
Chapter 1

Socrates and Teaching

Any investigation into Socrates as an educator would seem obliged at the outset to decide whether, or in what sense, Plato's Socrates may properly be called a teacher. It cannot simply be assumed that every reader of the dialogues will construe Socrates' words and deeds, or Plato's ultimate judgment on his educational methods, in the same way. For on the one hand, the philosopher is famous for announcing that he has "never been anyone's teacher" (*Ap.* 33a5) and on the other hand, he will stand in for the paid pedagogues of Lysis and Menexenus, as we shall see in the next chapter. Now surely Socrates is not supposed to be taken as a pedagogue in the ordinary Greek sense of the term, where it signifies a sort of superintendent or master of a youth whose job it is to see to it that the youth does what he is supposed to do. Socrates is no mere chaperon or guardian, and he is not placed in a supervisory role with his associates. Plato's Socrates is no more a pedagogue in this sense than he is a slave to anyone, as might perhaps be inferred from the fact that the pedagogues in ancient Athens often were slaves. Here, as elsewhere, Plato utilizes the contrast between Socrates' behaviors and practices and those conventional in his day as a way of underlining important differences of both approach and purpose, means and ends.

No, Socrates is obviously not a pedagogue in the ordinary Greek sense, but neither is he a "teacher" in the manner of the Sophists. Against the Sophists' claims to teach, Socrates will be ever anxious to contrast his own

mode of philosophical inquiry.¹ He is no more a “teacher” in a sophistical sense than he is “pious” in a conventional sense, or a “lover” in the pedestrian sense, or possessed of wisdom as the many think of it. To contrast his own duty to the god with conventional piety, his own “small wisdom” with genuine knowledge, his approach as a lover with the feigning, pseudo lovers, and Socratic *paideusis* with professional teaching, for example, Plato often has Socrates refuse conventional labels for his philosophical practices. At other times, he has him expand a conventional term to serve a philosophical purpose, as he does with the concept of Eros in the *Symposium*. Moreover, the dialogues seem to show example after example in which the philosopher differentiates his methods and objectives from those of other practices prevalent in his day. In this way, Socrates’ behaviors often exhibit an alternative conception of whatever topic is under consideration in the dialogue’s argumentation. This strategy allows Plato’s audiences to *see* important differences in a term or in ways of acting, and to judge matters for themselves.²

In the *Lysis*, the philosopher sets out to show Hippothales how a genuine lover should act, in preference to the feigning and ridiculous way Hippothales acts as a lover. The *Laches* contrasts the demonstrations of courage by experts with a Socratic examination of courage. In the *Apology*, Socrates speaks differently and separately to his “true jurors” than he does to the pseudo-jurors who turn out to be in the majority. And the Delphic oracle story contrasts—for the most part implicitly—several kinds of conventional knowledge with a more Socratic understanding of what would be required for genuine knowledge and, more broadly, contrasts the wisdom the gods have with a human kind of wisdom. At *Gorgias* 521d, Socrates tells Callicles that he is the only one of his contemporaries who practices the *true* political art. In *Republic* VI, Socrates contrasts the out-of-place educator with a more appropriate educator such as himself. The *Phaedrus* contrasts bad rhetoricians with “the true rhetorician,” and the *Sophist* contrasts sophistry, as it was ordinarily practiced, with a “sophist of noble descent.” And Socrates uses his chance to speak in *Symposium* to recall how Diotima characterized the *true* lover in terms of characteristics associated with Socrates, thus contrasting a philosophical kind of Eros with conceptions of it advanced by previous speakers in the dialogue. Indeed, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the “*true* lover,” “*true* statesman,” the “*true* rhetorician” and the “sophist of noble descent” from the philosopher, at least if what is meant by this is a philosopher such as Socrates. In fact, in each contrast, I suspect that the positive alternative can be shown to harmonize with Socrates’ way of philosophizing as Plato depicts it in the dialogues. These contrasts, taken together, might even furnish a kind of composite sketch of Plato’s exemplary philosopher. But demonstrating this would require a separate study. What I will try to exhibit in the contrast that follows are the many ways that

Socrates differs as a teacher from the professional teachers of his day, and how his *paideusis* will differ from other models of education.

To begin with, the difficulty in characterizing Socrates' role as an educator derives chiefly from apparent inconsistencies in what he says from one place to another, sometimes even within a single dialogue. Consider, for example, what he says in his defense speech. In the very same speech in which he proclaims, most emphatically at 33a, that he is not a teacher, we shall see that Socrates tells his jurors that some of his associates imitate him, applying what they have learned. Furthermore, what they have learned by observing his approach to others and from talking to and imitating him seems to be something concrete and demonstrable. Plato's rendition of the philosopher's legal defense clearly goes on to identify the actions of these imitators as a chief cause of the criminal indictment against him (17c; 23d–e). So he may not *intend* to teach people things, but some people nevertheless seem to have learned things from him. These ambiguities enshrouding Socrates' role as a teacher pose unavoidable questions for our investigation. This chapter attempts to establish a working conception of Socratic education, and its exploration of the meaning of the term *teacher* as a label for one of Socrates' key roles in the dialogues shall begin in what seems like the most obvious place—with the philosopher's own defense of his life's work in *Apology*.

After Section 1.a examines the reasons Socrates denies being a teacher at *Apology* 33a, Section 1.b offers a brief sketch of how Socrates' jurors would have understood the activity of teaching. Section 1.c uses the preliminary exchange between Socrates and Thrasymachus at *Republic* 337c–d to show that there is an analogous ambiguity enshrouding Socrates' role as a student in the dialogues. These first three sections raise the question about what Socrates thinks teaching entails, thus Section 1.d draws upon James King's helpful contrast between two models of teaching, teaching as the Sophists claimed to do it, and teaching, as Socrates says in the *Gorgias* that it should be conceived, to determine the meaning of teaching that might be most fittingly associated with the philosopher's practice. Section 1.e elaborates on the account of Socratic education and offers a fuller characterization of the teacher-student relationship as Socrates is shown engaging in it in the dialogues.

