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Socrates: Final Essay  
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## tell me a **story**

Our lives are made up of the stories we tell and the stories we hear. Especially today, with Internet technologies such as blogging and podcasting, which are tools that enable people to tell their own stories with ease, we are always immersed in the lives of others. The stories we tell inform future generations of who we are. By telling stories, we create hiSTORY. A person's style has a lot to do with how we understand others. Some tell them as they saw it with their own eyes, while others only retell the happenings of others. Each person has a different way of telling stories.

Even in Ancient Greece, Plato recognized the various styles of storytelling in *The Republic*. While engaged in a conversation with other Athenian men, Socrates identifies two major forms of language. The first form is imitative. In practice, imitation, or mimesis, comes in the form of dialogue. "And if one likens oneself to someone else in voice or gesture, is that not imitation...It seems, then, that in such cases Homer and the other poets carry forward their narrative by means of imitation" (*Republic* 393c). The second form is more "pure and simple," according to Socrates. This inherently "better" style of writing manifests itself in the form of personal narrative. "That would be narration, pure and simple...Now this, my friend, is simple narration. No imitation intrudes" (*Republic* 393e-394b). Socrates expresses his discomfort with the first form - from the beginning, he views it as a disruption of authenticity. He says that it is the style

of writing that presents untruths. "They should neither do nor imitate other things...they themselves must neither practice nor imitate such behavior" (*Republic* 395c-396a).

Socrates disregards imitation both in writing and in life. Socrates goes on to say that if people happen to imitate what is bad, society will never truly be good. While putting into practice these forms of writing, Plato recognized their significance. Just by explicating these forms in a text that is representative of the first style, he begins to establish his own role in his texts. Even though his own voice is not explicitly visible in *The Republic*, his ideas are noticed in the style of his writing.

Even modern philosophers, like Friedrich Nietzsche, recognize these various forms of storytelling. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche identifies Plato as a translator or an exponent in relation to the stories he tells.

"He was the most audacious of all interpreters and took the whole Socrates only the way one picks a popular tune and folk song from the streets in order to vary it into the infinite and impossible - namely, into all of his own masks and multiplicities." (Nietzsche 103)

Nietzsche also acknowledges the forms Socrates describes in *The Republic* and attributes the first form to Plato. As Plato is not present in his own texts, Nietzsche asserts that Plato has hid himself behind a veil. Would Nietzsche make the similar claims about Xenophon, who represented Socrates in an entirely different way?

These styles of writing, as identified by Plato, accurately represent two of the major accounts of Socrates we have today, those written by Plato himself, and the tales told by Xenophon. Plato represented Socrates by using the first form of writing: he created many Socratic dialogues. While Plato removed his own voice from his texts, Xenophon told the stories of Socrates from his own point of view. Two understandings

of Socrates emerge from these two vastly different portrayals of the man; first as a character in a dialogue written by an author, and second as a “real” human being living in Athens. Plato tells of Socrates through the voices of others. He attributes philosophical, cultural, and political ideologies to both the character “Socrates” and to friends of Socrates. In order to come to his own understanding of Socrates, Plato needed to recreate the man in a quasi-fictional sphere. Xenophon, on the other hand, does not hesitate to directly address the historical individual, Socrates. While Plato constructed characters, Xenophon related to people. Xenophon’s texts are easier to read and understand, for they lack the kind of philosophical depth Plato’s texts possess. While removing his own voice from his dialogues, Plato has made the reader become an active philosophical participant in conversation. Xenophon is a historian, but Plato is a philosopher.

Both directly and indirectly, using primary texts and secondary sources, I examine the relationship between Plato and Socrates and Xenophon and Socrates. I first historically investigate the people Plato and Xenophon, using not dialogues or personal narratives, but conceivably more “historically” accurate sources. After establishing an “authentic” portrait of these historical figures, I throw into doubt the integrity of the embodiment of Socrates by conducting a close reading of two texts, the first written by Plato, and the second by Xenophon. These two texts are written in different manners and present conflicting interpretations of Socrates. I then take into account more modern interpretations of Plato, Xenophon, and Socrates, in an attempt to explicate various views both in accordance with and in opposition to my own textual analyses. In conclusion, I will ask more questions about the role of storytelling in ancient

times and ask new questions about storytelling in the techno-induced future. I seek to show how Plato's texts, on the one hand, present Socrates as a constructed character and engage the reader in an individual Socratic pursuit of knowledge, while Xenophon's texts, on the other hand, offer only personal and historical accounts of the person Socrates, in the name of providing a less philosophical and more individual account of Ancient Greece.

