

Alcibiades on Socrates’s Silenic Ways: A Gadamerian-Inflected Hermeneutical Interrogation of Socrates as a Dialogue Partner

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Introduction

Although most readers of Plato’s *Symposium* find Alcibiades’s speech humorous and delightful to read, commentators are divided on how to interpret it. A particular point of contention centers on Alcibiades’s critical assessment of Socrates. For example, some interpret the speech through Alcibiades’s moral failures and thus, in essence, dismiss his critical remarks about Socrates.¹ Others contend that Alcibiades’s depiction of Socrates is both plausible and offers significant insights into Socrates’s philosophical *eros*.² This essay aligns with several conclusions of the latter group. In particular, it takes seriously Alcibiades’s portrait of Socrates as a satyr whose peculiar philosophical *eros* gives rise to a philosophical practice that simultaneously attracts and repels. Despite Alcibiades’s flaws, the accusations that he levels against Socrates reveal tensions in the philosopher that are worth interrogating. Alcibiades’s speech, which both condemns and praises Socrates, proffers a complex picture of the challenges of the philosophical life and Socrates’s particular enactment of that life. The multiple textual clues in the *Symposium*—for example, Plato’s staging of Alcibiades’s speech as truthful and the stark contrast between Alcibiades and Apollodorus³—indicate that Alcibiades’s censure of Socrates should be read with critical attentiveness and seriousness since the questions it raises are philosophically, not to mention ethically, significant. By refusing to allow either Socrates or Alcibiades the last word, Plato’s text could be read as inviting his readers to participate in an ongoing interrogation of *both* figures—figures whose complexity and (dis)harmony of opposites continue to enchant and offend.

The notion of not having the last word is a common theme in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s writings. For Gadamer, this means, among other things, that to engage in a genuine, reciprocal dialogue, one must remain open to the real possibility that one’s position is wrong or perhaps needs rethinking. This essay dialectically examines Socrates’s interactions with Alcibiades in the

Symposium to see whether Socrates himself is, in fact, a good dialogue partner in Gadamer's sense. My strategy is to offer a close reading of relevant passages of the *Symposium* in order to make manifest the dialectical and ethical tensions within the text, especially in the interaction of Socrates and Alcibiades. My aim is *not* to offer a detailed reading of Gadamer's reading of specific Platonic dialogues;⁴ rather, my aim is to articulate, as it were, a Gadamerian-inspired framework whose main structures include genuine dialogical openness to the other, anticipatory listening, risk, a willingness to put one's own views to the test, and an embrace of one's finitude, and then to show how Socrates's engagement with Alcibiades falls short of what Gadamer throughout his corpus emphasizes as hermeneutical virtues.

Alcibiades's Interrogation of Socrates and Socratic Irony

Let us begin near the end—namely, with Alcibiades's abrupt, disruptive, Dionysian entry into the festivities even as the participants are still applauding Socrates's speech so loudly that Aristophanes is unable to make himself heard. Apparently, Aristophanes wants to follow up with something that Socrates had said about him in his speech. However, Alcibiades's splashing entry with his drunken entourage and a shrieking flute-girl quickly takes center stage. Having been carried in by his acquaintances—likely because of his inebriated condition—Alcibiades gathers himself and announces that he has come to crown Agathon with a wreath currently atop Alcibiades's handsome head. Agathon invites the latecomer to recline next to him and, as Alcibiades makes his way to his seat, his attempt to remove the wreath causes the ribbons and ivy to cover his eyes, temporarily blinding him. Consequently, he fails to see that Socrates, who had been sitting next to Agathon, has cleared a space for him on the couch. Once the blinders are removed and his head turns, Alcibiades realizes that he is sitting next to none other than Socrates! The language here reminds us of the prisoners in the cave, who now freed of their bonds, turn to see the fire casting shadows on the cave wall and thus begin to become aware of the reality of their situation (*Republic* 515c–e). Their experience is one of pain and a sense of confusion; yet, this uncomfortable disorientation opens, at least potentially, the path to liberation. Interestingly, when Alcibiades sees the reality or truth symbolized by Socrates's presence, he does not perceive it as liberating, but rather, like the prisoners, as painful and disorienting. For example, he says “[i]t's Socrates! You've trapped me again! You always do this to me—all of a sudden you'll turn up out of nowhere where I least expect you!” (*Symposium* 213c). Even so, Alcibiades does not flee but

ultimately engages Socrates head on. Although inebriated and quite the character, Alcibiades is willing to be vulnerable with Socrates, openly acknowledging his moral failures and calling out Socrates's inordinate disdain for human things. One could interpret Alcibiades's critique of Socrates, as I hope to make clear, as a failure to embrace his finitude. Socrates's rejection of finitude puts him at odds with Gadamer's positive emphasis on finitude and its corollary—namely, our need for genuine, reciprocal dialogical encounters.

