people who spent much of their time with Socrates and were therefore associated with him. I call this collection of stalwarts the Socratic circle. See for example: Plato, *Apology*, 33b-34b; Plato, *Phaedo*, 58c-59b; Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I. I. 4; and Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 94.

company.<sup>46</sup> Membership in the circle of acquaintances, like membership in any set of friends, depended on presence and participation. Alcibiades, for example, presents himself in the *Symposium* as a lapsed associate. What does emerge, however, is that the experience of joining the circle was similar for many of Socrates' followers. A number of commentators have noted the traumatic experience of being turned inside out by Socrates before becoming one of the companions. I will deal with this initiation later.

A revealing passage is the opening of Plato's *Symposium*, where Apollodorus, the character who narrates the bulk of the dialogue, describes how he recently had a chance to refresh his memory about the original event, "this party at Agathon's." (172a) Apollodorus was not at the original party, but learned about it from Aristodemus, and confirmed details with Socrates. Apollodorus' memory was refreshed by telling the story to Glaucon and he reports a brief exchange with Glaucon that framed that particular retelling. To Glaucon he reports having said:

And don't you know it's only two or three years since I started spending so much of my time with Socrates, and making it my business to follow everything he says and does from day to day? Because, you know, before that I used to go dashing about all over the place, firmly convinced that I was leading a full and interesting life, when I was really as wretched as could be — much the same as you, for instance, for I know philosophy's the last thing *you'd* spend your time on. (172c-173a)

If we ignore for a moment the intricacies of the way the *Symposium* reaches us, we can use this passage, and the opening to the dialogue in general, to help us understand the character of the Socratic circle:

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<sup>46</sup> A couple of Plato's dialogues take place when Socrates returns after a prolonged absence and is greeted enthusiastically by his friends.



1. The passage quoted provides us with a description of an admirer of Socrates in his own words. The admirer describes himself as one who is trying to spend all his leisure time with Socrates. The Socratic circle was made up of such men who chose to spend their time discussing philosophy. This description should be compared to that at the end of the *Symposium* by Alcibiades who was a lapsed member of the circle. The opening of the *Symposium* (not just the part quoted) nicely sets out the differences between those within the circle and those outside. Apollodorus loves to talk philosophy, and finds financial discussion "tiresome." Apollodorus is thought of as a "poor unfortunate" but he *knows* that the others are really unfortunate. Apollodorus is crazy, in a philosophically correct fashion no doubt, while others are crazy from the point of view of the philosopher. Apollodorus is in love, again in a philosophically correct fashion, while others are victims of their desires, which they call love. (Apollodorus is also a parody of Socrates, barefoot and enthusiastic, but not necessarily as wise.)

2. To return to the intricate frame of the *Symposium*: the elaborate care with which Plato shows us how the story came to be told alerts us to the importance of the retelling of such stories. In the opening we see how members of the circle would pass down and memorize conversations of the master. Apollodorus is not simply telling of something he heard; he went to the trouble to learn the story and check details with Socrates, who, one might add, did not discourage such oral hagiography. The ability to retell such stories was probably one of the signs of serious interest and participation in the circle. People outside the circle turned to those identified with Socrates to hear such stories; they were expected to know such stories. These stories were the currency of the Socratic circle and the Socratic myth. It is not surprising that Plato, Xenophon, and others would start writing them down while they could still be checked, and when the character of Socrates was still at issue. The writing down was a reasonable extension of the oral practice of handing

down such stories.<sup>47</sup> The writing down may have also been the death of the circle, as it would have devalued the memories of those like Apollodorus. The writing down established a new type of authority, that of the author Plato, around whom a new Academic circle formed.

The question of the nature of the Socratic circle resolves itself into questions around the nature of Socratic orality. The Socratic circle, if it existed, was an oral circle, bound by dialogue not membership rules. To fully understand the nature (and hence existence) of the circle we have to understand Socratic orality. We need to understand how and what was discussed to understand how those discussing were bound and circumscribed. We need to understand the political organization of their dialogue which involves understanding how the activity of dialogue can set those in discussion off, circumscribe them, such that they become identified as a circle. In other words the full answer to the question of the existence of the Socratic circle lies in the character of Socratic dialogue.