SECTION 1.A WHY SOCRATES DENIES BEING A TEACHER

Plato's *Apology of Socrates* dramatizes the seventy-year-old philosopher's arguments against charges of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. In

his defense, Socrates also reviews the daily philosophical activities in which he attests to having been engaged for his entire adult life, providing his jury of at least 500 dicasts, and a (presumably) large audience of observers, with an account of his distinctive philosophical practice in the city. He attempts to prove that he has never acted unjustly to anyone. In this context, the accused philosopher utters these oft-cited lines:

I have never been anyone's teacher (*didaskalos*). If anyone, young or old, desires to listen to me when I am talking and dealing with my own concerns, I have never begrudged this to anyone, but I do not converse when I receive a fee and not when I do not. I am equally willing to question the rich and the poor if anyone is willing to answer my questions and listen to what I say. And I cannot justly be held responsible for the good or bad conduct of these people, as I never promised to teach them anything and have not done so. If anyone says that he has learned anything from me, or that he heard anything privately (*idia*) that the others did not hear, be assured that he is not telling the truth. (*Ap.* 33a5–b8, Grube trans.)

What precisely is Socrates denying in the first sentence cited above? He is denying being a *didaskalos*, that is, one who is a master or instructor of others. Socrates has no *didaskaleion*, or school, and he claims no expertise or mastery of any particular art or science, as would have been conventionally thought to be a prerequisite for one to instruct (*didasko*) others. A *didaskalos* should be able to instruct others on the various subjects he has mastered; hence Socrates is denying having ever purported to be anyone's master or instructor. In whatever sense Socrates may be characterized as a teacher, then, he is not a teacher of any specific subject on which he regards himself as an expert. He has no art or science that he considers himself able to teach to others. He is not associated with any school (*didaskaleion*), and he has no formal pupils because he charges no fee for conversing with people. What is more, his methods are not didactic, a word that derives from the Greek word *didasko*. He does not teach by means of an exposition that aims to persuade or demonstrate, in the manner of a Protagoras, for example. Perhaps Socrates would accept that he is an educator if one means something quite different than would have been connoted by the term *didaskalos*.

Some interpreters claim that the above passage must be taken "literally," and they cite Socrates' denial here as a reason for enjoining others against referring to what Socrates does as teaching in any sense. Those who interpret the passage in this way claim to be taking Socrates' statements at face value. Yet, precisely what "face value" does this passage have? For the "literal"

approach, Socrates' unequivocal denial is the end of the story, rather than grounds for comparison and contrast.³ But far from being a merely literal rendering of the statement, this allegedly *prima facie* way of interpreting the passage requires, in fact, that one ignore its broader context within the dialogue and within history. If we make the effort to situate these apparently categorical denials within their larger dramatic, historical, and discursive contexts, we shall see that Socrates' statement here is far from obvious or unambiguous. The broader context supplies a wealth of information that must be taken into account if an interpretation is to fully explicate, and fairly evaluate, the accused philosopher's denial. Socrates' disclaimer must be heard in light of the wider political and legal objectives he might be supposed to have had for saying what he says and for saying it in the way that he does. And situating his disclaimer within the dialogue as a whole will reveal that Socrates qualifies and clarifies, elsewhere in his speech, what he says in the above-cited passage. So although Socrates' denial at 33a5 sounds unequivocal, the assertion never to have been anyone's teacher will turn out to be a much more restrictive claim than it first appears to be.

Let us first adumbrate the immediate context. The philosopher's denial to be anyone's teacher must, of course, be construed as part of a legal, if plainly spoken, defense for a capital crime. His defense (*apologia*) is delivered before the largest crowd to whom Socrates ever speaks in Plato's dialogues, and because this public setting is so extraordinary—and the occasion so monumental—it is of utmost importance to clarify what would seem likely to have been his leading objectives in addressing his jury. Ascertaining his larger purpose here will illuminate much about why Socrates stresses here the particular issues he does.

In the first place, Socrates' denial ever to have served as anyone's teacher establishes the cornerstone for his legal defense against the charge that he corrupted the youth of Athens. This defense is based upon the principle that before a person can be held responsible for corrupting another, a causative relationship between the teachings or practices of the alleged corrupter and the faults of the ones allegedly corrupted must be demonstrated. In this case, a link would need to be shown between the actions or words of Socrates and the future actions of people with whom he had associated. Since Socrates had no custodial relationship over his companions, such as parents have over their children or masters over their slaves, he must next attempt to convince his jury that he also had no contract or agreement of service with the people with whom he conversed. In cases where associations are bound by a contractual agreement or an implicit warranty of service between the parties, it would seem fairly easy to establish the necessary causal link between them, and thereby to hold one party accountable for the faults of the other. However, a

lack of evidence for such a contractual agreement between the parties—in the form of any contract or implied warranty of service (which might be thought to result from the payment of a fee)—would seem to make it far more difficult to prove this legal charge against Socrates.⁴

During his trial, Socrates would surely have been well aware that the transgressions of some of his former associates would be weighing heavily upon the minds of his jurors as he speaks to them. Indeed, the philosopher has fraternized with some characters from whom he might like to unhinge himself as far as possible in the present context. It is reasonable to assume that his attempt to distance himself from these people would need to go beyond simply making a case against the concrete charges pending against him. But just who are “these people” referred to in the passage cited above, the putative students Socrates asserts he has not promised to teach and to whom he has not taught anything? Just prior to the passage quoted, Socrates had related to his jury the story of defying the illegitimate order of the Thirty Tyrants in the matter of Leon of Salamis. He goes on to ask the infamous question concerning whether his jurors think he would have survived as long as he has had he led a more overtly political life in the defense of justice. And then he asserts:

Throughout my life, in any public activity I may have engaged in, I am the same man as I am in private life. I have never come to an agreement with anyone to act unjustly; neither with anyone else, nor with any one of those who they slanderously say are my pupils (*mathētas*). (*Ap.* 33a1–5, Grube trans.)