After a few tense exchanges between Socrates and Alcibiades—with Socrates at times speaking indirectly to Alcibiades through Agathon—Alcibiades decides to crown Socrates as well, taking back some of the ribbons from the crown with which he gifted Agathon. In spite of his already inebriated state, Alcibiades demands that more wine be brought in, of which he quickly puts away more than two quarts and offers the same amount to Socrates. However, as he tells the group, the wine doesn't seem to faze Socrates, who drinks with the best but never gets drunk (*Symposium* 214a). Of course, Eryximachus, representing Apollo's attempt to re-gain control, cannot be silent in the midst of this Dionysian take-over. Accordingly, he proceeds to censure Alcibiades's excessive drinking and to reestablish the order and propriety of the speeches. Having explained that the participants had been offering encomia to the god Eros, Eryximachus invites Alcibiades to join in. Alcibiades, however, says that Socrates would react violently if Alcibiades praised “anyone else in his presence—even a god!” (*Symposium* 214d). This charge of impiety provokes a response from Socrates. After the two go back and forth, the good doctor intervenes and suggests that Alcibiades present a speech in praise of Socrates. Our intoxicated latecomer accepts and proclaims emphatically that his account of Socrates will be truthful and urges Socrates to interrupt and correct him should he find anything inaccurate (*Symposium* 215a). Given his state, Alcibiades acknowledges that he might confuse the order of events and will speak in something of a stream-of-consciousness manner. However, he insists that what he will say about Socrates is true; it is worth noting that Socrates never interrupts Alcibiades's speech, which is a significant departure from Socrates's typical eagerness to accept a challenge to pursue truth.

At the beginning of his speech Alcibiades says that he will use an image to describe Socrates and emphasizes that the image “aims at the truth” (*Symposium* 215b). The image, or rather images, he employs are a Silenus and the satyr Marsyas. As Pierre Hadot observes, “[i]n popular imagination, Sileni and satyrs were hybrid demons, half-animal, half-men, who made up the escort of Dionysos.”⁵ Alcibiades's description of a Silenus focuses on how the exterior or appearance

differs from what is within. The Silenus was a hollowed-out statue which was split down the middle and inside contained miniature statues of the gods (*Symposium* 215b4). Both the Sileni and Marsyas are often depicted or associated with the flute (more precisely, the aulos). Marsyas's musical skills were so extraordinary that he challenged Apollo to a musical match, the consequence of which was his being skinned alive.⁶ By drawing upon these images, Alcibiades highlights important parallels between Marsyas and Socrates. Like the hubristic and impudent Marsyas, Socrates—despite his regular feigning ignorance—is acutely aware of his extraordinary intellectual abilities and is willing to challenge anyone who will engage him. However, Socrates doesn't need a musical instrument to enchant; his enchanting power comes through “words alone.”⁷

The picture that Alcibiades paints reminds the reader of aspects of Aristophanes's speech.⁸ For example, Alcibiades emphasizes that the Silenus was split down the middle, which recalls the punishment that the original circular humans received after they challenged the gods. Since the image of the Silenus points to Socrates, Alcibiades intimates that Socrates too exhibits a type of hubris.⁹ To substantiate Alcibiades's accusation, one might point to Socrates's claim to have been given a divine calling, which requires him to interrogate and judge the speeches and deeds of his fellow citizens. In light of Alcibiades's particular frustration with Socrates, the charge of hubris more likely pertains to Socrates's disdain of human things and his (true, rather than feigned) sense of intellectual superiority over most humans. Stanley Rosen claims that even though both Socrates and Alcibiades “are exceptional men,” the only trait they share in common is hubris,¹⁰ and that hubris was, in fact, what drew Socrates to Alcibiades. “Socrates's offer of assistance is not simply ironical, but expresses frankly his interest in hybris. Socrates loves in Alcibiades that which he shares with him: a kind of madness through which each in his way transcends his contemporaries.”¹¹ This hubristic madness, however, is not the same for each man.¹² Alcibiades wants to rule the world and dominate in all things human. Socrates is unconcerned with the world, indifferent, and at times even callous, when it comes to human concerns, emotions, and interpersonal relations.