### **Joining the Circle**

To understand the character of the circle and its dialogue one has to find a beginning from which to start. That start is the beginning of the trajectory of involvement in the Socratic circle that an Athenian youth might have traversed. We can start by asking How would someone have heard about the Socratic circle? and What would they have heard?

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<sup>47</sup> See Havelock, "The Orality of Socrates and the Literacy of Plato: with some Reflections on the Historical Origins of Moral Philosophy in Europe" and Rossetti, *Aspetti della letteratura socratica antica*. Rossetti describes how the Socratic circle used written dialogue to defend themselves and Socrates after his trial. The trial of Socrates, which could have eliminated the Socratics as a philosophical movement, caused the young men whom he was supposed to have corrupted to band together to present a positive picture. Defending Socrates was, for those that he was supposed to have corrupted, a defense of their character. Rehabilitating Socrates was a way of washing away the stain of corruption associated with the circle.

The interesting thing about this question is the number of dialogues we have which depict first encounters with Socrates and his circle of friends. A number of Plato's and Xenophon's dialogues (not to mention the *Clouds* of Aristophanes) paint a picture of what it was like first to meet Socrates and then to become a member of the Socratic circle. I suspect the repeated treatment of the first encounter reflects the interest outside the circle in the potential for encounter. It could also be that these works were designed to act as an advertisement for Socratic philosophy – drawing readers to their first encounter. Who since then has not wondered how they would respond to such a commanding presence as Socrates. Within the Socratic dialogues there are many different reactions, and who does not wonder whether they would be like Theaetetus or Polus?

### **Hearing about Socrates**

As Socrates points out in the *Apology* most Athenians would probably have heard stories about him before they ever met him. What most would have heard was a mixture of opinions, short reported dialogues (stories), and plays with Socrates as a character. Opinions about Socrates abound in the dialogues, and I suspect everyone in Athens who cared had one, though one wonders if they were as positive as that of Laches. (181a-b) Plays like Aristophanes' *Clouds* would have been the most public source of hearsay, but stories, embedded with scraps of conversation, would have been a staple of what was heard about Socrates.<sup>48</sup> This is an important point, since today most of our first encounters with philosophers are by means of written works or, for a few, lectures. Stories about philosophers are not as important to the reputation and encounter as they

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<sup>48</sup> I distinguish a story from an opinion in the following fashion. An opinion simply states what the opinionated believes about the other - it tells us something. A story shows us the someone in a light that encourages us to draw an opinion. Often what is said is a combination of both, for example, Alcibiades' description of Socrates at the end of the *Symposium*.

were in the time of Socrates. The philosophically inclined youth would not have read about Socrates; he would have heard reports of Socrates' unique abilities.

Xenophon's memories are an example of what was probably in circulation, though many such stories were probably not as sympathetic. It is interesting to note the structure of most of Xenophon's dialogues. Unlike Plato's dialogues, Xenophon's are framed by comments by the author. Most of the dialogues are reported to make a point, that Socrates did not corrupt the youth, or that he was respectful of the gods. These stories of Xenophon's are designed to address the reader unsure what to make of the memory of Socrates or the justice of his execution. Likewise, while Socrates was alive, we can imagine stories circulating about this amazing character told and retold with embedded dialogues. No doubt the circulating stories provided fodder for the dramatists and dialogue writers later on.

A common feature to such stories would have been the way Socrates was portrayed as an unrelenting questioner. Most stories that report the words of another take the form of "and he said ...." followed by a statement. Socrates would have stood out as one who asked questions, not one who lectured. Storytellers would have been forced to embed dialogue in order to capture the character of the questioner. Tales of Socrates take the form of "and he asked ...." The stories would have stood out as reported dialogues compared to most stories that report actions or opinions. Some might even have heard of his extraordinary claim that he was charged to question people by Apollo.<sup>49</sup>

I commented above on the importance of these reported dialogues to those within the Socratic circle; here my point is that there were many such stories in circulation, both

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<sup>49</sup> Socrates was not the only one who asked questions. According to Grote on the authority of Aristotle, it is Zeno who invented dialectic examination. See *Plato, and the Companions of Sokrates*, volume I, p. 96.

favorable and not. These stories would have fascinated young argumentative men eager to succeed and excel. The possibility that Socrates was the wisest man in Athens, the possibility that he could make the worst argument appear the best,<sup>50</sup> the way he humiliated the great men of the day not to mention the other sophists, and his peculiarities of character would have all contributed to his fascination in certain circles. Especially fascinating would have been his claim to be ignorant about everything except love. For the young men who were just discovering themselves this *silenus* would have been fascinating if not attractive in a perverse way. Who would not want to meet this daimon? Some may have joined the circle for the wrong reasons.

