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Human Excellence and the Body Politic: 
Socratic Education as Reliever of the Tension 

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The problematic relationship between the political community and its outstanding individuals is certainly as old as political communities themselves. It is possible that men living outside of some political community may avoid the problem, but, as long as there are communities which seek the common good and individuals who may be distinguished from others due to their talents or achievements, there will exist a problem of how to do justice to both the community and to those who excel. This relationship has been addressed by political philosophers in all periods of history. These political philosophers have approached the problem from various angles but none has managed to completely avoid the issue. 

Different approaches to the problem may be identified by reference to the fundamental questions which the philosophers pose with regard to outstanding individuals. In fact, the way that the question is asked frequently supplies the answer or at least some important implications for the answerer. Some questions related to the problem are: What is the place of the outstanding individual in the political community? What does the excellent one owe to the community? What does the community owe to the outstanding ones? What must the community tolerate from these individuals? What must these individuals tolerate from the community? The above questions or similar ones have been addressed by Aristotle, Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and virtually all others who have been considered political philosophers. It would not be out of place to mention that similar questions have been addressed by the political thinkers of China as well. The problem is truly a universal one for those who are concerned with either good government, the good of the community, or excellence. It is difficult, although perhaps not impossible, to conceive of an intelligent human being who does not fall into at least one of these categories.

The founder of political philosophy was also deeply concerned about the relationship between the polis, his political community, and excellent individuals. Socrates, the man whom Cicero said called philosophy down from the heavens, devoted his life to making the excellent young men of the polis of Athens safe for the community and making the democracy which flourished in that polis safe for them. From all accounts of his life Socrates was preoccupied with the outstanding young men of Athens and spent most of his time engaged in dialogue with them. The thesis of this essay is that the time he spent with them was in pursuit of solving the problem of how a polis, especially a democratic one, might peacefully coexist with her excellent young men without resulting in the destruction of either. Learning
the facts of Socrates' life, much less his true beliefs, is extremely difficult, since he never wrote. We are left to rely on the accounts of others who were either his friends or his students. Because of this closeness between Socrates and our sources of information about his life and beliefs, we must realize that the picture we receive is more literary than historical and, therefore, may be idealized to a certain extent. However, that should not discourage us, since an idealized view, if true to the general facts, may make it simpler for us to find the most important themes in both the life and thought of Socrates. Most of our knowledge of Socrates comes from two of his students, Plato and Xenophon, and from his friend Aristophanes, the Athenian writer of comedic plays.

This study will focus on Platonic Socrates, as distinguished from Xenophonic Socrates or Aristophanean Socrates. It is Plato's account of Socrates with which most are familiar today. He is the writer whose Socratic writings have been most widely read. Through an examination of some of Plato's writings on Socrates this paper will focus on Socrates' approach to the problem of the relationship between the *polis* and the outstanding individual. To a lesser extent the paper will examine the Socratic way of life as a solution to the problem. Again the focus will be on the life of Socrates as presented by Plato rather than on particular speeches delivered by Socrates in the course of a Platonic dialogue. However, it will be necessary to refer to the speeches of Socrates on some occasions in order to try to understand the character as he is presented by Plato. Although Plato wrote over 20 dialogues dealing with Socrates, the investigation in this paper will center on three of those dialogues: *The Apology of Socrates*, *The Republic*, and *The Gorgias*. These dialogues represent the heart of the Platonic literature on the questions at hand, although they are certainly not exhaustive with regard to the topic.

The corpus of Platonic writings on Socrates present a portrait of a man who eschews the spotlight of politics and public affairs in order to spend his time engaged in conversation or dialogue with the brightest young men of Athens. From all accounts Socrates avoids conversations with the old of the city just as assiduously as he pursues the company of the young. In addition, he avoids the many, or the *demos*, who are the rulers of the Athenian democracy. In fact, he steers clear of public life in general except when compelled to take part in his civic duty by the *polis* of Athens. He also is reluctant to become involved with the rhetoricians and sophists who abound in the city. These men make their livings flattering the many on the one hand and teaching those who are willing to pay to learn how to deceive the many, or *demos*, on the other hand. One time he is compelled to address the *demos* is at his trial where he is charged with corrupting the youth of Athens and with being the worst of the sophists. He is obliged to defend his life before the people of Athens by presenting his *apology* or defense in a court of law.
Why does Socrates devote his life to the young men of Athens? What is his fascination with these outstanding young men? Even if we assume that he was unaware of the serious consequences that this infatuation would have for him personally (it did lead to his being sentenced to death), what drew him to them? In order to answer this question it is necessary to turn to the Socratic notions of education and philosophy presented by Plato. The most extensive handling of these topics in the corpus of the Platonic literature can be found in the second half of *The Republic*. In the first half of *The Republic* Socrates constructs a "city in speech" in order to address the question of justice posed to him by some of the youths of Athens. This "city in speech" represents an imaginary *polis* which Socrates puts forth as the most just city we can conceive. It is purely imaginary as we are repeatedly told (by reference to many impossible features contained within it). Socrates indicates that this "city in speech" could not possibly come into existence in reality except by pure chance, an extraordinarily unlikely occurrence. For Socrates the most unrealistic feature of this "city in speech" composed of many impossible features is that it will be governed by philosophers or philosopher-kings.

