



## Afterword: Trajectories of Socratic Studies

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When I was in graduate school the majority of scholars who studied Socrates were students or colleagues of Gregory Vlastos. They were developing a coherent moral philosophy that they could attribute to Plato's early Socrates, whom they identified with the historical Socrates. This line of research focused on Socrates as a distinct figure in the history of philosophy, comparable to other moral philosophers, and was conducted mainly within departments of philosophy. The recent publication of the second edition of the *Bloomsbury Handbook of Socrates* shows the continuing vitality of this line of research.

During the same period, Leo Strauss presented another approach to Socrates. In contrast to Vlastos, who studied at Harvard, Leo Strauss studied at the University of Hamburg, during the period of philosophical ferment in interbellum Germany. Rather than seeing a philosophical system in Socrates, Strauss saw him wrestling with nihilistic challenges to morality such as those he saw in Europe in his own lifetime. While Vlastos brought Socrates into line with contemporary Anglo-Saxon analytic moral philosophy, Strauss brought him into relationship with the crisis of modern thought in continental Europe. While Vlastos was making Socrates familiar and comfortable for young American students, Strauss was making him unfamiliar and problematic, but infinitely deeper.

Plato's Socrates was absolutely central to Strauss' thinking about the relationship between the philosopher and society, not only in the ancient world but throughout the entire history of western philosophical writing. But he did not neglect Xenophon's Socrates. The revival of interest in Xenophon's Socratic writings was a special project of his:

he wrote two books on Xenophon's Socrates and another on his *Hiero*, along with articles on Xenophon's other writings. Here the contrast with Vlastos is striking.

Both of these scholars offered bold, dramatic, and counter-intuitive theses. Both of them, in a strange way, were esotericists: Vlastos held that Plato had scattered a coherent moral philosophy into his early Socratic dialogues, and Strauss held that he had scattered subversive notions throughout his writings. One difference: while Strauss offered a theory to explain why a philosopher might write esoterically, Vlastos never explained why Plato failed to present Socratic philosophy in a systematic way.

One of Strauss' main contentions was that philosophers had to be careful with their words, both in order to avoid persecution and out of consideration for the good of others. As if to confirm the danger of persecution, non-Straussian academics made it very difficult for Straussians to publish articles or obtain University positions, unless they concealed their thoughts. I found Strauss' writings infinitely more engrossing than most other writings, but I did not find them completely persuasive. After publishing one "Straussian" paper, and receiving some unjustified criticism, I chose a different direction.

You know that we have come a long way when a scholar like Malcom Schofield quotes Strauss with approval, and when Strauss' characteristic methodological doctrines – always focusing on the literary character of the composition, distinguishing the characters from the author, allowing for irony, even perverse irony, ignoring the forest to focus on the moss on a single tree – have become integral parts of the general scholarly toolbox. To my mind, they have become too widely accepted. It is perilous to make far-reaching claims on the basis of a single word or sentence or to offer counter-intuitive interpretations without canvassing the alternatives. It is a mistake to treat compositions as timeless works, unconnected to their time and place. That approach was not so unusual in Strauss' time, but it is untenable today.<sup>1</sup> As we used to say in Chicago, "He makes Plato better than he really is."

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<sup>1</sup> Both of these criticisms, by the way, apply equally well to the Vlastonian school.

Today, there is an explosion of research on Socratic studies. To my mind, the most significant frontier is Xenophon's Socrates and how to bring him into relation with Plato's.<sup>2</sup> There is abundant evidence that Xenophon read Plato and responded to him throughout his writings. If not Plato's very first reader, Xenophon is the first writer we know to have engaged seriously with Plato's Socrates. How do we understand this engagement? There is certainly profound disagreement: Plato's Socrates is a theoretical and speculative thinker; Xenophon's Socrates eschews useless speculation, offers pragmatic teachings on moral issues, and offers disquisitions on subjects like architecture, perfume, battle configurations, and household management. Despite the contrast, we can bring these sources into relation if we focus on the personal dimension: how do the two Socrateses affect their interlocutors? What ideational and emotional obstacles do they encounter, and how do they overcome them? How do the two Socrateses differ in their views on virtue, the emotions, and happiness? How far did their disagreements about the relative value of the active life and the contemplative life go? How do their divergent teachings relate to their divergent portraits of Socrates as a personality? While Plato's Socrates has received a great deal of attention on most of these matters, Xenophon's has not. Further clarification of his views is not only a major desideratum in its own right, it will also help shed new light on Plato's Socrates.

