

The Puzzle of Education in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*

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Was Socrates a teacher? Plato appears to have taken this question very seriously, so much so that any attempt to answer this question based on his dialogues leads one into a complex set of difficulties. On the one hand, Plato everywhere shows Socrates doing something that could be described as 'educational', drawing out brain-children like a midwife in *Theaetetus*, numbing his interlocutor into *aporia*, bewilderment, like a torpedo fish in *Meno*, and generally provoking people into defending or reconsidering their beliefs. On the other hand, when Plato's Socrates has the opportunity to defend himself against the charge of corrupting the youth, rather than arguing that he is the ideal teacher of Athens, he explicitly denies that he is a "teacher."

Another question arises in Plato's *Apology of Socrates* – does Socrates challenge the "traditional" education of fifth century Athens? Again readers are presented with a complex set of issues. If Socrates' presence in the city and his new education benefits its political health, then his subversive activities should be readily admitted. Yet, while Socrates does repeatedly note that he challenges Athenians, he also suggests that he poses no threat to traditional education. In this paper, I argue that Plato complicates the question of whether Socrates necessarily undermines the "traditional" education of fifth century BCE Athens by identifying several of its constituent parts that are in tension. Further, I contend that the claims based on which Socrates denies that he is a teacher are actually undermined elsewhere in the dialogue as Plato places obstacles in the path of the possible ways of distinguishing Socrates from the sophists. The result is that the *Apology*

ought to be understood as an expertly crafted puzzle about Socrates' philosophizing and the very nature of education in a political community. Plato's *Apology* raises questions, but resists solutions.

The Traditional Educations

I have entitled this section "The Traditional Educations" in plural because the traditional education entails many parts: families, noble citizens, poets, the city's laws or regime, and the city's religion. Though all of these elements may work towards the same end, they are sometimes in conflict and in the *Apology*, I suggest, Plato emphasizes these tensions. Further, Socrates' suggestion that his educational practices are ultimately reconcilable with the traditional education only adds to the puzzle of what is a "teacher" in the *Apology*.

A central pillar of the traditional education is the family or, more specifically, fathers. In *Clouds*, Aristophanes parodies the father's claim over his son's education by depicting a father, Strepsiades, who seeks a sophistic education for his son Pheidippides (instead of trying to shield his son from it). Once Pheidippides emerges from Socrates' thinkery, however, he beats his own father "with justice," he claims, and threatens to beat his mother as well (Aristophanes, 1998b, 1333 & 1443). Towards the end of the play, Strepsiades asks his son to help him "destroy the wretch Chaerephon and Socrates." Pheidippides reveals that his allegiance has been fully transferred by objecting, "I wouldn't do injustice to my teachers" (1465-7).

Socrates attempts to argue in the *Apology* that his own association with the young of Athens is not in tension with the desires of Athenian fathers. Socrates says that if he had corrupted young men in the past, they would come forward themselves now that they are older, or "their families—fathers and brothers and their other relatives—should now have remembered

it and taken their vengeance if their families had suffered anything bad from me” (33d).¹ He then notes several fathers of young men with whom he associated in the courtroom: Crito, the father of Critobulus, Lysanias father of Aeschines, and Antiphon father of Epigenes (33e). Socrates follows with a list people present who are brothers of young men with whom he associated: Theozotides’ son Nicostratus, the brother of Theodotus, Demodocus’ son Paralus, brother of Theages, Ariston’s son Adeimantus, brother of Plato, and Aeantodorus, brother of Apollodorus (33e-34a).²

Socrates explicitly makes a strong case for the *lack* of conflict between himself and the fathers of the city. But though there are some fathers who do not see a conflict between Socrates’ association with their children and their own rights or interests, there are others who undoubtedly do not want Socrates to associate with their sons. Eva Brann notes that it is unlikely that an Athenian would publicly pronounce his child’s corruption and, in any event Anytus, who supported Meletus’ indictment with Lycon, was known to be such a parent (Brann, 1978, p. 7).³ There is surely a relevant difference between fathers whose sons associated with Socrates at length and fathers, like Anytus, whose son did so only briefly; one would rightfully give priority to the opinion of those who had more direct and extended experience with Socrates. However, the distinction is problematic because of Socrates’ insistence that he is available to all the young men of the city. Even if Socrates does not engage them directly, he knows that they are keenly attentive when he converses with others. He readily admits that the young men of the city follow

¹ All translations from *Apology of Socrates* are those of West and West (Plato, 1998).