In order to be able to philosophically deconstruct the figure of Socrates, one must first know who Plato and Xenophon, the people, were. Of course, such histories are only collections of stories. In this historical background, I have primarily relied on the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy for information, and have restrained myself from relying on the very dialogues which I analyze.

Plato was an author. He wrote texts regarding philosophy, culture, and politics. Even though he was not the first "philosopher" the world saw, he is considered to be the creator of philosophy. "Plato is, by any reckoning, one of the most dazzling writers in the Western literary tradition and one of the most penetrating, wide-ranging, and influential authors in the history of philosophy" (Kraut). His texts provide a, "rigorous and systematic examination of ethical, political, metaphysical, and epistemological issues, armed with a distinctive method..." (Kraut). Plato did not only contribute to a historical narrative by recording events, but he created his own philosophical narrative by asking questions and discussing the intangible. Plato created a large collection of dialogues, most of which are centered around Socrates. Plato was not the first to use dialogues to express himself, but his dialogues were unlike common Greek dramatic dialogues. Unlike comics and tragedians, like Aristophanes, Plato turned people into characters in

his texts. He did not invent an alternative reality, as many dialogues do. Plato's dialogues are discussions and debates of philosophy.

“But Plato's dialogues do not try to create a fictional world for the purposes of telling a story...a single speaker narrates events in which he participated. They are philosophical discussions - 'debates' would...be an appropriate word - among a small number of interlocutors, many of whom can be identified as real historical figures” (Kraut).

His dialogues record and create a new philosophical history focused on a character named “Socrates.” Plato's texts first provide a portrayal of Ancient Greek and Athenian culture, but they also make deep philosophical arguments. All but one of his texts are centered on the voice, questions, and ideas of Socrates (Kraut).

It is difficult to truly know Socrates. Even though I have set out to provide a “historical” account of each person I account for in this essay, creating an account of SOcrates that is removed from Plato and Xenophon is impossible, since they are the two main authorities on the life of Socrates. In addition, telling a tale of Socrates that is connected to Plato and Xenophon would risk the strength of my essay. The rest of this text would be at odds if I attempted to create a Socrates separate from Plato and Xenophon. One could even claim that an objective and historical Socrates does not exist. Instead of jeopardizing the integrity of my claims about the styles of Plato and Xenophon, I will restrain myself from constructing a biography of Socrates. Instead, I will examine the idea, the person, and the character through the texts of Plato and Xenophon.

Like Plato, Xenophon was one of the primary authors who told the stories of Socrates. However, Xenophon was a historian and a soldier, not a philosopher. According to Richard Kraut, Xenophon was, “a historian and military leader,” and also, “wrote, like Plato, both an *Apology* of Socrates (an account of Socrates’ trial) and other works in which Socrates appears as a principal speaker” (Kraut). Even though both authors wrote accounts of Socrates, Plato was more connected to the philosophical ideas of Socrates, while Xenophon was more visibly attached to Socrates as a human being and a friend. Xenophon was explicit about his relationship with Socrates. He did not hesitate to show his friendly love for Socrates. “Of all the people that I have known, he was the most concerned to know the extent of any of his associates’ special knowledge...” (Memoirs of Socrates 4.7.1). In his own words, he recognizes their friendship. Xenophon’s texts do not require the author to think about and process deep philosophical ideas, for he was a simple person. “Xenophon was a practical man whose ability to recognize philosophical issues is almost imperceptible, so it is plausible that his Socrates appears as such a practical and helpful advisor because that is the side of Socrates [he] witnessed” (Nails). While Plato saw Socrates as a philosophical entity, Xenophon saw Socrates as a person and a brother, so to speak. Xenophon’s identity as a historian also makes it easier for the reader to accept his accounts as “truth,” for they do not in themselves present philosophical questions or discussions. When reading Plato, one is more concerned with philosophical ideas and morals, whereas when reading Xenophon, one is more aware of history. “...Xenophon’s depiction of Socrates, whatever its value as historical testimony (which may be considerable), is generally thought to lack the philosophical subtlety and depth of Plato’s” (Kraut). It is easier to

relate to both Xenophon and Socrates through the writings of Xenophon, for on the surface, Xenophon talks about relationships, and does not necessarily strive for philosophical depth.