### **Overhearing Socrates**

The next step in the trajectory of encounter would have been to eavesdrop or overhear a Socratic exchange. It is unlikely that many youths would have been questioned by Socrates without having had a chance to listen to Socrates perform with others. Plato especially goes to great lengths to show us how many would listen in to the conversations of the master, but the best example of the importance of overhearing Socrates comes from Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, IV. II. In that dialogue, which Xenophon says is to "show his [Socrates'] method of dealing with those who thought they had received the best education,"<sup>51</sup> Socrates deliberately creates situations where Euthydemus, the proud boy in question, can overhear exchanges designed to bring him into the circle, even if by a humiliating route. The steps of the seduction are:

1. Within earshot of Euthydemus one of Socrates' companions asks, "Was it by constant intercourse with some wise man or by natural ability that Themistocles stood out

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<sup>50</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 18b.

<sup>51</sup> Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV. II. 1.

among his fellow-citizens ... ?" (IV. II. 2) This gives Socrates a chance to answer in a way that pointedly criticizes Euthydemus' reliance on books for wisdom, thereby creating a situation where, if Euthydemus does not enter the dialogue to defend his book learning, he has to swallow his pride. It is, in essence, an ironic situation. There is a surface discussion between Socrates and a companion; on another level there is second communication between Socrates and Euthydemus.

2. As Euthydemus is not tempted to enter the conversation when obliquely mocked, Socrates creates a second overhearing where Euthydemus is explicitly mentioned. Socrates makes fun of how Euthydemus has no teachers (only books) by imagining an exordium he might give, "Men of Athens, I have never yet learnt anything from anyone..." (IV. II. 4) Xenophon tells us that the mock exordium "set all the company laughing." (IV. II. 5) We can imagine how humiliated Euthydemus felt.
3. Socrates continued this treatment of ironic and explicit criticism until he found Euthydemus "more tolerant of his conversation and more attentive." (IV. II. 8) Then he went alone to the spot where Euthydemus used to hang out (a saddler's shop - which suggests the Socratic interest in the crafts may have had something to do with those who frequented the shops). There Socrates engaged Euthydemus directly, humbling him, as he did others, proud of their wisdom. By the end Euthydemus admits he knows little, "I am inclined to think I had better hold my tongue, or I shall know nothing at all presently." (IV. II. 39)
4. The last step in the process is best described by Xenophon:

Now many of those who were brought to this pass by Socrates, never went near him again and were regarded by him as mere blockheads. But Euthydemus guessed that he would never be of much account unless he spent as much time as possible with Socrates. Henceforward, unless obliged to absent himself, he never left him, and even began to adopt some of his practices. Socrates, for his part, seeing how it was with him, avoided

worrying him, and began to expound very plainly and clearly the knowledge that he thought most needful and the practices that he held to be most excellent. (IV. II. 40)

A number of points can be made about this remarkable dialogue:

1. To execute this tactic, Socrates involved others. It is interesting how the opening move is not made by Socrates, but by a companion, who presumably knew what to do. Whether the companions were prompted by Socrates or grew to know what was expected of them we do not know, though in Plato's *Lysis* we have a case where Socrates and his companions agree on their agenda before engaging the intended target.
2. The complicity of others would have changed the odds in any discussion with Socrates. Socrates is traditionally seen as the *ieron*, the dissembling underdog who at first seems to be defending a hopeless position, and then against all odds, comes out on top in the debate. In this dialogue of Xenophon's it would appear that many of Socrates' encounters were not so innocent. Socrates had a sympathetic audience primed to feed him the right questions and to tease the interlocutor who refused to play the game. Socrates often chose the grounds for a conversation and arranged the contest to suit his purposes. Rather than a David who routinely faced the sophistic Goliaths, Socrates could be a spider who laid traps for young men. Entering into discussion with Socrates would certainly have been an intimidating and hostile situation to enter for a youth — a situation hardly conducive to fair dialogue, something we are not likely to notice when reading a dialogue because the complicity of the Socratic circle is de-emphasized. (As readers we do not see the rest of the circle — old friends of Socrates gathering around).