This kind of project needs to place the texts within a larger framework of Athenian literary culture. How did the views of either Socrates relate to other views in the cultural world of fourth century Athens? As examples of persuasive rhetoric, how does Socratic literature compare to the whole range of extant rhetoric? How does Xenophon's Socratic historiography, and Plato's occasional nods in that direction, compare with historiography generally? How should we understand Xenophon's reactions to Plato, and Plato's less common reactions to Xenophon? Were they rivals, enemies, or teammates? Xenophon's responses to Plato clearly imply an overlapping audience. How do Plato

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<sup>2</sup> I do not wish to under-emphasize the fascinating challenges and opportunities offered by the so-called minor Socratics, even if it is much harder to compare fragments than entire compositions, or the importance of the pseudepigrapha.

and Xenophon seek to affect the opinions and attitudes of this common audience? How did they balance apologetic aims with the effort to outline a compelling view of human aspirations? What about their relationships with other literary actors?

Any project of interpretation requires careful attention to the tone of the conversations and of the compositions as a whole. Irony remains a central concern among interpreters, but what exactly does irony mean in the Socratic context? How does it differ from the more narrow phenomenon known in Greek as *eironeia*? Is the irony of Socrates the character the same as the irony of Plato or Xenophon the writers? Is irony the right word for either phenomenon, or should we be thinking in terms of *spoudaiogeloion*, hyperbole, provocation, sarcasm, or other modes of speech?

Associated with this is the question of how literally to treat the statements of Socrates. I find this particularly pressing when dealing with Xenophon's Socratic writings: when Xenophon's Socrates says that *sōphrosunē* cannot be distinguished from *sophia* (*Mem.* 3.9.4), does he mean to say that they are the same thing? If so, does he mean that literally? Is every form of *sophia* a form of *sōphrosunē* or is *sōphrosunē* a subset of *sophia*? In *Memorabilia* 4.6.7 Socrates equates *sophia* and *epistēmē*. Does that mean that *sōphrosunē* is also identical to *epistēmē*? In *Memorabilia* 4.4 Socrates claims that *dikaiosunē* is identical with *to nomimon*, while in *Symposium* 3.4 Callias suggests that *dikaiosunē* is the same thing as *kalokagathia*, and Antisthenes affirms it unequivocally. Does that mean that *to nomimon* is *kalokagathia*? How literally are we meant to take these seemingly hyperbolic equations and other philosophical pronouncements? How much philosophic precision can we demand from them in the case of a writer who rarely shows great interest in philosophic precision?

These are the questions that I find most urgent in Socratic studies today, and I am sure that others would have many more to add. To address them requires philological and philosophical labor on many different aspects of Socratic literature. It will require an immense number and variety of collaborators to shed light on the literary, semantic,

philosophical, conceptual, historical, emotional and other aspects of this fascinating literature.

Socratic reception has taken a huge step forward with the publication of *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Socrates*.<sup>3</sup> With Socrates, reception begins early: since he wrote nothing, all our evidence about him, including the writings of Plato and Xenophon, is, in effect, reception. But no less important than the reception of Socrates as a literary figure, is the influence of Socrates on his circle of friends and admirers. These writers show Socratic influence not only when writing about Socrates, but in all their writings. Plato's *Letters* and *Laws*, and Xenophon's historiographical and other writings, all fall within the compass of Socratic studies, because they were composed by members of the Socratic circle. As Noreen Humble has argued,<sup>4</sup> an historiographical work like *Spartan Polity* can be investigated as a piece of Socratic literature. As Anthony Ellis has shown,<sup>5</sup> one can discern Socratic influence by contrasting what is common to Plato and Xenophon with what appears in previous historiographers.

And aside from the immediate Socratic circle of early and late Socratic writers, the ripples of influence spread outward to other contemporary writers who, if not in the Socratic circle, nevertheless were in the Socratic orbit. That includes, at the very least, figures as diverse as Aristophanes, Euripides, Isocrates, and Aristotle. Aristotle is a particularly valuable resource for dialogue with the Socratic compositions. Greek literature of all kinds addressed the same ethical-political issues that Aristotle addressed in his *Ethics* and *Politics*, but no literature shares more of the same concerns with Aristotle than Socratic literature. His *Rhetoric* contains invaluable information about Greek culture that sheds light on this literature as well. There is much to do, and the papers in this collection offer exemplary studies that point the way to further illumination.

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<sup>3</sup> MOORE, C. *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Socrates*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> HUMBLE, N. *Xenophon of Athens: A Socratic on Sparta*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> ELLIS, A. A Socratic History: Theology in Xenophon's Rewriting of Herodotus' Croesus Logos. *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, v. 136, p. 73-91, 2016.