² Notably, in the list of “brothers” Socrates offers, the fathers of the young men who associated with him remain central. Hence, three of the four brothers are described as X son of Y.

³ The relevant text in support of this argument is Xenophon’s account of Socrates’ *Apology* in which Socrates says “my brief acquaintance with Anytus’ son led me to believe that he was a person of some caliber.” But Socrates offers a prophecy that highlights the fact that he and Anytus had disagreed on the young man’s education: “my prediction is that he will not remain in the servile occupation his father has arranged for him; but because there is no one of principle to take him in hand, he will succumb to some base motivation and make considerable progress as a degenerate” (Xenophon, 1990, 29-30).

him because they enjoy seeing Socrates reveal that citizens of fame and repute are not wise – and such revelations are “not unpleasant” to witness (33c). Thus, Socrates’ effect on the young men of Athens extends far beyond the relationships sanctioned by some of the fathers of young men with whom he associates.

In sum, Socrates says that his philosophical activities need not be in conflict with the city’s fathers but, at the same time, his willingness to converse with any young man indicates that he is willing to associate with some young men *against* their fathers’ wishes. Since Socrates does not ask for fathers’ permission, and no young man needs to ask his father for a fee to pay Socrates, Socrates will necessarily come into conflict with fathers’ right to determine their sons’ education. Further, his claim, “I always do your business, going to each of you privately, as a father or an older brother might do, persuading you to care for virtue” (31b), suggests that he is perfectly willing to usurp, and even enthusiastic about usurping, the role of fathers, whether or not he deems them to have fulfilled their paternal duties.

Within the traditional education there is more than the father’s right over a child’s education at stake, for the family does not exist in isolation in a political community. It was understood that other citizens would have, and ought to have, an influence on young men. In his ominous encounter with Socrates in *Meno*, Anytus insists that the city’s young men can become virtuous by spending time with any *kalos k’agathos* citizen, any noble and good gentleman.⁴ Meletus is drawn into a brief exchange in Plato’s *Apology* and ends up arguing similarly that all Athenian citizens – the judges at the trial, the Councilmen, the members of the Assembly – make the young better (24e-25a). Socrates asks Meletus, “then all the Athenians, as it appears, make

⁴ When pressed into naming who makes the young virtuous by Socrates, Anytus says “Why give the name of one individual? Any Athenian gentleman [*kalōn k’agathōn*] he may meet, if he is willing to be persuaded, will make him a better man than the sophists would” and that “these men have learned from those who were gentlemen before them” (Plato, 1997c, 92e-93a)

them noble and good [*kalous k'agathous*] except me, and I alone corrupt them. Is this what you are saying?" Meletus responds, "I do say this, most vehemently" (25a).

Since fathers rely on positive associations with local gentlemen for their sons' education, they must decide with whom their sons should associate. A father could control the education of his son insofar as he could encourage certain associations with others. However, by allowing even a citizen he selects himself to influence his child, he cedes some control over the education and the allegiance of the young man may tested. And clearly what is at stake in Plato's *Apology* is what one ought to look for in an ideal citizen who might associate with the young. The case that Socrates presents is that he *is* such an ideal citizen, one who exhorts people to care for living well rather than wealth, fame and political power – the trappings that are a high priority for many Athenian fathers in the fifth century. The question that is raised in Plato's *Apology* is, with what kind of noble and good citizen should a father want his son to associate? Is it (a) one who will serve his own (the father's) best interest, (b) one who will serve his son's best interests, making him a virtuous man, or (c) one who will serve the city's interest? That there will sometimes or often be a distinction between (b) and (c) is emphasized through Socrates' insistence that he lives a private life, forgoing public (i.e., political) action. In addition, Socrates explicitly distinguished (b) and (c) when he recounts how he asked Callias, "who is knowledgeable in such virtue, that of human being and citizen [*tēs anthrōpinēs te kai politikēs*]?" (20b). Further, of course, the individual, even a virtuous one, may come into conflict with his political community – that tension is a crucial theme of the *Apology*.