If this city is to keep itself supplied with an ample number of philosophers to provide good government, it will have to devise a system of education for those who are fit to be philosophers and, therefore, rulers in this "city in speech." This philosophical education will not be given to all in the "city in speech" but only to those whose souls make them fit to be philosophers. In Book VI of *The Republic* Socrates posits the idea that only certain types of men and women, or, to be more exact, certain types of souls are capable of becoming philosophers (*Republic*, 484a-d). Since this is true, it follows that only those with this particular type of soul are fit to be educated as rulers for the best of cities. What are the characteristics of the souls of these potential philosophers? Socrates states that the souls of the potential philosophers all possess three important characteristics. First of all, these souls hate that which is false and cherish that which is the truth (*Republic*, 485c). Secondly, a soul that is fit for philosophy will be moderate and have no love of money or the many things with which money is associated. However, in conjunction with this moderation the excellent soul will be neither illiberal or cowardly (*Republic*, 485e-486b). Obviously, philosophy is not to be pursued by those who are not exceptionally quick studies, for in order to reach the depths of philosophy one must traverse the shallows quickly or be doomed never to escape them. Socrates summarizes the philosophic soul at the end of this section of *The Republic*:

> Is there any way, then, in which you could blame a practice like this that a man could never adequately pursue if he were not by nature a good rememberer, a good learner, magnificent, charming, and a friend and kinsman of truth, justice, courage and moderation?" (*Republic*, 487a).
These special souls then are the only ones that should be admitted to partake of the philosophic education that will be offered the future rulers of the "city in speech."

Those who have these talents or attributes of the soul are the excellent and need to be educated to philosophy not only for their own good but for the good of the polis, as will be explained below. Those souls which are capable of being taken to true philosophy through proper education also have a need to be taken there, as will, hopefully, become clear in what is to follow. A particular problem arises because the polis, certainly any but the best polis, the "city in speech," and especially the democratic polis of Athens, corrupts the best souls and pulls them away from philosophy instead of steering them toward the love of wisdom. These inferior regimes or cities corrupt the best souls by failing to nurture them through the proper education. These regimes direct or point the best souls toward lower goals than wisdom and virtue (Republic, 491b-e).

This misdirection creates a very serious problem for both the excellent souls and the cities, since those capable of attaining the highest good, philosophy, are also capable of reaching the greatest evil, tyranny. As Socrates explains it, these souls which are equipped to be the greatest achievers of justice and virtue are also capable of becoming the sources of the greatest injustice and villainy:

"So I suppose it is reasonable that the best nature comes off worse than an ordinary one from an inappropriate rearing."
"Yes, it is."
"Won't we say for souls too, Adeimantus," I said, "that, similarly, those with the best natures become exceptionally bad when they get bad instruction? Or do you suppose an ordinary nature is the source of great injustices and unmixed villainy? Don't you suppose, rather, that it's a lusty one corrupted by its rearing, while a weak nature will never be the cause of great things either good or bad?" (Republic, 491d-e)

Outstanding souls have courage, moderation, beauty, wealth, strength of body, and charm which can be used for the greatest good or evil.