There are at least three different kinds of former associates who might have been perceived as pupils of Socrates and whose association with the philosopher may have been used to slander him publicly. These are the kinds of former associates from whom Socrates would have wanted to distance himself in the present circumstances, and he may have had one or more of them in mind when denying above that he was the *didaskalos* of any person:

- a. *The Rogues*. These are characters of disastrous historical consequence.
- b. *The Imitators*. These are his regular companions in the streets of Athens who mimic his method of cross-examination and perform refutations on prominent citizens.
- c. *The Disciples*. These are the most extremely devoted of his associates who act like those characters in the dialogues who are portrayed as fawning over Socrates, adopting his style of dress, and making it their business to know everything Socrates says and does.

Let us look briefly at each of these three groups in turn.

a. *The Rogues*. Perhaps the philosopher's most brilliant protege, Alcibiades, betrayed Athens about sixteen years prior to Socrates' trial, in the middle of the Peloponnesian War. His defection to Sparta most likely shifted the balance of power against Athens, contributing significantly to its ultimate defeat at the hands of the Spartans. Along with Alcibiades, Phaedrus, who is featured in the *Protagoras*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*, also was implicated in the mutilation of the Herms and banished from Athens sometime around 415. Some eleven years later, in 404, two other people with ties to Socrates—Charmides and Critias—were involved in the uprising against the city by the so-called Thirty Tyrants before, in 403, the oligarchs were overthrown and the democracy was reinstated.⁵ It would not have been possible for Plato's earliest audiences to forget these facts, given that this insurrection occurred just a few years prior to Socrates' trial. Socrates must expose and rebut the attempt to hold him guilty by association for the crimes of these former associates. By writing his *Apology of Socrates*, Plato's version of the defense speech is presumably offering Socrates' first and only public account of his actions with respect to these momentous political events. Hence, in declaring, "I have never been anyone's *didaskalos*," Plato is, in the first place, making Socrates respond to quite concrete circumstances and very recent political events. What the philosopher is denying is playing the role of mentor or advisor to anyone, since if he never advised anyone at all, he could not have been a mentor or an advisor to the thirty oligarchs.

This public perception of Socrates as providing political counsel to oligarchs might explain why only in the *Apology* does Plato have Socrates speak about his interlocutors and about his philosophical practice in such inclusive terms, asserting three times (29d, 30a, 33a–b) that he will talk to anyone and everyone. This leads Vlastos to conclude that Socrates is a "street philosopher" who will talk to "all and sundry."⁶ In fact, the kinds of characters with whom Plato has him converse are not just anybody and everybody. In the dialogues taken as a whole, Socrates seems to be far more selective than he claims to be when apologetically stressing his civic concern and the egalitarian nature of his practice. Alexander Nehamas has shown that what he is claiming in his defense is made even more narrow, and far from indiscriminate, when he explains his divinely appointed mission to examine only those who believe they are wise.⁷ This selectivity is probably necessary. After all, Plato's dialogues provide only about two dozen examples of a Socratic conversation, while Socrates had a career that spanned nearly forty years during which, according to his testimony in *Apology*, he spent every day in conversation. Now if the philosopher had talked to just one person a day, he could have conversed with nearly 15,000 people by the time of his trial. Whether Plato's two dozen cases of such

philosophical dialogue attempt to present a cross-section of the kinds of people with whom the historical Socrates conversed, or whether Plato blends features culled from the tens of thousands of conversations Socrates might have had into two dozen or so composite philosophical dialogues with characters he finds most interesting for some reason, we can only conjecture. Yet judging from the *kinds* of characters with whom Socrates is depicted in conversation, it seems clear that, on the one hand, Plato does not take the philosopher to be indiscriminate about the people he approaches, as Vlastos claims, and yet, on the other hand, Socrates *does* talk to people who are not presumed to be wise. The cases of Lysis and Alcibiades will illustrate that his objectives are not as narrow as Nehamas would have us believe.⁸ Socrates seems to be motivated by broader concerns than simply searching for a kindred spirit, another good person like himself, even though this purpose might well explain the thrust of a dialogue such as the *Theaetetus*. When he is not portraying him going toe to toe with some kind of expert, Plato chooses to depict Socrates in conversation with some of the very best and brightest youths in Athens (including his own brothers).

His disclaimer above, of having been anyone's *didaskalos*, is uttered in response to a specific charge, but it is a charge fueled by a much larger set of historical and political developments. This helps clarify why Socrates insists that these people have not learned anything from him and why his chief objective in the *Apology* seems to be to try to disabuse his jury of the confused idea that he is either a *didaskalos*, a Sophist, a nature philosopher, or a peculiar amalgam of all three. His seemingly broad assertion never to have been anyone's *didaskalos* will be qualified further in the next part of his argument by what Socrates says to adumbrate his point.