Individual citizens and families are only a part of the picture of the initiation of new members of society into the political community. Education happens through specific associations but also on account of the fact that a person is reared in a community in which there

is a shared language and a shared set of customs and laws. Throughout Greece, there was a high value placed on *homonoia*, like-mindedness or solidarity. Though Athens in the fifth century was known for its relative freedoms, *homonoia* was still taken to be essential in Athens.⁵ Shared customs and laws – notably the Greek word *nomos* means both custom and law – provided an education through socialization. It is highly relevant that Meletus’ first response to Socrates’ question of who makes the youth better is, simply, “the laws” (24d). The laws of a city, its political regime, is that which cultivates citizens and, one might infer from Meletus’ response, any educational force that interferes with the socialization is subversive and will threaten *homonoia*. Elsewhere Plato’s Socrates does not disagree with this sentiment. Indeed, books 8 and 9 of *The Republic* contain the argument that different political regimes cultivate different citizens, and Socrates’ entire conversation in *The Republic* considers how a state might be able to form just citizens, and be just itself.⁶ That Socrates fails to engage Meletus on this point shows his unwillingness to take seriously here Meletus’ concerns about the threat to *homonoia* by undermining the traditional education. As I will discuss later, rather than defend himself against this charge – that he threatens traditional education – Socrates distinguishes himself from the sophists, a collection of intellectuals who, like Socrates, challenge the traditional education. Socrates may be right in his insistence that his presence can improve the city. However, he is certainly trying to change the city and he is doing so in a climate in which a threat to *homonoia* is a threat to the political community itself; in a city that is constantly at war (both aggressively and defensively), a unified populace may be the only thing which safeguards the political regime and prevents the death and enslavement of its inhabitants.

⁵ See Rahe on the importance of *homonoia* in Athens (1994; see pp. 172-204 in particular.). Rahe’s analysis is exceptionally valuable for those interested in political education in classical Greece.

⁶ Socrates presents what was the commonly accepted view in his funeral oration in *Menexenus*: “for a polity [*politeia*] molds its people; a goodly one molds good men, the opposed bad” (Plato, 1997b, 238c).

Socrates rejects Meletus' answer that the laws educate young men and make them better and insists that Meletus state what *person* could be identified who educates the young well (24e). At this point, it is evident that Socrates sides with the new class of educators against the traditional education. For he, like the sophists, believes that education should not be left to socialization but must be given conscious attention.⁷ The Greeks generally gave so little thought to the formal aspect of education, wrote Xenophon, that the Spartan emphasis on the role of a formal educator was exceptional and, he argued, exemplary.⁸ In Athens, Socrates was addressing accusers who represented a political community that valued *homonoia* and, to a significant degree, delegated their children's formal education to a household servant. Socrates' claim to be good for the political health of the city is undermined by his failure to offer Athens an account of how his philosophizing could preserve *homonoia* – a claim that would be particularly difficult to make for someone who denies that he is a teacher.

In this political context, one may come to understand that the charges of impiety are not distinct from the charges of corrupting the youth but are a part of the corruption charge. If Socrates does injustice “by not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other *daimonia* that are novel” (24b), his injustice is not his private belief. It matters very little what he *privately* believed. It is the *public* challenge to the gods of the city that corrupts the young. Religious rights and rituals educate the young through socialization in appropriate codes of

⁷ Before the emergence of the professional classes of teachers and Socrates, there were teachers, but only of the young. By the early fifth century there were schools for the young that offered three types of lessons – musical education, physical training and elementary lessons in reading and writing (see Marrou, 1956, I.4).