To examine Socrates, I discuss two texts, one by Plato, and the other by Xenophon. I intend to examine Socrates through both content and style. In this analysis of primary texts, I deconstruct Plato's *Phaedrus*, a story written in strict dialogue form with two characters who converse, Socrates and Phaedrus, and Xenophon's *Dinner Party*, a personal narrative and an account of an event. It should be noted that not all Platonic texts are written only in complete dialogue form. I have chosen the *Phaedrus* for just this reason, as it is a clear representation of Plato's mimetic literary style.

Plato's *Phaedrus* is a text about friendship, love, writing, and philosophy. Plato tells this story with two people, Socrates and Phaedrus, who engage with each other and the reader on both basic and philosophical levels. In terms of style, this text is truly an artist creation, for it is not a narrative, but rather, a dialogue. It is a creation and a construction of the mind. It seeks to create two characters. The text begins with a friendly conversation between Socrates and Phaedrus, but soon evolves into a great philosophical debate about love and the value of writing.

“SOCRATES: Phaedrus, my friend! Where have you been? An where are you going?

PHAEDRUS: I was with Lysias...” (Plato 227a)

This text is clearly a dialogue, both in literary style and in physical appearance. There is no doubt in my mind that Plato intended to create a dialogue, for even the way the text is structured visually, as seen above, is indicative of a dialogue. Only two characters converse in this text. In addition, Plato's own voice is absent. As the author, he has

chosen to exclude himself. Like most Platonic dialogues, Socrates does most of the talking. When reading this text, it is easy to mistake Plato for Socrates and Socrates for Plato, as is with other texts written by Plato, such as *The Republic*. Stylistically, Socrates becomes Plato's mouth piece. Plato uses these characters to tell a story.

There are two types of conversation in the story of the *Phaedrus*. The first is a playful and friendly type of communication. "Oh, Phaedrus, if I don't know my Phaedrus I must be forgetting who I am myself..." (Plato 228b). This is a more basic form of conversation that is suggestive of a friendly relationship between the characters. The second type of conversation is more philosophical. "Listen, then: 'You understand my situation: I've told you how good it would be for us, in my opinion, if this worked out. In any case, I don't think I should lose the chance to get what I am asking for...'" (Plato 231a). This type of discussion contains speeches and questions that show how Socrates led intellectual debates. Socrates' role is the question asker. His primary part in the *Phaedrus* is to engage others in philosophical conquest. "Do you really believe then that any one of these people, whoever he is and however much he hates Lysias, would reproach him for being a writer?" (Plato 258d). Plato not only engages the characters in the dialogue with each other by making them question each others' existences, but the questions Socrates asks also engage the reader, for the answers to his questions are never clear and obvious. Most of the dialogue focuses on love, but after Socrates and Phaedrus recite their respective speeches on the subject, they engage in a discussion of writing and rhetoric.

Just as the identification of the forms in *The Republic* showed Plato's awareness of his own style and position in his writing, the discussion of writing in the *Phaedrus* also

is evidence of Plato's own awareness of the style of the dialogue and the implications of it. Socrates and Phaedrus both talk about deception while discussing the rhetorical art. "Well, then, isn't the rhetorical art, taken as a whole, a way of directing the soul by means of speech, not only in the law-courts and on other public occasions but also in private?" (Plato 261a). Plato is recognizing the direction of his own soul by embracing this artistic form. Socrates then addresses the issue of the truth in speeches and says that if one does not know the truth, his work is not art at all. Socrates then moves to recognize the divisions of speech and explicitly identifies the role of the dialecticians. Finally, near the end of the dialogue, Socrates honors those who use dialectic by saying that they are the noble ones and those who have good souls.

"But it is much nobler to be serious about these matters, and use the art of dialectic. The dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it a discourse accompanied by knowledge - discourse capable of helping itself as well as the man who planted it, which is not barren but produces a seed from which more discourse grows in the character of others." (Plato 277a).

Plato's role in the dialogues is even more apparent now. Even though his voice is technically absent from the dialogue, the content of the dialogue matches the style. It is here where Plato's role as a philosopher becomes evident.