Socrates continues by denying that he plays the role of *didaskalos* or that he has ever been employed as a professional *didaskalos*. In this context, the philosopher is reserving the term *teacher* for the established professionals. If he were a "teacher," then he would receive payment for this service; and since he does not collect fees or payments from anyone, as his poverty attests, he cannot be a *didaskalos*. Since he is not a *didaskalos*, he cannot justly be bound by any implied warranty of service. As a layperson, he did not have the kind of professional relationship with his associates that would justify the expectation that he was going to deliver something to them. Therefore, as he himself concludes, he "cannot justly be held responsible for the good or bad conduct" of people who talk with him or hear him talking to others about his own affairs.⁹ If he were paid for his services, the fee payment of itself might provide evidence for holding that some kind of contract or implied warranty had indeed existed between Socrates and those rogue associates who brought deep suspicion upon the philosopher's practice in the city. In such a case, he might rightly

be held liable for their later actions. In sum, Socrates' denial that he is anyone's *didaskalos* is here made for a quite straightforward and immediate purpose: to vitiate the conditions that would evidence a contract of service, and thereby the implied warranty, which must be presumed, and should be established, if he is to be convicted of corrupting the youth. The philosopher must flatly deny being a *didaskalos* in order to challenge any possible legal basis on which he could be held responsible for the crimes of some of his former associates.¹⁰ Precisely what *kind* of teacher he denies being, and the differences between Socrates' educational approach and the practices of the Sophists, will be examined later.¹¹

Notwithstanding the legal reasons underpinning the philosopher's reliance on a conventional definition of "teacher" for his disclaimer here, however, Plato's audience might imagine many people learning a variety of things from partaking in or listening to Socratic conversations. In particular, some aspects of his method of cross-examination—what has come down to us as "the Socratic method" (see Introduction, note 10)—appear to have been amenable to imitation and appropriation by his young followers. These imitators furnish another reason for Socrates to rely on a conventional definition of teaching at this point in his defense.

b. *The Imitators*. Socrates says at 23c that others were mimicking his techniques of cross-examination with some success:¹²

Those young men who follow me around of their own accord (*automatoî*) . . . take pleasure in hearing people questioned; they themselves often imitate (*mimountai*) me and try to question others. I think they find an abundance of men who believe they have some knowledge but know little or nothing. The result is that those whom they question are angry, not with themselves but with me. (Ap. 23c2–8, Grube trans.)

Whether or not Socrates *intended* to teach them anything, this group of followers seems to have learned something from its frequent association with the philosopher, and it seems to have become quite skilled at the refutational part of Socrates' approach to others by imitating his manner of cross-examination. It is precisely this skill at cross-examination and refutation that has landed Socrates in his current difficulty.¹³ The philosopher immediately goes on, following the passage cited above, to identify the delight that his associates take in debunking those citizens who arrogantly imagine themselves to be wise as the moving cause of the hostility against him, the main motivation for the prosecution of the case (23d–e). Thus, these imitators of Socratic refutation

constitute an important second group of followers whose actions seem to have reflected badly on his practice of philosophy in Athens.

But whereas Socrates clearly attempts to distance himself from the future actions of his rogue associates, his relationship to the young followers who have appropriated some of his methods is more ambivalent. On the one hand, Socrates might say, "Cross-examination and refutation are practiced by many people, so they could have learned such techniques from any one of them just as readily as from me." On the other hand, however, he wants to argue that he provides a moderating influence, for these youths are like young cubs at play. It is not that their actions are wrong or inherently destructive; it is that at present their *paideusis* is incomplete, and without the guidance the philosopher alone can furnish, it may never find its proper completion. Socrates is suggesting that he is the only one who can provide the necessary limit and direction to the actions and aspirations of these youths. Without him, they are likely to become only more wild and unruly, or lapse into misology and misanthropy, skepticism and cynicism. So he seems to be both distancing himself from these followers—by exposing their lack of refinement and maturity—and linking himself with them, by arguing that he is the only one who can show them how to put their distrust of authority to good philosophical use. At 39c–d, he sternly warns the jury that certain aggressive young associates will take revenge on those who have convicted him, in the absence of the restraining influence he now provides. Socrates is warning his jurors that they cannot inoculate conventional wisdom against criticism; intellectuals and youths will always question traditional authorities and challenge common sense. For his part, Socrates has lived his life on the threshold between living an overtly political life and living an entirely private one. He is neither a *politikos* nor an *idiotēs*. His life is a public service, though he avoids customary political channels. But his young followers have not yet attained the delicate balance that kept the mature Socrates out of trouble up to this point, hence they may do foolish and harmful things. To deny being a *didaskalos* in the way that he does is also to deny being responsible for the actions of these passionate practitioners of cross-examination and refutation. After all, these associates are the ones whose actions Socrates had already pinpointed (at 17c and 23d–e) as prompting the legal indictment against him. There is yet a third kind of associate whose identity should help Plato's audience understand better both Socrates' denial of being a *didaskalos* and the motivation for the corruption charge against him.

c. *The Disciples*. The disciple types comprise a third group of followers—some of whom also may belong to the second group—from which Socrates may be seeking to distance himself in denying that he is a *didaskalos* who ever

taught anyone anything. Aristodemus and Apollodorus, in the *Symposium*, furnish Plato's audience with luminous examples of such self-appointed understudies. They imitate the philosopher's appearance and his mannerisms, and they seem most passionate about the protreptic dimension of Socrates' practice of philosophy. Their performance as narrators of the dialogue is at once incomplete and indispensable. They would appear to have been the most visible and most laughable of Socrates' followers. It is exactly his affiliation with characters such as these that Callicles excoriates in his condemnation of the philosophical life at *Gorgias* 485d–e, saying, “[He lives] the rest of his life sunk in a corner and whispering with three or four boys, and incapable of any utterance that is free and lofty and brilliant” (Woodhead trans.). Callicles, of course, charges that philosophy emasculates these boys who are lured by Socrates away from civic life and into a life of idle talk. The public behaviors of these “disciple” types must also have reflected badly on Socrates' practice of philosophy. (Perhaps Plato considered this public perception of philosophers a sufficient reason to found a formal school, since by removing the philosopher from the city streets, he would thereby be freed from constant public scrutiny.)