⁸ Looking back on the glory days of Sparta (and probably writing in the first quarter of the fourth century), Xenophon wrote,

outside Sparta, those who claim to educate their children best put servants in charge of them as *paidagogoi* [servants designated to oversee boys' daily routine] as soon as the children can understand what is said to them, and immediately send them to teachers to learn to read and write, to study the arts, and to practice gymnastics... Instead of leaving each man to appoint a slave *paidagogos* privately for his children, Lycurgus [the quasi-mythical founder of Sparta] put in charge of all of them a man who was drawn from the same class as those who hold the major offices of state. (Xenophon, 1975, II.1-2)

conduct and beliefs, essentially providing a foundation for a civic education that was threatened by Socrates and the sophists. As West points out, Plato's Socrates reverses the order of the charges by placing "corrupting the young" before the charges regarding the gods, at least as they are preserved by Diogenes Laertius (2.40) and Xenophon (*Mem.* 1.1.1) (see Plato, 1998, pp. 73, n38). On my reading of Plato's *Apology*, this inversion makes perfect sense since the defense centers on education and the charges of impiety are subsumed within the charges of corrupting.

That Plato dramatically links *Euthyphro* to the *Apology* is telling, for in *Euthyphro* Plato demonstrates that there are already multiple allegiances for sons even without the challenges of the sophists; Euthyphro believes that his loyalty to the religious teachings of the state take priority over his duty of respect to his father and his family's wishes. Hence a dramatic tension arises as Euthyphro is forced to consider which aspect of his traditional education takes priority, mirroring the tension within the traditional education itself to which Plato draws attention. Socrates demonstrates to Euthyphro how complex these loyalties are. Plato seems to suggest to his readers that it is not Socrates or the sophists who undermine the traditional education of parents or religion; rather, one may read *Euthyphro* as an argument that, because these traditional educational forces are sometimes in conflict, there has arisen a need for a philosopher who can help the city negotiate the conflict.

Before I turn to the new educators of fifth century Athens, it is important to consider a group that straddles the new and the old education, the poets. That poets were educators was a widely endorsed Greek view. In *The Republic*, Socrates notes that most Greeks believe that the chief poet-educator is Homer, "the poet who has educated Greece... worth studying both for our general education and for the management of human affairs" and, people believe, "that we should learn from him and follow this poet in the arrangement and conduct of the whole of our

own lives” (Plato, 2000, 606e-607a). The living poets of the fifth century continued to be viewed as the city’s educators. Hence, in the comedic contest of supremacy between Aeschylus and Euripides in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, each poet argues that his works are more educationally beneficial for Greek audiences than are his rival’s. Euripides replies to a question about the qualities of good poets by saying that they should demonstrate “skill [*dexiotētos*] and good counsel... because we make people better members of their communities [*pōlesin*]” (Aristophanes, 1998a, 1009). Later in the discussion, Aeschylus says, “the poet has a special duty to conceal what’s wicked, not stage it or teach it. For children the teacher is the one who instructs, but grownups have the poet. It’s very important that we tell them things that are good” (1053-4). Hence, it is surely no exaggeration when Werner Jaeger pronounced that “the Greeks always felt that a poet was in the broadest and deepest sense the educator of his people. Homer was only the noblest example, as it were the classic instance, of that general conception” (1945, p. 35).

What Aristophanes’ *Frogs* makes clear is that the mere fact that a poet receives the honor of having his work publicly performed in Greece does not necessarily mean that one should assume that the poet is a good educator. Aristophanes manages to satirize both Aeschylus and Euripides, perhaps undermining the educational authority of both (and perhaps making his own claim to be a prime educational force in the city).⁹ So in the fifth century BCE, the status of the poets as educators was called into question not only by Socrates and the other new educators but by the poets themselves.¹⁰ Further, the fifth century poets, through their decisions about what to depict in their publicly performed works, were giving conscious attention to the education they

⁹ Euben makes a compelling case, through a reading of *Clouds*, of Aristophanes as a political educator of the Greeks (1997, pp. 109-138).

¹⁰ Aristophanes is not the only example of a poet critical of the poets. Xenophanes of Colophon, who lived in the sixth and fifth centuries, composed verses critical of Homer and Hesiod.

provided Greek citizens. Hence, because of their conscious attention to the education of citizens, the fifth century poets have in common with Socrates and the sophists an essential aspect of their self-understanding. Yet the poets trace their lineage directly to the great poets like Homer and Hesiod and therefore make the claim that they are the rightful (and best equipped) educators of the polity.