Any but the best of cities accomplishes the corruption of the best souls by both flattery and the nurturing of false beliefs in the excellent soul. These false beliefs are nurtured not only by the many of the polis but also by the poets of the polis. Both the poets and the many regale the excellent soul with tales that glorify evil actions committed by gods and demigods. These stories depict those who are most worthy of honor as reaching petty goals through the use of treachery and deceit. Treachery and deceit are described as the ways of attaining the highest goals. While heralding the value of less than admirable methods, the demos and the poets of the polis are also guilty of prescribing the wrong ends for the best of souls as well. The polis, particularly the demos in Athens, commends the best soul as being the greatest
of all and worthy of the highest honors, but then denies to the best souls in
the name of democracy those honors he is told he deserves. In addition, the
many teach the most excellent soul that he should strive after that which the
many hold to be most high: money, power, fame, and the like. These goals
are substituted for what the best souls should seek—virtue and wisdom.
These best of souls are deceived into believing that they may have that
which they may not have in a polis, at least in a democratic polis such as
Athens. The best of men possessed of the best of souls are used by the
demos and by their relatives until they try to attain that which they have
been led to believe they deserve. Frustrated by the city, they seek to gain
what they deserve by the methods they have been taught to respect:
treachery and deceit. When their deceits are exposed or their ends finally
revealed these best of souls are cast from the polis and excellence is given yet
another black mark on the ledger of the demos.

When Socrates turns to the discussion of education, he indicates that it
is not what the many believe it to be—giving the soul something which it has
not got. Education consists of turning the soul, at least the most excellent
soul, away from the false goals which the polis prescribes for it toward the
one true goal, the love of wisdom. True education of the best sorts of souls
is turning the soul away from the tastes of the many, and toward the pursuit
of wisdom. Education, then, is that art of turning souls toward virtue:

“Therefore, the other virtues of a soul, as they are called, are
probably somewhat close to those of the body. For they are really not
there beforehand and are later produced by habits and exercises, while
the virtue of exercising prudence is more than anything somehow more
divine, it seems; it never loses its power, but according to the way it is
turned, it becomes useful and helpful or, again, useless and harmful.
Or haven't you yet reflected about the men who are said to be vicious but wise, how shrewdly their petty soul sees and how sharply it distinguishes those things toward which it is turned, showing that it doesn't have poor vision although it is compelled to serve vice; so that the sharper it sees, the more evil it accomplishes?"

"Most certainly," he said.

"However," I said, "if this part of such a nature were trimmed in earliest childhood and its ties of kinship with becoming were cut off—like leaden weights, which eating and such pleasures as well as their refinements naturally attach to the soul and turn its vision downward—if, I say, it were rid of them and turned around toward the true things, this same part of the same human beings would also see them most sharply, just as it does those things toward which it is now turned."

(Republic, 518d-519b).

Once again Socrates tells us that the same souls which are suited for philosophy are also suited for tyranny. The potential philosophers are the same as the potential tyrants! The only difference between the tyrant and the true philosopher is that the soul of the former is turned toward vice while the soul of the latter is turned toward virtue.

The business of turning souls from vice to virtue is indeed a most serious one for the polis. It is the difference between philosophy and the possibility of tyranny. However, it is also a very necessary, if dangerous, task if the polis is to remain free from despotic rule. It is a dangerous task because the one who undertakes it runs the risk of being branded the mentor of tyrants, if he is not completely successful in turning the souls of his pupils. Such was the fate of Socrates! Of the students of Socrates of whom we have knowledge we know that he had both successes and failures in the turning of souls. Among his reputed successes must be numbered the two philosophers Plato and Xenophon. His reputed failures would include Alcibiades, the outstanding Athenian general of the Peloponnesian War, who was ruined by his own ambition, and Critias, who was to become one of the infamous Thirty Tyrants of Athens.

The alleged failures of Socrates were to play an important role in his trial and death. One of the major charges leveled against Socrates at his trial, as we are told in the Apology of Socrates, was corrupting the youth of Athens. In other words, his attraction to the most excellent young souls of the polis proved eventually to be fatal to Socrates, although not until he reached the age of 70. He is charged with corrupting the youth of Athens because some of the excellent young souls with whom he was frequently seen were the leading contemnors of the Athenian demos. In fact, as was mentioned above, Critias was actually able to subvert the power of many in Athens during the reign of the Thirty Tyrants. The Apology of Socrates,
which will be discussed in greater detail below, is Plato's description of the trial of Socrates and the way in which Socrates "defends" himself against the charges brought against him. Allan Bloom claims that the true apology or defense of Socrates is presented in *The Republic* where Socrates explains why he has led the life he has led and where he explains the significance of the turning of souls. While there is certainly a great deal of truth in what Professor Bloom says, it would seem that the ultimate apology of Socrates exists in the persons and writings of Plato and Xenophon and the others whom Socrates was successful in turning toward philosophy. That apology is an ongoing defense that is still having an effect today, at least it is less than noble to deny that as a possibility.