From the beginning of Xenophon's narrative, it is clear that he is a historian and not a philosopher. The text begins with Xenophon's own voice as he tells the story of Socrates for himself. Unlike Plato's text, which is a dialogue that omits Plato, Xenophon's portrayal of Socrates is truly his own. The text starts with a historical placing: "It seems to me that in writing about the deeds of truly good men, it is proper to record not only their serious activities, but their diversions too" (Xenophon 227).

Xenophon constructs his text as a record of history. He is not approaching his text as a work of art. Instead, it is a historical creation. In Plato's dialogue, it is also unclear whether this is an event Plato witnessed himself, whether it is something he heard about, or whether it is simply a product of his own imagination. Xenophon, however, claims to be the observer of the events he writes about. "I should like to describe something I witnessed which let me to this conclusion" (Xenophon 227). One is able to better rely on Xenophon's text as the truth because he acknowledges his own presence. Xenophon takes the responsibility for his words, whereas Plato does not. In this way, too, Plato is more engaging. In Xenophon, it is clear and simple who's opinions are who's, but Plato forces the reader to create these classifications for himself.

Xenophon's account differs in content, too. The relationships between the characters are more playful and the focus is less on philosophy, and more on individual people. Even though this text is drastically different, Socrates is still the main character. Xenophon is more obviously telling a story set in Ancient Greece. "There was a horse-race at the Great Panathenaic festival. Callias the son of Hipponicus happened to be strongly attached to a boy called Autolycus and had brought him along to watch..." (Xenophon 227). The focus of this story is more on entertainment than on anything else. It is about the lives people lived, not the questions they asked. For example, love is still a central topic and idea, but the discussion lacks serious philosophical depth. "'My skill as a pimp.' They laughed at him [Socrates]. 'You can laugh,' he said, 'but I know that I could make a great deal of money if I chose to follow the profession.'" (Xenophon 238). Love is not discussed as seriously in Xenophon's *Dinner Party*, whereas Plato seriously delves into the philosophical significance of love

in his *Phaedrus*. In Xenophon's version of Socrates, Socrates is more of a mentor and less of a philosophical idea. In Plato, one relates to the questions Socrates asks, whereas in Xenophon, one relates to the actual person Socrates. Xenophon, as a historian, is more concerned with the mundane and relational aspects of social gatherings.

“Naturally, Socrates and his friends began by thanking Callias for his invitation but excusing themselves from dining with him; but when it became clear that he really would be annoyed if they didn't come too, they joined the party.” (Xenophon 228)

This lack of philosophical depth makes Xenophon's text easier to read, for Plato's works truly challenge the reader. Even though a deeper meaning of Xenophon's texts might exist (it is not my goal to uncover the philosophical relevance of the narrative), one can read Xenophon's text without questioning what the definition of love is. On the one hand, one does not need to dissect Xenophon's text to gain an understanding of it. On the other hand, one must take every word into account to even begin to grasp Plato's *Phaedrus*.

Xenophon and Plato set out to accomplish different tasks. While Plato was a student of Socrates who attempted to be a philosopher, Xenophon was an admirer of Socrates who sought to create history. After examining Plato's and Xenophon's texts, I will now seek the counsel of three commentaries on the stories of Socrates. I will use texts by Leo Strauss, Hayden Ausland, and L.A. Dorion to further examine Socrates. Strauss takes into account all the various interpretations of Socrates. He plainly says that Plato's texts were not meant to be accurate or historical works. “Whatever we might have to think of these decisions, the Platonic dialogues were admittedly not reports, but

works of art; they do not permit us to distinguish incontestably between what Socrates himself thought and the thoughts that Plato merely ascribed to him” (Strauss 3). Strauss believes that we cannot believe that Plato’s texts are correct interpretations of Socrates simply because there is almost no historical basis of Plato’s texts. He goes on to say that writing historical texts was not even Plato’s goal, for he was a philosopher, not a historian. Strauss also identifies Xenophon as the only reliable source for information on Socrates.

“Plato never vouches for the authenticity of his Socratic conversations. Plato is not a historian. The only historian among Socrates’ contemporaries on whose writings we must rely for our knowledge of Socrates is Xenophon, who continued Thucydides’ history, and who vouches for the authenticity of at least some of his Socratic conversations by introducing them with expressions like ‘I once heard him say.’” (Strauss 4).