With this context of the poets' role in Greece in mind, one can better understand the insult of Socrates' determination "that [poets] do not make what they make by wisdom, but by some sort of oracles" (22b-c). Among a group whose members prided themselves on their ability to educate and improve citizens, Socrates' remark would be insulting, denying both their ability to make wise judgments about what they portray and that there is an art to their practice.¹¹ It is therefore unsurprising that, when Socrates specifies the groups that are represented by his accusers, he says that Meletus was "vexed on behalf of the poets" (23e).¹² Socrates seems to suggest that poets have a choice. On the one hand, they can accept that they are educators who put no thought into what their poetry teaches, and are thereby part of the traditional education; in that case, they must deny themselves the venerable title of "teacher." On the other hand, they may accept that they care about the political education of the city and, therefore, their poetry may be in conflict with the poetry of others and their works may be in tension with the traditional education. Since the education of the city, a matter about which Socrates cares deeply, is at stake, he will not allow the poets to have it both ways.

The New Educators

¹¹ In Plato's *Ion* (1997a), Socrates similarly denies Ion, a rhapsode, and the poets whose work he performs, a claim to an art or craft (*technē*).

¹² There does not appear to be a consensus over whether Meletus himself was a poet. West contends that he was, although "no doubt one of the artless, ordinary poets, possessed by someone else's wisdom" (1979, pp. 134-135). Nails says that he was probably the son of a poet, though not a poet himself (2002, Meletus II, s.v.).

If my above analysis is well taken, Plato has shown that though Socrates is charged with educating the young in a way that challenges the traditional education, the traditional education challenges itself because of tensions inherent among its several constitutive elements. Though Socrates claims at several points that his philosophizing is consistent with the traditional education because many fathers approve of it and because he is doing the work of the gods (sanctioned by the oracle at Delphi), the core of the charges against him seem to be that he is undermining the traditional education. But rather than focus on defending himself against this charge, Socrates instead defends himself by saying that there are formal educators in Athens and denying that he is one of them, insinuating that these formal teachers are the people to whom citizens should direct their censure.

Despite his explicit denial, that Socrates teaches is suggested not only throughout the Platonic corpus but within the *Apology* itself. It is in the *Apology* that Socrates describes himself as the gadfly of Athens, awakening “a great and well-born horse who is rather sluggish because of his great size” (30e). Yet Socrates tells the jury, “if you have heard from anyone that I attempt to educate human beings and make money from it, that is not true” (19d). Later he reiterates, “I have never been anyone’s teacher” (33a) and “I have never promised or taught any instruction” (33b).

To many scholars, Socrates’ denial has seemed difficult to reconcile with Plato’s depictions of Socrates generally and the Socrates of the *Apology* in particular. Indeed, Eric Havelock concludes a paper on the *Apology* stating that “the familiar profession of Socratic ignorance... is here converted into a denial not only of Socrates’ educational purpose and activity, but of its professional and technical standards. It is surely the most dishonest statement in Plato’s writings” (Havelock, 1952, p. 108). Other scholars have resisted the charge of

dishonesty by exploring a specific sense of teaching to which Socrates may be referring in his denial. Vlastos argued that Socrates' denial of teaching was an example of his "complex irony," a statement which is true in one sense and false in another; Socrates does not teach in the sense of transferring information, but he teaches through questioning (Vlastos, 1991, p. 32). Brickhouse and Smith make a related distinction. They contend that Socrates converses and exhorts but he does not teach. Further, they say that Socrates "does not deny that through his exhortations he has something to teach his fellow Athenians. What he denies is that he is a teacher in the damning sense" (Brickhouse & Smith, 1989, p. 198). He avoids the "damning sense" because he has no formal students, only those who freely choose to listen to him. Nehamas contends that Socrates denies that he is a teacher in the sense of possessing infallible knowledge; he rather has merely "the conviction that some moral positions, which may in fact be very important to him, have so far survived all dialectical attacks" (Nehamas, 1992, p. 286). To name but one more example, Scott highlights the refusal of fees as the key difference; since Socrates takes part of a gift exchange rather than a market exchange, he can legitimately deny the title of teacher. In addition, like others, Scott holds that Socrates' favored question-and-answer method allows him to "teach" in a sense that molds character but does not transfer knowledge (Scott, 2000).