In another Platonic dialogue, the *Phaedrus*, Socrates and his companion, Phaedrus, pause to take shelter from the sun under the platanos tree. While under the shelter of the platanos the men engage in a philosophical discussion. It is no mere coincidence that the name of the tree is so similar to the name of the author of the dialogue. Just as the tree shades Socrates and Phaedrus, Plato shelters philosophy and, therefore, provides for its continuation after the life of Socrates has ended and, as it turns out, for millenia after the death of Plato himself. It should also be noted here that it is doubtful that Socrates believed that political philosophy could have ever existed in any place other than Athens, or a place like Athens—a democracy. Other types of regimes refuse to allow philosophy to enter into their gates. The action of the *Phaedrus* takes place outside the city walls of Athens, and we may, therefore, infer that Plato not only provides a suitable shelter for the continuation of philosophy in time but also makes it possible for philosophy to venture out beyond the confines of democracies and still survive. What greater defense of Socrates can there be than that he and his successors have given the gift of philosophy to the Western world? They have made the love of wisdom a possibility for those whom most polities would corrupt or at least divert.

One additional preliminary is necessary before turning to a discussion of Plato's *Apology of Socrates*: we must distinguish Socrates from another group of 'teachers' who thrived in Athens during the fifth century B.C. This other group of teachers was known as sophists or rhetoricians. Unlike Socrates, these men charged for their services, and their lessons consisted of teaching the young men of Athens the art of speechmaking. Techniques of persuasion were provided so that these young men would be able to win their points with the many (the rulers of Athenian democracy) in both the law court and the legislative assembly. These *sophists* were unconcerned with philosophy or the pursuit of virtue; they were only interested in winning victories through rhetoric. Much like the lawyers of the present day these men were not concerned with right and wrong or truth and falseness. Power and control were their only goals, although wealth could help them attain these goals and, therefore, was frequently seen as another worthwhile pursuit.
In the terminology used in *The Republic* these sophists were the false philosophers who the many confuse with the true philosophers. The source of the confusion arises from the fact that these false philosophers appear to use the same techniques of investigation as the true philosophers—speeches and dialogues. However, these false philosophers are not generally of the best sort of souls, and, when they are, their souls have not been turned toward the good. Again, these sophists taught techniques and methods and were not concerned with the use to which these skills were put. Their field was the techniques of persuasion and political control through speech. These men became the mortal enemies of Socrates, and they were most awesome and deadly foes, indeed. Although they were his enemies, the sophists accused Socrates of doing what they themselves were, in fact, guilty of: teaching manipulation of the many through the use of speech to the youth and, thereby, corrupting them.

Perhaps the fullest treatment of these sophists by Plato appears in the dialogue entitled *Gorgias*. This dialogue is a conversation between Socrates and Gorgias, one of the most famous of all the sophists. Other participants in this dialogue are Chaerephon, a young follower of Socrates, and Callicles and Polus, two other sophists. The dialogue in many ways demonstrates the differences between philosophers and sophists. It also helps to explain why the sophists were so opposed to Socrates—he was capable of exposing them for what they were. At the opening of the dialogue Socrates has been brought by Chaerephon to hear Gorgias speak. However, the two arrive too late for the public oration and rather than settle for a simple declamation from Gorgias Socrates wants Gorgias to explain to him what it is he teaches, as he explains to Callicles:

But do you suppose he would be willing just to talk with us? What I really want is to learn from him the power of his art, and what it is he professes to teach. The rest of his performance he may, as you suggest, deliver at some other time (*Gorgias*, 447c).

With some ‘help’ from Socrates Gorgias is able to explain what it is he teaches:

*Gorg.* I mean the ability to persuade with words judges in the law courts, senators in the Senate, assemblymen in the Assembly, and men in any other meeting which convenes for the public interest. Since it is perfectly true that by virtue of this power you will have at your beck and call the physician and the trainer, that businessman of yours will turn out to be making money for somebody else! Not for himself will he make it, but for you who have the power to speak and persuade the vast majority.

*Socr.* At this moment, Gorgias, you seem to have come very close to defining what sort of art you consider rhetoric to be. If I understand
you at all, you mean that rhetoric produces persuasion. Its entire business is persuasion; the whole sum and substance of it comes to that. Can you, in fact, declare that rhetoric has any further power than to effect persuasion in the listeners’ soul?