Given his *pleonexia*, Alcibiades is open about his desire to be godlike and rule over all humankind. His charge against Socrates seems to be that the philosopher's hubris also shows itself in a desire to be like a god, that is, to *transcend* all things human, which results in neglect, dismissal, and disparagement of human relationships, bodily desires, and honor. In other words,

Alcibiades's view of Socrates's moderation or temperance involves two aspects: (1) moderation as (an almost superhuman or perhaps anti-human) strength, and (2) moderation as (subhuman) indifference. As one intoxicated by power, Alcibiades sees his failed seduction as a failed *conquest*. He has not been able to overpower the philosopher with one of his chief weapons, viz. his good looks. In this sense, Socrates's moderation and ability to resist Alcibiades is viewed as an awe-inspiring strength (or advantage) that he can hardly comprehend. Yet, at the same time, Socrates's utter insensitivity to Alcibiades, coupled with Socrates's feigned romantic interest, point to something strange about Socrates that indicates an unhealthy disdain for human life in this world—a life characterized by embodied and emotional needs and desires and that likewise requires friendships of genuine reciprocity in order to thrive and flourish.¹³ Here again, Alcibiades challenges Socrates's peculiar irony. For example, he states that Socrates's claim to know nothing but his own ignorance rings as hollow as the Sileni statues: "He [Socrates] likes to say he's ignorant and knows nothing. Isn't this just like Silenus?"¹⁴ In this same context, Alcibiades draws attention to Socrates as a dissimulator when it comes to matters of the heart. That is, even though he plays the role of an older, wiser man, seeking young, beautiful boys—in short, the lover (*erastês*)—Socrates could care less about their physical beauty. Whether a boy was beautiful, wealthy, or famous was of no consequence to Socrates: "He considers all these possessions beneath contempt, [...] In public, I tell you, his whole life is one big game—a game of irony" (*Symposium* 216d8–216e5). Alcibiades's accusation can be interpreted as a condemnation of philosophical *eros* gone awry. That is, the philosopher's *erotic* quest can become so all-consuming that his or her embodiment and significant relationships with others are despised and seen as obstacles to overcome. Rather than accepting and embracing his incarnate being, Socrates, as Martha Nussbaum observes, "in his ascent towards the form, has become himself, very like a form—hard, indivisible, unchanging."¹⁵ Granting Alcibiades's own problematic way of relating to Socrates, several questions remain worth asking. Does Socrates stand against the charge of exhibiting a cold, stone-like indifference in his interaction with Alcibiades? Does Socrates not, as Nussbaum puts it, engage in a "dissociation of his body"—or even more strongly put—a disparagement of his embodiment? Does Socrates have room for human others whom he considers as genuine equals? Or is it the case that with those, like Alcibiades, who actually challenge Socrates to examine his views and being-in-the-world with others, does Socrates resort to dialogical or sophistic games?

Lastly, does Socrates, as Gadamer might put it, approach the other expecting to learn something and with a willingness to put his own views at risk?