These treatments of the denial all draw distinctions in one way or another between Socrates and the sophists. Socrates seems to invite this distinction exactly along those lines for, immediately after his first denial of teaching and making money from it, he says, "though this too seems to me to be noble, if one should be able to educate human beings, like Gorgias of Leontini, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis." Socrates describes them as sophists and Evenus of Paros is soon added to the list (19e - 20c).

Thus on the one hand there is Socrates, who makes no promise to make young men more virtuous humans and citizens and denies that he possesses this *technē* (and hence asks for no fees because he takes on no students). On the other hand is a class of teachers who claim to have expertise in the teaching of virtue and collect fees in exchange for making their students more virtuous humans and citizens. If Athenians have confused Socrates with the sophists who spend much time talking about human and political *aretē*, virtue or excellence, one should not be terribly surprised. Anytus, in *Meno*, prides himself on staying clear of any sophists and then ends up in the position of knowing their danger without having met one (92b-c). Socrates, in contrast, is found discussing the matter of virtue with these professional educators when they visit Athens.

Further, Socrates makes speeches on virtue, making the distinction between himself and the sophists even murkier. He tells the jury that it is a great thing that he does for the city – “to make speeches every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me conversing and examining both myself and others” (38a). In addition, as I noted above, Socrates says, “I always do your business, going to each of you privately, as a father or an older brother might do, persuading you to care for virtue” (31b). If Athenians failed to notice that *in private*, some sophists take fees for teaching virtue while Socrates does not, and that sophists believe that they have mastered the *technē* of teaching while Socrates either denies that there is one or denies possessing it, they might be excused.

It would be one thing if Socrates consistently distinguished persuading (what he does) from teaching (what the sophists do). However, Socrates complicates matters by claiming to teach the jury. The verb *didaskēin*, to teach, and its cognates appear 18 times in Plato’s *Apology*, and the verb *paideuein*, to teach or educate, and its cognates appear three times.¹³ When Socrates denies that he teaches, he uses both words – *paideuein* at 19d9 and 19e2 and *didaskēin* at 33a5

¹³ Based on my search of Plato’s *Apology* in the *Online Abridged TLG database*.

and 33b6. Yet despite the weight of these words in a speech that supposedly attempts to demonstrate that Socrates is not a teacher who claims a *technē* and collects fees, he uses the words in ways that clearly show that he understands teaching to be broader than the specialized role he assigns it. Socrates says at 19d2 that the jury should teach one another about whether they have actually seen him do what he is accused of in the “old accusations.” Clearly he understands that teaching may be done in a non-technical, informal way.¹⁴ Further, Socrates tells the jury that he will *teach them* at 21b1, “I am going to teach you where the slander against me has come from,” and 35c2, “to me it does not seem to be just to beg the judge, nor to be acquitted by begging, but rather to teach and to persuade.”¹⁵ If Socrates is only a “persuader” and “exhorter”, why does he here say that he will both teach (*didaskēin*) and persuade (*peithein*)? I submit that Plato is far too careful a writer to have used *didaskēin* in addition to *peithein* in Socrates’ comments to the jury by accident, especially when using *peithein* alone would have allowed the distinction to hold between teaching and persuading/exhorting. Rather, Plato presents pieces of a puzzle that draw the reader into its web; however, these puzzle pieces are so expertly misshapen that they resist all solutions. In doing so, Plato demonstrates the skills of the master teacher that he is; he creates a brilliant work in which each layer of answers reveals new questions.

As further evidence of Plato’s puzzle, consider another way that Socrates distinguishes himself from the sophists. He says that anyone who wants to may associate with him if they choose, but since he promises nothing, takes no fees, and denies responsibility for them, they should be understood as listeners rather than students (as Brickhouse and Smith put it) and the encounter should be understood as a gift exchange (as Scott puts it). And this manner of distinguishing himself from the sophists seems to be invited by the text as well for Socrates says

¹⁴ Reeve notes this use to criticize scholars who claim that Socrates merely denies teaching in a technical sense (1989, p. 162).

¹⁵ At 35d4 he adds that it would be possible for him to teach the jury badly.