_Gorg._ No, I can’t, Socrates; you seem to me to be giving an adequate definition. This is really its sum and substance. (_Gorgias_, 452e–453a)

Socrates then manages to get Gorgias to admit that his art is limited to persuasion and that he is ignorant of other arts, although through his speeches he can persuade the many that they should listen to him with regard to the other arts rather than those who are really knowledgeable in those arts.

Socrates, having exacted these concessions, then strikes at the heart of the matter when he asks Gorgias what happens if a student should come to him ignorant of the difference between good and evil:

For the moment let us rather consider this point: Is the rhetorician’s equipment the same in regard to justice and injustice, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, as it is regarding health and the several subjects of the other arts? Is it, in fact, true that he does not really know what is good or evil, beautiful or ugly, just or unjust, but has devised a means of persuasion about them so that, in the eyes of the ignorant, he seems to know more than the actual possessor of knowledge though he does not really do so? Or is it necessary for him to know? Must the man who intends to learn rhetoric have acquired this knowledge before he comes to you? And if he hasn’t, will you, the teacher of rhetoric, teach him none of these things (of course that’s not really your job), but instead will you make him, in the eyes of the crowd, seem to know such things, though he doesn’t, and seem to be good, though he isn’t? Or is it a fact that you will not be able to teach him rhetoric at all until he first learns the truth about these matters? What is really the situation in such cases, Gorgias? For heaven’s sake, strip the veil off rhetoric, as you promised to do, and tell us what on earth its power may be!

_Gorg._ Why, Socrates, it is my opinion that if a pupil does not happen to know these things, he will learn them, as well as rhetoric, from me. (_Gorgias_, 459d–460a)

From this point on Socrates has Gorgias and the other sophists where he wants them. Initially, he continues with the claim that rhetoric is no art at all but more of a knack, like cookery. This the sophists find most insulting. During the remainder of the dialogue Socrates proceeds to demonstrate through a dialogue with Polus, the upstart sophist, and Callicles, the most corrupt and, hence, dangerous sophist, that the sophists cannot teach justice and virtue to their ignorant pupils as Gorgias had claimed, because
they are ignorant of those things themselves. Rhetoricians are ignorant of the most important things in human life. He compares rhetoricians with tyrants and claims that rhetoricians can serve no just purpose in the polis because of this ignorance. In fact, they are most dangerous to the polis because of this coupling of their power at persuasion with their ignorance and lack of concern about the highest human things. It is easy to see from this why the sophists so detested Socrates.

Having briefly touched on the major elements of the life of Platonic Socrates that are essential for comprehending the topic under discussion, one can now turn to the events surrounding his death at the hands of the Athenian polis. In the Apology of Socrates Plato presents an account of the trial of Socrates. In fact, what Plato presents is not a “full transcript” of the trial (not even a dramatised one), but rather he gives us only the speeches made by Socrates and not those of his accusers. He does tell us something about what the accusers said but only because Socrates refers to those speeches in his own address to the jury. All of the accusers were excellent speakers—apparently rhetoricians. From what Socrates says to the court it becomes obvious that he was formally charged with two crimes: corrupting the youth of Athens and impiety. The second charge was actually in two parts: not honoring the gods of the city and introducing new gods or spirits into the city of Athens. Quite obviously the two major charges are related.

During the course of his “defense” Socrates chooses to divide the charges made against him into two separate categories. In the first of these categories are the old charges—those that have been persistently leveled against him over a period of years by the sophists and poets of the polis. These old charges include making the stronger argument appear the weaker, being a meddler in the affairs of others, and prying into things under the earth and in the heavens. When speaking on his own behalf Socrates devotes most of his attention to these old charges rather than the particular “crimes” for which he stands indicted. Those “crimes” he is brought to court for at this time he calls the new charges and all but ignores them. With regard to the old charges Socrates does identify at least one source of these false claims made against him:

I went to one of those reputed to be wise, supposing that there, if anywhere, I would refute the divination and show the oracle, “This man is wiser than I, but you declared that I was.” So I considered this man thoroughly—I need not speak of him by name, but he was one of the politicians—and when I considered him and conversed with him, men of Athens, I was affected something like this: it seemed to me that this man seemed to be wise, both to many other human beings and most of all to himself, but he was not. And then I tried to show him that he supposed he was wise, but was not. So from this I became hateful both to him and to many of those present.
At any rate, as I went away, I reckoned with myself: "I am wiser than this human being. For neither of us is likely to know anything noble and good, but he supposes he knows something when he does not know, while I, just as I do not know, do not suppose I do. I am likely to be wiser than he in just this little something; that what I do not know, I do not suppose I know."