According to Alcibiades, Socrates's "game" seems to be to lead young, potential beloveds (*eromenoi*) to believe that he is interested in an amorous relationship, yet his true intentions remain (at least for a time) masked. Both the feigned ignorance and romantic overtures are mere dissimulating appearances, akin to the "outsides of those statues of Silenus" (*Symposium* 216d4–5). So why play such elaborate, even deceptive games? Perhaps Socrates's ultimate goal is to better his younger counterpart. If so, he has no qualms with using misleading, *sophistic* tactics to achieve his ends, which is precisely what Alcibiades is exposing. (To be sure, Alcibiades simultaneously exposes his own character flaws.) Socrates's ploy is to enact a role reversal, wherein the beloved becomes the lover who is willing to go to any lengths to win his beloved. Alcibiades attests that such a reversal occurred in his case; yet, Socrates refused Alcibiades's romantic advances, leaving the latter humiliated. Despite Alcibiades's lack of moderation, his interest in Socrates was not merely or even primarily with the physical dimension of a romantic relationship.¹⁶ He tells us that he was also pained as a result of what he learned during his time with Socrates—pain that he compares to a snakebite but much worse: "[S]omething much more painful than a snake has bitten me in my most sensitive part—I mean my heart, or my soul, or whatever you want to call it, which has been struck and bitten by philosophy, whose grip on the young and eager souls is much more vicious than a viper's and makes them do the most amazing things" (*Symposium* 218a2–7). Alcibiades then describes this experience as one of participating "in the madness, the Bacchic frenzy of philosophy" (*Symposium* 218b3–4).

At some point, Alcibiades had been "bitten by philosophy," and this apparently happened during his time spent in philosophical conversation with Socrates. According to his report, he had become so mesmerized by Socrates's passionate pursuit of wisdom that he broke with convention, took up the role of lover (*erastês*), and attempted, yet failed, to seduce Socrates. Rather than dismiss Alcibiades's account of his botched seduction as *merely* the confused ramblings of a disgruntled, spurned lover—which is not to deny that he is a disgruntled, spurned lover—it is worth considering how his account dramatizes his conflicting desires and ultimately derailed him from achieving a more integrated life, whether a life of contemplation or practical wisdom. On the one hand, he claims that he had come to realize his inability to accomplish his goal by himself; thus, he acknowledges his need for Socrates's help in order to reach his highest potential, of which

he says “nothing is more important” (*Symposium* 218d2–3). On the other, he thinks that he can achieve this goal through seducing and possessing Socrates as his “beloved.” Socrates’s response to Alcibiades’s overture (which Alcibiades describes as spoken “in that absolutely inimitable ironic manner of his” [218d8–9]) is reminiscent of his retort to Agathon, in which the poet implored Socrates to sit next to him so that by merely touching the philosopher, he might become wise.¹⁷ Socrates’s reply intimates that Alcibiades has misunderstood both Socrates’s maieutic role and the object of his erotic yet unattainable pursuit, wisdom. That is, Socrates does not have the power to make Alcibiades virtuous. For that to occur, Alcibiades’s *eros* must be re-directed. In his rebuff, not only does Socrates suggest that Alcibiades’s proposal is not a fair exchange, but he also, and perhaps more importantly and less ironically, draws attention to Alcibiades’s wanting more than his “proper share” (*Symposium* 218e6). Here we have an instance of Alcibiades’s hubris, which elsewhere Socrates’s explicitly states is characterized by a desire to have “absolute power” and influence over “all mankind.”¹⁸ In short, Alcibiades’s speech both expresses and dramatizes his various *erotic* conflictions. His *eros* for power over others, dramatized in his attempt to “conquer” Socrates, ultimately subverts his at least nascent *eros* to pursue the love of wisdom. However, Socrates too exhibits incongruities and tensions that are worth exploring and to which we now turn.

Alcibiades’s Self-Awareness, Socrates’s Blindness, and Reading Plato against Socrates

One could interpret Socrates’s statement that Alcibiades wants more than his proper share as Socrates’s reminding Alcibiades of his *pleonexia*, about which presumably the philosopher had warned a young Alcibiades and which at this point in his life has more or less “won the day.” In fact, Alcibiades seems to openly acknowledge that Socrates had rightly identified his character flaws and that he himself is acutely aware of his misplaced and conflicted desires. “I know perfectly well that I can’t prove he’s wrong when he tells me what I should do; yet, the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways: I cave in to my desire to please the crowd.”¹⁹ Here Alcibiades describes what Aristotle later identifies as the incontinent person. That is, he knows what he ought to do; however, due to his conflicting and competing desires, he chooses what he knows will harm him and experiences regret. As he goes on to say, “when I see him [Socrates], I feel deeply ashamed, because I am doing nothing about my way of life, though I have already agreed with him that I should.”²⁰ Alcibiades’s problem doesn’t appear to be a lack of knowledge