I have never been anyone's teacher; but if anyone, whether younger or older, desired to hear me speaking and doing my own things, I never begrudged it to him. And I do not converse only when I receive money, and not when I do not receive it: rather, I offer myself to both rich and poor alike for questioning, and if anyone wishes to hear what I say, he may answer me. And whether any of them becomes an upright man or not, I would not justly be held responsible, since I have never promised or taught any instruction to any of them. (33a-b)

Responsibility for his effect on Athens is precisely what is at stake and Socrates' disavowal of responsibly based on the fact that he promises nothing, accepts no fees and establishes no formal relationships with his students is not quite convincing.¹⁶ But the most challenging part about accepting that Socrates' free attachments make him a different kind of teacher, or not a teacher at all, is that Socrates explicitly invokes a degree of formality when he talks about the relationships that he has with young men. For example, consider Socrates' identification of several of the fathers and brothers of the young men with whom he associated that I discussed above. Socrates says to the jury that if he had corrupted the young, someone would come forward to say so or, at least, their fathers or families would. But if Socrates merely had informal relationships with the many young men who listen to him conversing, would he really be able to identify so readily the families who can attest to his non-harmful influence?

Socrates' disavowal of formal relations with young men is even more explicitly undermined when Socrates utters a threatening line that is too often overlooked in the scholarship: "I affirm, you men who condemned me to death, that vengeance will come upon you right after my death, and much harsher, by Zeus, than the sort you give me by killing me... There will be more who will refute you, *whom I have now been holding back; you did not*

¹⁶ Brann's analysis of this passage is insightful:

if he takes no money, that only means that he is uncontrollable—he cannot be engaged or dismissed, as a parent might hire or fire a professional. And if he takes no responsibility for the careers of his young associates, why, that is usually called irresponsibility. But if he conveys no positive matter to these young men, that is the very worst of all, in the light of what he shows them instead... He goes about engaging public men, poets and craftsmen in conversations which are really examinations, in the course of which it emerges that they do not, in truth, know what they are doing, although they think they know it well enough while the young men stand by and watch and smile... This is what Socrates calls "not being anyone's teacher," and this is how he makes himself palatable to his fellow-citizens! (1978, pp. 11-12)

perceive them” (39c-d; my emphasis). If the relationship is free and informal, how does Socrates have the power to hold people back? Socrates here suggests not the relationship between unattached conversational partners and onlookers but, rather, the tightly knit bonds of a master teacher and his disciples. Once again, Socrates’ own testimony challenges his denial of teaching and the reader is left – like Socrates’ jury and most Athenians – with a cloudy picture of whether Socrates is a teacher and, if so, what kind of teacher he is.

Conclusion

In his account of Socrates’ trial, Plato has provided a brilliant mediation on the problem of education in the *polis* in fifth century Athens. My reading of the *Apology* suggests that Plato is not offering an argument about how Socrates differs from other educators nor is he attempting to demonstrate the compatibility of the Socratic education and the traditional education. Plato, perhaps an even more gifted educator than his own teacher, Socrates, opened up a problem, revealed its complexities, and crafted a work so intriguing and puzzling that it continues to draw readers into its depths. The *Apology* is constructed with such care around the issue of teaching that it invites speculation on how Socrates differed from the other teachers and intellectuals of his day and simultaneously resists all solutions.

If I am right about this, the question remains why Plato would do such a thing. I tentatively suggest three answers. First, Plato reveals the accusers, and the Athenians in general, including the jurors at the trial, to have had very little sense of the monumental changes of the educational currents in their time. Further, they did not understand at all how Socrates – or the sophists – fit into this picture beyond recognizing the fact that the tides were changing and the new teachers and intellectuals were contributing to the change. Second, I think that Plato intends

for his readers to engage in precisely the type of speculation that has occupied scholars, inquiring into what sense Socrates' philosophizing is educational if he denies that he is a teacher. Third, and relatedly, Plato wants his readers to engage in general contemplation about what sort of teachers they ought to want both for themselves and for their cities. It is this final answer that reveals the enduring value of the work, for we ought to always remember that we must identify and reflect upon the many educational forces around us; we must make decisions about what kind of teachers we need for ourselves and what kind of education we want for our young citizens.

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