3. If Socrates routinely mocked people within their hearing, it is not surprising that he was martyred. An essential part of the initiation into the Socratic circle was a purifying humiliation in which everything you believe is exploded. This feature of the initiation has been noted by others; Laszlo Versényi, in *Socratic Humanism*, compares the method to Dionysian ecstasy.<sup>52</sup> Rossetti goes further; he feels the evidence suggests that there was almost a formula to the initiation of youths.<sup>53</sup> If this tactic for improving the minds of others was commonly used, there must have been a number of Athenians who did not return to Socrates chastened and ready to learn, but waited, humiliated, for their revenge. Today, someone who taught this way (and we should remember that for Xenophon there is no question that Socrates taught) would be called a bully. This the dark side of Socratic teaching.
4. For those who returned, the return must have been difficult and comparable to a conversion experience. To overcome the humiliation, and to prostrate oneself intellectually before Socrates so as to be remade out of ignorance, would have involved a complete reversal, from detesting Socrates to depending on him for a new philosophical existence. Let us not forget how Euthydemus and others, once they adopted Socrates, did so with a vengeance. Euthydemus, like Apollodorus in the *Symposium*, returned to spend "as much time as possible with Socrates." This would explain the devotion of many of the Socratic circle to Socrates. He had broken them down until they had admitted ignorance in public, and then offered to rebuild them in his image. The rebuilding was paid for in time, complicity in the humiliation of

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<sup>52</sup> "Thus Socrates' erotic *peragogé*, this turning of man inside out, or rather turning him away from the unessential pursuits toward himself, has as we have seen a great deal in common with Dionysian ecstasy." (Versényi, *Socratic Humanism*, p. 146.)

<sup>53</sup> Rossetti, "Il momento conviviale dell'eteria socratica e il suo significato pedagogico," p. 60.



others, and love. The story of how Socrates rebuilt his companions has not been told, but it would sound more like an cult initiation than today's academic apprenticeship.

5. Above all, this story shows the importance to the Socratic project of overhearing. The first two steps, ironic and explicit criticism, are aimed not at the interlocutor, but at a designated eavesdropper - a member of the audience.

One might object that I am making too much of a single dialogue by Xenophon. However, that Socrates deliberately created situations where people would overhear his conversations is confirmed by both Plato and Aristophanes. In Aristophanes' *Clouds* we have the short dialogue between the better and worse *logoi*. The dialogue of the *logoi* is trotted out by Socrates in order to teach Pheidippides.<sup>54</sup>

In Plato we see listening-in being arranged in a less devious fashion in dialogues like the *Protagoras*. There Socrates enters into debate with Protagoras, not for his own betterment, but to discover what Hippocrates might learn if he studied with Protagoras. On one level the potential student Hippocrates is the intended audience. On another there is also the assembled intellectual community for whom the contest between Socrates and Protagoras would have been of major interest.

In the *Lysis* we see Socrates conversing with Lysis so as to show how one should treat one's beloved. In the *Symposium* we hear from Socrates a dialogue between himself and the priestess Diotima. Socrates by reporting allows us to eavesdrop on his (mythical) past. You can see how this thread will be developed in the next couple of chapters. The reader of dialogue is just such an invited eavesdropper. In the *Apology* we see listening-in being used in the court when Socrates interrogates Meletus before the jury. This could be

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<sup>54</sup> Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 889-1104.

a model of the role of the reader. We are the jury ... we are set up to overhear in order to judge, but the judgment concerns our souls not that of Socrates.<sup>55</sup>

If we survey the Socratic corpus, dialogues where overhearing is part of the dynamic appear to outnumber the dialogues like the *Phaedrus* where there is no audience. We cannot escape the conclusion that Socratic oral practice was designed as much for the eavesdroppers as it was for the interlocutors. This is what oral dialogue might have in common with written dialogue, its design as an event that can be overheard. In the next two chapters we will look at the written dialogue to see if the relationship between author and reader is comparable to that between the Socrates and his audience.