Given the actions of these three kinds of followers, it is little wonder that Socrates wants to insist to his jury that anyone who claims to have “learned” anything from him is lying. Socrates' declaration here would be most implausible if he were not taken to mean “learn” in a very narrow and conventional sense, too, as conventional as his sense of “teaching” is in the context of his defense, where it means to carry out formal instruction for a tuition about subjects of which one is master or in which one has technical expertise. We have seen that his conception of teaching is conventional here because, in the *Apology*, Socrates is concerned primarily with contrasting what he does in his philosophical conversations with the behaviors and practices of the Sophists, those professional rhetoricians who *were* paid to be someone's *didaskalos* in Socrates' day.

In his “Socrates versus Sophists on Payments for Teaching,” David Blank reminds us that the kinds of discourses for which the Sophists were notorious were rendered even less estimable in the minds of noble Athenians as a result of the tuition charged for them. The Sophists' practices appear to have given negative connotations to all professional teaching in the minds of Socrates' fellow Athenians.¹⁴ And after all, they were the ones who had laid first claim to the title of “teacher,” and their policies were the ones with which the conversational street philosopher's would be most easily confused in the minds of his jurors.¹⁵ Now that we have briefly clarified Socrates' primary motives for issuing his blanket denial ever to have been anyone's *didaskalos*, let us attempt to state more precisely what kind of teaching he is disclaiming at his trial.

SECTION 1.B CONVENTIONAL ATHENIAN ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT TEACHERS AND TEACHING

At *Apology* 33a, Socrates quite clearly seems to say that he is not a teacher, according to the definition of a *didaskalos*, as his audience would have understood it. Just what does his Athenian audience seem to think teaching is, and what does it think a *didaskalos* does? In addition to being connected to a school, we have seen that a *didaskalos* seems to be someone who meets the following four criteria:

1. A *didaskalos* is someone who claims to be able to instruct others in a specific subject about which presumably the pupil does not know and about which she or he presumably does.
2. A *didaskalos* is someone who accepts money for this instruction.
3. A *didaskalos* is someone who instructs *only* when payment is made.
4. A *didaskalos* instructs through expository speeches and demonstration in private lessons to the one who is paying the tuition. In addition to identifying the primary mode of instruction as lecturing or speech making, this implies that he or she speaks differently (or reveals more) to a paying customer within the school than he or she would in a public forum that might include nonpayers.

It is at least possible that Socrates would agree with the city in holding that anyone who meets conditions #2 and #3 might justly be held responsible for the misdeeds of his customers, as a result of the contractual warranty such a tuition-instruction arrangement would imply. (But it is another question indeed whether Socrates really thinks that the Sophists fulfill all four of these conditions—as they claim to do—and it is a further question still whether these four conditions add up to a good definition of teaching.)

It is important to recall that the philosopher's argument in the present context is designed to convince his jury that he cannot justly be held responsible and therefore *should not be* held responsible for the actions of others, whether or not they claim to have learned from him. He does not deny conversing with people, interrogating them, and offering *logoi* of his own to which they must be willing to listen. He says he begrudges no one the chance to listen or converse with him (33a), but he also seems to be fully aware that he has no control over what either his interlocutors or third parties will do or say about what he has said or about what they suppose they have learned from him. What he *does* deny is being anyone's *didaskalos*, that is, he denies ever taking a fee, and thereby entering into a professional, contractual relationship

with any of his interlocutors that would entail a set of expectations that he is not prepared to meet. This nuance, as we have seen, is important to his defense, because it is aimed at vitiating any legal basis for holding him accountable for the actions of others. It is at least partly in order to avoid the expectation of a *quid pro quo*, which is implied whenever one accepts a fee for services, that Plato's Socrates approaches his interlocutors in the stubbornly ignorant, relentlessly interrogatory, and consistently *pro bono* way that he does.

Early in *Apology*—within the first three Stephanus pages—Socrates has already begun framing the contrast between his practices and those of the Sophists'. In the following passage, he links teaching with fee taking, making evident that being a professional, who can persuade others to pay a tuition to learn what the *didaskalos* knows, is central to what he means by “teaching” from the very beginning of the argument he presents in his defense.

If you have heard from anyone that I undertake to teach (*paideuein*) people and charge a fee for it, that is not true either. Yet I think it is a fine thing to be able to teach people (*paideuein anthropous*) as Gorgias of Leontini does, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis. Any of these men can go to any city and persuade the young.
(*Ap.* 19d8–e5, Grube trans.)