or inability to follow Socrates's arguments; rather, he suffers from an unstable character and *eros* gone astray.²¹ Not only does Alcibiades admit to haven been bitten by philosophy—a bite whose truth still has the ability to cause him to feel shame—but also in his exchange with Socrates just prior to the former's speech he indicates his awareness of philosophical topics, which he and Socrates likely debated on previous occasions. For example, he says that he will not willingly tell a lie, and he emphasizes that he will use images to communicate truth—a subject matter discussed at length in the *Republic*.²² Although inebriated, Alcibiades's precisely worded commentary shows that he knows how to get Socrates's attention and that he is cognizant of the significance of these key, Socratic philosophical themes. Furthermore, the fact that Socrates's claims made such an impression on Alcibiades indicates that he had no trouble following Socrates's arguments, but rather understood precisely their implications and what they meant for his own life. Alcibiades's ability to grasp Socrates's philosophical claims, affirm their truth, and yet willingly turn away from them, may signal Plato's own questioning of an intellectualist view of ethics.²³ Whatever the case may be, by his own admission, Alcibiades's misdirected *eros* resulted in a neglect of self-care and a sense that his life was not worth living.²⁴

Socrates, of course, is famous for his notion of Socratic ignorance—that is, he is cognizant of his own ignorance. However, when Socrates actually engages others in dialogue, he seems fairly confident that he does, in fact, know what, for example, justice and beauty are. His elenctic method regularly pulls others up short, but one wonders how frequently Socrates himself is pulled up short? For all of Alcibiades's flaws, and there are many, his intellectual acumen combined with his hubris and *eros* results in his being unafraid to challenge and interrogate Socrates, calling out his inconsistencies, interpersonal failings, his un-at-homeness with his own bodily existence. Concerning the latter, recall that earlier Alcibiades likened Socrates to Marsyas, whose hubris led him to challenge the god Apollo to a musical duel, thus resulting in his being skinned alive. As we have indicated, Socrates exhibits an uneasy relationship with his body. Perhaps Alcibiades's remark regarding Marsyas's flaying is meant to highlight Socrates's desire to transcend his body, to be, as it were, free of the flesh that imprisons him.²⁵ As Alcibiades's account of Socrates's irony and feigned romantic interest in him makes clear, Socrates has no qualms with utilizing “ironic” deception to achieve his dialogical goals, so long as he judges the end to be good.

Here it is worth asking, What *are* Socrates's dialogical goals? Taking our cue from both the *Apology* (36b) and Alcibiades's speech, Socrates engaged in his philosophical midwifery in order

to “generate” genuine thinking and a concern for self-care, both of which are, for most philosophers, indeed good ends. Unlike, for example, the tyrant’s use of deception to satisfy his desires and attain his objectives, Socrates uses irony and sophistic tactics to bring about positive ends—namely, the moral and intellectual betterment of his dialogue partner. Yet, as Alcibiades’s example indicates, there is no guarantee that the result will be positive.²⁶ Genuine risk, as Gadamer reminds us, is characteristic of true dialogue. To be open to the other and to engage in anticipatory listening is to put oneself and one’s beliefs at risk; it is to be vulnerable and willing to admit one’s failings and misguided views. We often encounter Socrates’s dialogue partners, including Alcibiades, openly admitting their logical inconsistencies and more importantly, given our present aims, their failure to live an ethically consistent life of personal and interpersonal flourishing. Granting that Socrates *speaks* about his ignorance, do we see him, especially in the *Symposium*, dialogically *interact* with others such that he genuinely puts himself and his views at risk? I am inclined to answer in the negative.

When Socrates’s maieutic activity does its work, it often produces a crisis in his interlocutor; this was certainly the case with Alcibiades. Here we return to Socrates’s dissimulating irony, which Hadot discusses at length. Drawing on the work of Otto Apelt, Hadot writes, “Socrates splits himself into two, so that there are two Socrates: the Socrates who knows *in advance* how the discussion is going to end, and the Socrates who travels the entire dialectical path along with his interlocutor.”²⁷ As the two go back and forth, Socrates eventually gets his dialogue partner to admit that his position is flawed or even contradictory. What his interlocutor thought he knew or understood prior to his dialogue is now revealed as unfounded and his former value-system and way of life is called into question. Here, too, the interlocutor is split in half: “there is the interlocutor as he was *before* his conversation with Socrates, and there is the interlocutor, who, in the course of their constant mutual accord, has identified himself with Socrates, and who henceforth will never be the same.”²⁸ We see what Hadot calls Socrates’s “ironic self-deprecation” in his feigning to be interested in learning something from his conversation partner. But isn’t Socrates’s feigning a kind of intentional distance or detachment, which prevents him from, to use Hadot’s language, truly identifying with his interlocutor or entering wholly into his discourse?²⁹