### **Socrates' Accomplices**

One of things that we should notice about the way dialogues were set up to be overheard, is that this required the complicity of the Socratic interlocutor. We tend to think of Socrates as the sole genius behind the Socratic effect, which fails to recognize the role of the faithful companions who knew how to respond to the questions so as to achieve the ironic goal. The importance of the other performers is made explicit in the *Statesman* where the Athenian Stranger asks for an interlocutor who will answer appropriately. By contrast Socrates often has to fight with interlocutors who are not cooperative: witness how he negotiates with Protagoras over the expected responses. I am not suggesting that the friendly interlocutor was an equal in the creation of the performance, but that he had a role, and this is a feature of the orality of the event. Socratic dialogues depended to a certain extent on the skill of both the Socratic figure *and* the friendly other. The case of the Athenian Stranger suggests that some wise men

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<sup>55</sup> See Rossetti, "Il momento conviviale dell'eteria socratica e il suo significato pedagogico," for more examples.

could not deliver their teaching without a well trained amanuensis, much as some today cannot write without a word-processor.

Another way of looking at this is to recognize the importance of the political structure of the dialogical space. The Socratic dialogue could not take place just anywhere with any group of people as long as Socrates was there. Socratic dialogue in so far as it was an oral product was authored by a community (if authorship is relevant to the work of an oral community). If we take seriously the authorlessness of oral work we have to consider the political character of the Socratic circle (not Socrates) as the principle (not author) of Socratic dialogue. This is not to say that Socrates wasn't a unique, necessary, and central member of the community, but we should not be blinded by our fascination with individual authors to the community spirit behind Socratic dialogue. Although we will return later in this book to considering generally the politics, time, and space in which dialogue in general takes place (this is, for Bakhtin, the appropriate feature with which to distinguish dialogues), for the moment here are some observations about the political space and time of the Socratic dialogue.

### **Public Space**

Oral dialogue needs two or more people to take place at all. This puts a constraint on the opportunities for dialogue. If one wants to engage in dialogue one has to make oneself available. One has to enter some sort of meeting space where others who wish to dialogue also converge. Public places like the market and the gymnasium are logical spots to loiter if one wants to engage others in conversation. Socrates, we are told, spent his whole day in the marketplace and other public spots. He was available for dialogue in a public space

in a way few others were prepared to be. This alone would account for the quantity of dialogues reported about him.<sup>56</sup>

While public space was available to most men it was difficult for women. Cultural restrictions on access to the public spaces where dialogue takes place might account for the scarcity of women characters in dialogue. It is only with the courtly dialogue by authors like Castiglione that one has conversations taking place in spaces where women were at home.

### **Symposium Space**

Not all Socratic dialogue took place in the public marketplace. A less accessible space also frequented by the Socratics was the private home of a patron of discourse. The evening dinner dialogue, because it is usually among a circle of friends, is less competitive and more prone to entertaining exchanges. The space is intimate and jocular, though we should not compare the space of a symposium with the typical dinner party today. It is not surprising that love is a theme of dialogue in such a space.

### **Leisure Time**

Along with considerations of space we need to also be alert to the time available. As I mentioned above, Socrates made himself available all day. His companions like Apollodorus also made it their business to spend their day with him. It is interesting how few dialogues are interrupted by events or appointments that have to be kept. One gets the sense that the Socratics have unlimited time at their disposal. They can talk all day and then party until the morning if that is called for.

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<sup>56</sup> The American School of Classical Studies at Athens has produced a charming pamphlet called *Socrates in the Agora* which discusses, with illustrations, the Athenian Agora that was Socrates' stamping ground.

Needless to say, only people with substantial amounts of free time could participate in such constant daily dialogue. (This also gives us a sense of how much talking went on.)

This may have further restricted participation to those who could afford the time (or those prepared to give up the material benefits of being employed). The leisurely time available for dialogue is difficult to find today, especially in academia.