Plato's audience is led immediately to wonder, does Socrates really think the Sophists teach in a genuine, philosophical sense? One need only recall Socrates' long discussion with Adeimantus in *Republic* VI to discover an answer to that question. There, Socrates likens the way the Sophists “teach” to the handling of a wild beast. The Sophists are said to master the desires and aversions of the many, so they can give the large beast exactly what it wants. And worse, Socrates says, they call this knowledge of the beast's likes and dislikes *wisdom*. The Sophists are obliged to learn what pleases people and then learn how to dazzle them while delivering what the audience craves, if they are going to be successful in the way that Socrates describes above. One can infer from what he says here that Socrates does not believe that the student will be the best judge of what he or she needs to learn, nor of when and how this learning should transpire. The genuine teacher knows that fee-based teaching forces one to pander to the extent that making the student feel good about the session is necessary if the teacher expects to generate repeat business. In their discussion in *Republic* VI, Socrates and Adeimantus agree that political education, the *paideusis* appropriate to the requirements of *politikē*, must not be carried out without regard to what is just or good or true, as is the case in the system of education practiced and promoted by the Sophists. Therefore, Socrates and Adeimantus conclude at 493d7–8 that one who “teaches” like the

Sophists do would be strange or “out of place” (*atopos*) as an educator (*paideutēs*).¹⁶ Socrates proceeds directly to contrast this *atopos* kind of *paideutēs* with someone like himself, someone we might call the “true *paideutēs*.” It should be clear from this cross-reference to *Republic VI* that it is the pseudo-educator from whom Socrates wants to distinguish himself and, by implication, his kind of *paideusis*, from the very outset of his trial.

The philosopher underscores his restrictive, conventional definition of teaching here when he says that the Sophists he names “can go anywhere and persuade the young,” which means that they can find enough youths willing to become clients to allow them to make a living wherever they go. Whether this is because the Sophists are truly good instructors or merely good salesmen, whether the young are just gullible, or the Sophists are shameless and supremely skilled at persuasion and deception, Socrates does not say here. He leaves these matters for his jury to ponder. But the definition of teaching that emerges from these contextual considerations of Socrates’ defense speech suggests that, from the beginning, when he speaks about “teaching” or being a *didaskalos* in the *Apology*, Socrates has in mind the conventional conception of the Sophists’ fee-based instruction. What is crucial to my argument here is that Socrates elsewhere explicitly contrasts a strange or an “out of place” *paideutēs* with an appropriate *paideutēs*, thus he allows for the possibility of genuine educators. We should conclude that in the *Apology* it is the *pseudo* kind of teaching, not the genuine alternative, that Socrates testifies to being neither able nor willing to engage in.

The leading motivations for Socrates’ denial at 33a should now be clear enough: he needs to refute the charge of corrupting the youth, and to accomplish this, he must exhibit the differences in form and substance between his lay practice in the city and the Sophists’ professional activities. Plato may have had still other reasons for having Socrates deny being a teacher in the way he does at his trial. Perhaps Plato stresses this in his account in order to temper his own audience’s expectations for the philosopher’s success with the characters he targets in the dialogues. Plato also surely knew that the ability to convince or persuade depends on the skills of one’s interlocutors, in this case, his jury. Hence, also, no one can really *teach* another something the other is not prepared to learn, just as no one can ever really convert someone else, since the turning around entailed by both pedagogy and “psychagogy” must take place *within* one’s own person. This is surely one important reason why learning is explained as a kind of recollection in various places throughout the dialogues. Socratic education is incompatible with a conception of the education process as some kind of knowledge transfer and of the teacher as a mere “content provider.” Hence the question concerning whether, or in what sense, Plato’s Socrates can aptly be regarded as a teacher continues to puzzle readers of the

dialogues.¹⁷ Yet this is only one side of the perplexing problem. The ambiguity in Socrates' role as a teacher is complemented, and perhaps compounded, by the ambiguity in his role as a student. And since "teacher" and "student" are correlative terms, perhaps our investigation shall benefit from a brief examination of the way Socrates acts when he is positioned on the other side of the relationship.

SECTION 1.C SOCRATES AS STUDENT: THE CONTRAST BETWEEN A MARKET AND A GIFT ECONOMY

In Plato's Socratic dialogues, the larger-than-life philosopher seems superior to every interlocutor with whom he converses, and although he always appears eager and willing to learn from those he examines in conversation, he never seems to learn much of substance, if anything, from his interlocutor about the topic under discussion. Yet these conversations are supposed to exemplify the exercises through which Socrates says his character and his beliefs are tested and strengthened.¹⁸ These discussions define the Socrates we know, an interlocutor without equal in the dialogues. He is perceptive and adroit on his feet, as only one whose words have been carefully scripted can be. Now Socrates regularly declares that he expects to learn something from these conversations, and he clearly regards his practice of cross-examining others as strengthening him. But the great examiner seems only to gather additional evidence with which to support his already thoroughly tested beliefs. At most, he could be said, if one can draw inferences from these representative conversations, to gain inductive evidence about the various types of human character and about possible arguments and their entailments for various positions. Moreover, these conversations provide him with the opportunity to perfect strategies for the best approach to different kinds of interlocutors. But he appears to learn little or nothing about the subject matter during these conversations. As the master of his conversational craft, Socrates seems to learn only how better to assay the character of his interlocutors, to identify their fundamental beliefs or the structure of their desires, and to anticipate them in argument. He claims thereby to be learning about himself, caring for himself, and perfecting his character.

Moreover, Socrates is rarely portrayed in the role of student, just as he is rarely shown being interrogated in the way he interrogates others. Only twice in the dialogues (*Prot.* 338c–339d and *Grg.* 462a–467c) is he

cross-examined at length. And only twice does he really seem to be depicted as learning something of substance from another person and positioned in the role of a student, and both times it is with a woman, with the mysterious priestess Diotima in the *Symposium* and with Aspasia, Pericles' longtime companion, in the *Menexenus*. In many dialogues, he appears to be merely taunting or toying with his less able interlocutors. This feature of Plato's characterization of Socrates regularly frustrates first-time readers in introductory philosophy courses.¹⁹ Students often are annoyed that Socrates refutes the positive efforts of everyone else without seeming to put forth anything constructive himself. Not only does he sometimes seem to be refusing to assert any of his own ideas about the matters under discussion, however, but often when he professes his expectation that he is about to learn from an interlocutor who appears self-satisfied and ready to teach him something, this turns out to be Socrates' way of drawing the other person out, while exposing to onlookers the would-be teacher's misplaced conceit. And in a few cases, such as with Thrasymachus in the opening book of the *Republic*, Socrates' profession that he expects to learn from such a boastfully self-confident teacher leads to the unveiling of the philosopher's most offensive kind of irony, the overly humble, self-deprecating standpoint he sometimes occupies. Whether this is just a way for the clever cross-examiner to provoke a reticent interlocutor into saying what he really thinks or believes, or whether Socrates truly has nothing to say, the same ambiguity that characterizes Socrates' role as a teacher also inheres in his posture as a student.