Plato and Xenophon were two very different men who set out to accomplish two different goals, according to Strauss. This is also evident from the biographies of Plato and Xenophon, for Plato was a student while Xenophon was a soldier. Strauss offers a good introduction for approaching the texts of Plato, Xenophon, and even Aristophanes.

Similarly, Ausland provides a more detailed account to reading Plato. In his essay, “On Reading Plato Mimetically,” he asserts that Plato was an author who wrote literary works of art and that nothing can be assumed about Plato’s texts. “Plato comes to mind first as a philosopher, but we should not forget that he bequeathed his philosophical understanding to posterity mainly in the form of his literary works” (Ausland 371). Ausland acknowledges Plato’s philosophy, but is a stronger believer in Plato as a literary artist. Ausland recognizes the complexity of Platonic dialogues. “But in Plato’s genuinely dramatic compositions none of the personae can be

assumed to speak for the author - even where a paraenetic hypothesis for a discussion might suggest otherwise” (Ausland 372). He says that one must always question the root of the philosophical ideology. In fact, Ausland also cites Strauss to say that how Plato presented “his” philosophy is just as important as the content of his texts (377). Ausland also asserts that Plato’s Socrates is in fact representative of the historical figure, Socrates. “What the characteristically Socratic dialogues exhibit par excellence, on the other hand, is in one way or another present in all Plato’s dialogues. This Socrates is clearly imitative of the historical Socrates” (Ausland 382). However, Ausland goes on to doubt the reality of this Socrates. Finally, Ausland says that Plato’s art is used to question and engage the reader. “Thus he relies in his discourse not on any demonstrative procedure designed to impart a certain teaching to others, but rather on an inductive art whose effect is to elicit each man’s more productive thoughts” (Ausland 384). He believes that Plato wants the reader to create and come to his own understanding of Socrates. Ausland says that Plato’s style is even used to arouse the reader. “If we reflect that Plato has invented his conversations to provoke is readers in the way in which Socrates’ discourse awakens thought in his auditors, we are then to a certain extent obliged to enter into the discussion ourselves” (Ausland 386). In other words, Plato’s texts are not one-dimensional, but instead they are truly multi-dimensional in the ways that they engage the audience. As for Xenophon, Ausland has little to say.

Dorion does, however, engage with Xenophon. He deconstructs the notion that Xenophon’s texts are historically accurate. “But if it turns out that Xenophon’s Socrates...does not correspond to what we know of the historical Socrates, should we

not then regard him as an impostor unworthy of our interest?" (Dorion 93). Dorion is unsure of whether or not to trust Xenophon, who's texts are often not "primary" Socratic texts, for they do lack philosophical depth. The fact that Socrates was a philosopher and Xenophon's texts do actually lack deep intellectualism is certainly enough of a reason for one to question the validity of Xenophon's work. Dorion now poses the "Socratic question:" "...can we reconstruct the thought of the historical Socrates on the basis of the main surviving testimonies on him, those of Aristophanes, Plato, Xenophon and Aristotle?" (Dorion 93). We have conflicting views on Socrates. How can we have a historical understanding of the figure when each portrayal is different? Does this mean that we can only understand Socrates as a philosophical entity? Dorion continues to discuss the notion of personal creativity and invitation of fiction. He presents the one main criticism of Xenophon, which I explicated above.

"This criticism...argues that Xenophon was not a philosopher and that the properly philosophical interest of his Socratic writings is thin - so thin that it would be hard to understand Socrates' enormous philosophical posterity if he were merely the boring preacher depicted in the *Memorabilia*" (Dorion 93-94).

This is a criticism for those who only value Socrates as a philosopher. However, this opinion devalues true philosophy, for, to gain a real understanding of an individual, one must know their mind, their body, and their relationships.

Who is Socrates? Two distinct characters emerge from the different texts of Plato and Xenophon. Plato creates a more engaging construction of Socrates that makes the reader question and doubt his own existence. Xenophon, however, attempts to present a historical basis of Socrates in an attempt to help others understand Ancient Greece.

From both the primary and secondary texts I analyzed, it is clear that both Plato and Xenophon must be considered to be able to begin to understand Socrates. From my own study of the two writers, it is important that one come to his own understanding of Socrates, for after reading the texts of Plato and Xenophon, the realities and the fantasies of Socrates become even more pronounced. Socrates remains a mystery. In his own apparent quest for the truth, he, as a philosophical and metaphysical entity and as a person, was able to avoid veracity.

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