From there I went to someone else, one of those reputed to be wiser than that man, and these things seemed to me to be the same. And there I became hateful both to that man and to many others.

After this, then, I kept going to one after another, all the while perceiving with pain and fear that I was becoming hateful. (Apology, 21b-21e)

As we saw in Gorgias Plato gave an account of one of these encounters which demonstrated how much these sophists must have come to hate Socrates as he moved about the city exposing them. The bitter exchange that took place in that dialogue was apparently only one of several such encounters.

With regard to the new charges brought by individuals present in the court, Socrates only attempts to show how ludicrous these charges actually are. He manages to get Meletus, one of his accusers, to assert that, while only Socrates purposely corrupts the youth of Athens, all other Athenians help to make those youth better:

(Socrates) Then all Athenians, as it appears, make them noble and good except me, and I alone corrupt them. Is this what you are saying? (Meletus) I do say these things, most vehemently. (Apology, 25a)

This passage is particularly ironic when you consider the purpose to which Socrates devoted his life, according to Plato. It is even more ironic when one considers that Socrates was, in fact, convicted of the charges brought against him. But irony is a constant presence in the life of Socrates and the writings of Plato.

Socrates does not really defend himself against the charges made against him by Meletus and his cohorts. Instead he simply instructs the jury that, if he is to be found guilty by them, it will not be on the basis of these new charges brought in court and the paucity of evidence which accompanies them but on the basis of the prejudice against him which stems from those old charges. After trying to instruct and persuade the jury of the correctness of his way of life in lieu of a genuine effort at defense, Socrates is found guilty by the jury of 500 Athenians by 30 votes. His obvious lack of repentence for his lifestyle no doubt weighed heavily on the final outcome. At this stage of the trial Socrates is once again called upon to address the jury—this time with regard to sentencing. Under Athenian law both the ac-
cuser and the convicted are required to propose punishments for the transgressor against the *polis*. Meletus had proposed the death sentence for Socrates. In addressing the court with regard to his sentence Socrates virtually assures that he will be sentenced to death. He begins by stating that he believes that he did no wrong and that his sentence should, therefore, be a sort of reward rather than a punishment. He says that the city of Athens should require that he continue to live the life that he has been living—engaging in dialogue with the young men of Athens and seeking to expose ignorance and untruth wherever it exists. In addition, the *polis* should provide for his sustenance in return for this service to the city. Bear in mind that what he proposes as his sentence is the very action for which he has just been condemned by this same jury. He also tells the jury that, if he is allowed to live, he will continue to do what he has been doing in the past. He also rejects exile, since only in Athens was he free to follow the dictates of his conscience (at least until now he had been). Finally, he offers a small fine which he can pay as an alternative sentence or a moderate fine which his friends could pay. Even in making these proposals he shows no remorse, and the jury which convicted has little choice but to condemn.

The jury condemns Socrates to death, and, after that final decision is reached, Socrates is permitted to address the court for one last time. He concludes the trial with the following remarks:

But it is clear to me that it was now better for me to be dead and to have left troubles behind. Because of this, the sign also nowhere turned me away, and I at least am not very vexed at those who voted to condemn me and at my accusers. And yet it was not with this thought that they voted to condemn me and accuse me: they supposed they would harm me. For this they are worthy of blame.

This much, however, I beg of them: When my sons grow up, punish them, men, and pain them in the very same way I pained you, if they seem to you to care for money or anything else before virtue. And if they are reputed to be something when they are nothing, reproach them just as I did you: tell them that they do not care for the things they should, and that they suppose they are something when they are worth nothing. And, if you will do these things, we will be treated justly by you, both I myself and my sons.