With Thrasymachus, we shall again see that Plato uses Socrates' behavior to illustrate key differences between a conventional concept and his novel alternative. The precarious stance occupied by the philosopher is threatened in the opening book of the *Republic*. When Thrasymachus finally jumps—like a wild beast—into the conversation that Socrates has been having with Polemarchus, I, the Sophist ridicules the philosopher for not being much of a teacher, giving nothing himself and just profiting from the wisdom of others (338b). He begins by charging Socrates with being a poor excuse for a teacher, but he ends up accusing him of being an unsatisfactory student as well, alleging that the philosopher is willing to give neither praise nor payment in recognition of the benefits he receives from those who teach him. Thrasymachus' defiant questions levy the familiar critique against Socratic interrogation:

What is this nonsense that has possessed you for so long, Socrates? And why do you act like fools making way for one another? If you truly want to know what the just is, don't only ask and gratify your love of honor by refuting whatever someone answers—you know

that it is easier to ask than to answer—but answer yourself and say what you assert the just to be. (*Rep.* 336b–c, Bloom trans.)

Socrates responds ironically, professing incompetence and suggesting that Sophists such as Thrasymachus should pity him rather than treat him harshly; Thrasymachus exclaims (scoffing) that he knew Socrates would be ironical. For Thrasymachus, Socrates' legendary irony comes as no surprise, and he charges that the philosopher will say anything rather than offer his own answer (336e–337a). Socrates' irony turns to sarcasm as he calls Thrasymachus “wise” before chastising him for forbidding any of the possible answers that he might have been inclined to give. Socrates is only able to hint that one of the proscribed answers might have been his “opinion upon consideration” (337c), before Thrasymachus issues this challenge:

“What if I could show you another answer about justice besides all these and better than they are?” he said. “What punishment do you think you would deserve to suffer?”

“What else than the one it is fitting for a man who does not know to suffer?” I said. “And surely it is fitting for him to learn from the man who knows. So this is what I think I deserve to suffer.”

“That’s because you are an agreeable chap!” he said. “But in addition to learning, pay a fine in money too.”

“When I get some.” I said.

“He has some,” said Glaucon. “Now, for money’s sake, speak, Thrasymachus. We shall all contribute for Socrates.”

(*Rep.* 337c–d, Bloom trans.)

Socrates takes offense at the accusation that he is ungrateful for what he learns from others and that he never gives thanks. Because he has no money, he says, he cannot pay a fee, but he claims to be willing to give praise whenever he learns from others. Now Socrates probably does not expect to learn much that is new about the nature of justice from Thrasymachus. He might have suspected that the Sophist would define justice as the advantage of the stronger. Hence, it could be argued, Socrates does not expect either to have to suffer the humbling antidote of being “taught” by Thrasymachus or of having to pay him a “fine.” But if Socrates is really to be regarded as a genuine student, if he is capable of learning from others and is willing to do so, then it must be assumed that he enters into such agreements in good faith, sincerely hoping to learn from others. Yet notice how quickly the philosopher begins to distance himself from his conversational companions. At 338a, he commands

Thrasymachus, "Gratify me by answering and don't begrudge your teaching (*didaxi*) to Glaucon and the others." What he means by "teaching" here is the lesson or instruction, in the form of a shower of words, that he expects to be forthcoming now that Thrasymachus has stipulated his demand for a conditional "fine." "Teaching" here signifies the mere *quid pro quo* required of the Sophist by the promise to pay the fee. It seems clear enough that Socrates does not consider himself a student of the Sophist's "teaching" in the same sense he thinks his friends are. And perhaps Socrates does not think that Thrasymachus will tell him anything about justice that he does not already know. The answer he awaits will, as Thrasymachus rightly fears, "gratify" Socrates, because it will provide the philosopher with a positive view that he can begin to examine and put to the test. But we should note that the Sophist's instruction is being requested only by Socrates' friends, not by Socrates himself.

What is especially interesting here is that Thrasymachus knows that Socrates has no money, yet he persists in demanding a payment from him. His persistence on the money issue, when he is aware of the futility of demanding payment from Socrates, indicates that he is attempting to extort some kind of capitulation from the philosopher. Thrasymachus surely cares less about the money than about getting Socrates to play his game, to conceive of learning in general and conversation in particular as a "knowledge business." He seems at least to want to bring Socrates to admit to being a freeloader who never pays his own way. He evidently regards him as more of a parasite than a gadfly in the city. This contrast between their respective approaches to education makes plain the fact that Socrates is unwilling to participate in the market economy in which sophistical teaching is rooted. What is important, I think, is that it is from the commercialization of the learning process, not from the role of student per se, that Socrates is withdrawing in the above-cited passage.