### **The Varieties of Dialogue**

To conclude this chapter we return to the original question about the nature of oral dialogue, specifically that of the Socratic circle. We have traced a trajectory from hearing stories about Socrates to becoming an accomplice. We have discussed some of the issues around the time and space of Socratic dialogue. It now remains for us to lay out the variety of Socratic oral dialogue. This will serve as a classification of oral dialogue in general.

This also brings us back to the problem of dialogue and classification. Oral dialogue in the time of Socrates was not what it is today, something we rarely have time for because of the evidence that has to be read and the research that has to be done. Oral dialogue was the medium of the Socratic discipline much as the essay and book are the medium of philosophy today. Classifying the types of dialogue that we find in the Socratic corpus is a way of surveying the variety of philosophical experience available in an oral philosophical culture. (It is also interesting to compare this list to the list in the Introduction of contexts in which dialogue has arisen in our culture.)

1. Reported dialogues. Stories with embedded dialogue were the way youths would first encounter Socratic philosophy. These stories (and their exchange) were the fabric of the Socratic circle after the death of Socrates. They were also a component in Socrates' oral practice: witness his story of his exchange with Diotima. (*Symposium*, 201d-212b)

2. Competitive dialogues. The more aggressive teachers would attract students (steal them) from other teachers by engaging others in dialogue. Xenophon reports dialogues where sophists try to attract Socrates' followers from him (*Memorabilia*, I. VI. 1). We could read the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias* as examples of this sort.
3. Political dialogues. Dialogue was a political tool for Socrates. He used it in two ways:
  - 3.1) He would engage prominent figures in dialogue. Whatever noble motives this served, it definitely helped cement Socrates' reputation and entertained his followers. This type of dialogue is similar to the competitive dialogues though the stakes are different. When engaging politicians Socrates was not interested in stealing away students, so much as acting as a political critic, contributing in his stinging way to the well-being of the *polis*.
  - 3.2) Socrates describes spending time questioning the craftspeople (*Apology*, 22c-d). Systematically engaging the craftspeople would have had some interesting implications. For example he would have been in a position to recommend teachers (for the crafts) as he is reported to have done in the *Laches* (180c-d). Dialogue with the crafts people would have been a good way to understand where they saw the crafts fitting into the state and a good way to make connections with the various experts of which Socrates so often talks. One might call this a form of networking in preparation for a political career. Socrates may have engaged the craftspeople before his circle as an alternative to the sophistic political preparation.
4. Conversion dialogues. Related to the competitive dialogue is the type where Socrates and an interlocutor set out to be overheard in order to convert an eavesdropper. A subset of these would be the more intimate dialogues immediately around the moment of conversion.
5. Morality dialogues. In Xenophon we see how Socrates would use dialogue to shame his followers into ethical behavior (*Memorabilia*, I. II. 8). This sort of shaming

through questions is a surprisingly resilient type of dialogue. How many of us have heard such tactics used to teach today? (How often do such tactics work? More often than not, the embarrassment of the other results not in moral improvement, but in self-satisfaction on the part of the would-be Socrates.)

6. Dialectical dialogues. The *Sophist* and the *Statesman* show us how dialogue was used for research. Dialogue with a tractable interlocutor was the preferred way of presenting definitions and perhaps also for developing such definitions. Such dialogue was also a way of developing the skill of asking questions that elicit definitions. Presumably one would start by learning to be a tractable answerer and then move on to learning to ask questions. This type of dialectical dialogue should not be confused with Aristotle's version which is aimed at convincing people away from what they believe, though it would be interesting to consider the similarities.

To conclude this section on oral dialogue, we have seen how important overhearing is to oral dialogue. Socratic dialogue, unlike casual conversation, was not aimed at the interlocutor, but at the eavesdropping audience for whom the dialogue was arranged. It was often a purifying event comparable to an initiation where the target is humiliated and then built back up into a member of the Socratic circle. We also began to look at the setting of dialogue: the types of space and time of dialogue. Having sketched the nature of oral philosophical dialogue we now turn to the written dialogue to see if it works the same way. The next couple of chapters will look at the written dialogue to see if there is a target comparable to the eavesdropper, and if there is a mode of persuasion comparable to the purification of oral dialogue.