But now it is time to go away, I to die and you to live. Which of us goes to a better thing is unclear except to the god. (*Apology*, 41d–42a)

The lack of remorse about what he had done for the youth of Athens becomes even clearer in his final public speech—he had treated the sons of Athens as he would have the other Athenians treat his own sons. Socrates had led a life which attempted to turn the best of souls toward the highest rather than the lowest goals that men could achieve.
The central theme in the preceding analysis has been the dedication of Socrates to the task of turning the souls of the young men of Athens toward the ‘good’ and the ‘just.’ Secondary themes were the importance of this task and the danger involved for the one who attempted to perform it (Socrates). At this point, it would not be surprising to hear someone ask, "How is this relevant to the twentieth century or to political scientists of the present day?" Perhaps the easiest answer to challenges of this type is to say, "Relevance does not concern me; I am simply a scholar trying to understand the thought of another human being." Whether or not this response is sufficient in this case need not be debated, since that is not the answer that will be given. It seems to the author that the preceding considerations have or should have relevance for all engaged in the teaching of America’s youth (or the youth of any polity, for that matter). However, it seems to be especially significant for those of us who teach political and social sciences.

Those of us who teach political science or the humanities or social sciences, in general, seem to be serving the sentence that Socrates would have proposed for himself as first choice at his trial—to continue engaging in dialogue with the best young people of the polis and to have his sustenance provided for by the state. This appears to be especially true for those who teach at state institutions, but even the faculty at private colleges derive many benefits from the government which make it possible for them to practice their art, science, or knack. At the same time, we fare better than Socrates had hoped, since we receive considerably more than mere sustenance for our efforts. Having taken up this task begun by Socrates, it seems only natural to ask how we are doing. It is also reasonable to apply the standards which were spelled out in the works of Plato when we attempt to answer this question. Are we as professors of political science turning souls toward ‘the good’ and ‘the just’? Are we at least not like the sophists of Socrates’ time? That is, do we at least not teach techniques of manipulation and control to whomever wants to learn them and assume that our students either know the difference between right and wrong when they come to us or will somehow pick it up in the course of their studies although it is not really our job to teach it to them? I fear that the answer we must give for our profession is that we are more like the sophists than like Socrates.

In an essay written in 1961 Howard White criticized the political science profession which had recently undergone a “behavioral revolution” for aiding in the manipulation of the American voters by teaching techniques of manipulation to whomever would listen and selling or at least leasing our services to political candidates. White explained that political scientists (or students of politics) had traditionally opposed both corruption and manipulation, but that the new science of politics was, in fact, teaching and, therefore, condoning new techniques of manipulation. Within a few years these techniques would evolve into a true art form, as Joe McGinniss was prompt to point out to us. A year after White’s controversial article
appeared Leo Strauss published "An Epilogue" to Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics. Strauss took a similar position to that taken by his former student, Howard White, although he was less condemning in his tone. Strauss does not accuse political science of collusion or manipulation as White had. Strauss claims that the new political science, dominated by behavioralism, "fiddles while Rome burns." He then says that it is excused because: "it does not know that it fiddles, and it does not know that Rome burns." In other words, Strauss saw the problem with behavioralist political science as being one of ignorance rather than being diabolical.

Of course, since the time these articles were written, a number of changes have taken place in our profession—the behavioral revolution has been replaced by the post-behavioral revolution, and the excesses of the former have been ameliorated by the latter. We now have regained our equilibrium and are back on the appropriate course. Or are we? Are we any better today than the sophists of fifth century Athens? Should we not perhaps re-examine what we are teaching? Are we turning souls at all or merely fiddling? Is merely fiddling enough? If we are turning souls, are we turning them in the right direction? Is merely fiddling better or worse than turning souls the wrong way? Is American society more or less helpful than Athens in turning souls the right way? Unfortunately, I have no definitive answer to these questions. However, if I have raised questions in the minds of others where they did not exist before or raised nascent doubts to the level of consciousness, perhaps I have served some purpose of relevance above and beyond simply trying to understand the thought of another human being.

1If not true, we are still left with an important image of the founder of political philosophy presented by other important thinkers. We are left with a version of his life which these other important thinkers feel is most worthy of presentation. In the cases of his students we may infer that the untrue picture contains the most important elements of what they learned from him. This is one reason we write of Platonic Socrates or Xenophonic Socrates.

2All citations used in this paper refer to the title of the dialogue followed by the standard Stephanus page numbers.


4All quotations from The Republic are from: The Republic of Plato, translated by Allan Bloom, "Interpretive Essay" in Ibid., p. 307.


6All quotations from the Apology of Socrates are from: Plato’s Apology of Socrates, translated by Thomas G. West (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979).


10Ibid., p. 327.

11Ibid.