One suspects that Thrasymachus would like to provoke Socrates into confessing that he merely *plays* the student, just as he merely *plays* at being a *didaskalos* in the Sophist's opinion. For Sophists such as Thrasymachus, the teacher's role consists of making speeches for money, and the student's role is to pay and praise. His attack on Socrates voices his complaint that the philosopher does not uphold this simple obligation, commonly considered incumbent upon one aiming to learn. Thrasymachus assumes that Socrates cannot be a "real" teacher, because he is not a professional; and he cannot be a genuine student, because he pays no tuition. The argument here calls to mind a confusion of cause and effect in the popular portrayals of Socrates.²⁰ Socrates did argue in the *Apology* that since he had no knowledge, he could not claim to teach anybody anything. He also points to his poverty to prove that he had never been a fee-based teacher. But Thrasymachus' view echoes the common opinion that since Socrates is poor, he cannot be wise.²¹

On another level, this contest illustrates something important about Plato's conception of philosophy. It has been argued that Plato was the first Western thinker to organize a specific method and set of concerns under the heading "philosophy," but it has not been sufficiently emphasized how crucial it seems to be to his conception of the newly delineated field that its practice be carried out at a pre-commercial level of human relations.²² This is a prominent, though seldom stressed point of this long, preliminary contest between Socrates and Thrasymachus.²³ In addition to establishing the appropriate pre-commercial context for the discussion of justice to follow in the *Republic*, the above exchange between Socrates and Thrasymachus provides grounds for differentiating practices dependent upon a market economy from practices that are not.

Throughout the Socratic dialogues, even when it causes Socrates' behavior to seem implausible, callous, or superhuman, Plato ensures that Socrates' incorruptibility is secured.²⁴ Indeed, he makes the philosopher's incorruptibility—by money, gifts, honors, and even sexual favors, as the encounter with Alcibiades, to be discussed in Chapter 4, will illustrate—a vital, prominent feature of his characterization of him. This way of depicting Socrates and, by extension, philosophy, as Socrates is shown practicing it, appears to be extremely important to Plato's portrayal. This stance also is critical to his characterization of the philosopher's role as a *paidēutēs*, a lover, and a gadfly in the city. It should be no surprise then that Plato has Socrates argue in his defense that, far from benefiting personally from his practice in the city, he has neglected his own affairs in order to do the god's work, always refusing to accept a fee (or to enrich himself in any other conventional way) for his services (cf. *Ap.* 23c, 31c). This stance is vital to his philosophical practice, because it keeps Socrates uniquely free in several important respects: to converse with whomever he wishes, to be able to speak the truth, to be unconstrained by his interlocutor's evaluation of him or any need to make him feel good, to be mastered by no one, and to be in no one's debt. What is more, this curious philosopher casts himself as God's gift to his city, proclaiming himself the greatest of benefactors to the Athenian people (see *Ap.* 30a, 30d–e, and 36c–d). In precisely what sense Plato conceives him as a "gift" and the "greatest benefactor" to his city will be one of the ongoing issues with which our analysis of his first approach to Lysis and Alcibiades will be concerned. What is important here is that Plato not only keeps Socrates from being beholden to anyone, he also portrays him as a gift to his city and as someone who confers a great benefit upon others. We will see that Socrates gives a gift to others while consistently refusing to allow his gift to be reduced to an item of exchange.

There are many ways in which an economy can operate as an exchange economy. All of the forms of market transactions, including sales of goods and

fee for service transactions as well as barter, are obvious forms of economic exchange. Human interaction is sometimes conceived on a model of economic exchange too, and one may think of other classical forms of exchange—exchanging blows in battle, exchanging trophies in the heroic epics, exchanging speeches in rhetorical contests, and exchanging “knowledge” for a price, as the Sophists claimed to do.²⁵ Human beings also exchange gifts. A complete account of the conventional ethos governing Athenian practices of gift exchange in the last half of the fifth and first half of the fourth centuries B.C.E. would require a different kind of study, constructed around a much more detailed examination of a wide array of ancient sources for historical and philological evidence than can possibly be brought to bear here. What I shall do instead is take Aristotle as a source and adduce from his writings on benefaction a framework for grasping prevalent Athenian beliefs and practices at the time Plato would have been writing his Socratic dialogues. Aristotle’s analysis will be augmented by a brief survey of ethnographic evidence concerning the meaning and function of the gift. Before turning to Aristotle, let us briefly construct a general framework within which to interpret his discussion.

In his pathbreaking study on the gift, Marcel Mauss showed that gift exchange is different in important respects from the ordinary exchange of goods or other market-based economic transactions; but Mauss also argues that while the notion of a gift seems to require no reciprocity (what I am calling, in general, “exchange”), gift giving actually involves three interconnected obligations: giving, receiving, and reciprocating.²⁶ When one person gives a gift to another, this act of giving a gift or benefit is rooted in a whole ethos governing how such a gift exchange is to be properly practiced. Such an ethos stipulates what is fair in these relations, what type of behavior is expected in which circumstances, what kinds of gifts are appropriate for what occasions, and much more. Mauss’ study showed that practices surrounding the gift can constitute the very foundation of social relations, involving core issues of honor, freedom, sexual reproduction, and religious observation. The gift was shown to entail an ethos that intersects and regulates in myriad ways the whole spectrum of human behaviors and practices.

Mauss’ analyses of potlatch cultures exhibit how one person can place another in debt through the conferral of a gift or benefit. The recipient of the benefit incurs an unspoken debt to the benefactor until an equal or a greater benefit is given in return. Though the return is not explicitly commanded, and this distinguishes it further from commercial contracts and other forms of market exchange, Mauss found that beneficiaries will nonetheless be obliged to make a return in order to escape feelings of indebtedness to their benefactors. This results from the gift’s tendency to oblige recipients to reciprocate. When gifts function in a reciprocal way between two people, this is a “restricted” or “limited” gift economy.²⁷ For the most part, only a (more or less