Reminiscent of Aristophanes’s account of the halved humans seeking but never quite finding unity and wholeness, Socrates’s divided interlocutor is pained by his lack and must confront the source of his pain. A case in point is Alcibiades’s description of his own experience of self-

splitting, which, unfortunately for him, ends in doubt and despair. Alcibiades tells us that Socrates's words so upset him that he came to see his life as worthless and was ashamed both of his lack of self-care and his succumbing to his desires to please the crowd.³⁰ But do we ever see Socrates *pained* by his lack or doubt? Could one say that split or division in Socrates, to put it provocatively, is between his word (speech)—the claim of Socratic ignorance—and his deeds—how he *actually* conducts himself in his dialogical engagements with others?

One of the chief claims of this essay is that Alcibiades is not the only conflicted human being in this dialogue, but that Socrates as well has his own incongruities, tensions, and shortcomings. Here we recall Diotima's portrayal of Eros as a conflicted being, possessing traits from both parents. Like his mother, Penia, he is poor, tough, physically unattractive, and "always dwelling with neediness." Like his father, Poros, he is "always weaving devices, desirous of practical wisdom and inventive, philosophizing through all his life, a skilled magician, druggist, sophist" (*Symposium* 203d–e).³¹ The in-between, ambiguous character of Eros exhibits clear associations with Socrates and openly includes the descriptor "sophist." Is Plato inviting us to interrogate Socrates's silenic ways? Again turning to Hadot, rather than a "harmonious figure combining divine and human characteristics in delicate nuances," we find the character Socrates to be "ambiguous, troubling, and strangely disconcerting."³² Our investigation has shown that Socrates has no qualms employing dissimulating, sophistic tactics in his interactions with others so long as he judges such strategies fitting, just, or for the *ultimate* good of his interlocutor.³³ But what if Socrates's misguided, extreme disdain for human things results in a *skewed* way of seeing the world and others, an inability to delight in the beauty of the particular for its own sake, not to mention his detached, emotionally cold way of relating to and with others that presumes to know, despite feigning ignorance, what is best for his dialogue partners? With these questions in mind, is it fair to say that Socrates's dialogical interactions—at least to some degree—could be likened to performative noble lies, which, like Eros, combine incongruous elements that both attract and repel? Rather than raise doubts about the trustworthiness of Alcibiades's portrayal of Socrates, Plato has taken pains to legitimate his claims, thus encouraging his readers to puzzle through them.³⁴ For example, being inebriated, any restraint that Alcibiades might employ is no longer operative. Unlike the sycophantic Apollodorus of the opening dialogue, in the final dialogue, Alcibiades, though full of wine, offers both a cogent self-assessment of his own shortcomings and a persuasive critical evaluation of Socrates. Having once been a disciple(beloved)-in-training who

spent significant time with Socrates, Alcibiades has both the nearness and distance required to offer both praise and criticism of Socrates.³⁵ Lastly, as previously mentioned, Socrates does not question or refute the veracity of Alcibiades's exposé of Socrates's behavior and way of life. Given his typical agonistic dialogical engagement when such challenges are issued, Socrates's silence is telling.

Socrates and Eros as Lack and *Atopos*

Before closing our discussion of the *Symposium* and turning more directly to discuss my Gadamerian critique of Socrates, I want to highlight Alcibiades's description of Socrates as *atopos*. As we will see, there are many aspects and meanings associated with Socrates and placelessness. One meaning, which Hadot offers, is that Socrates does not fit any of the established and celebrated human types. That is, he is neither a noble, courageous warrior like Achilles, nor a clever statesman like Nestor.³⁶ Socrates has no place within this schema; thus, he is *a-topos* and more like the not-human or even the monstrous—the Sileni.³⁷ To explore additional dimensions of Socrates as *atopos*, let us turn to Socrates's conjured mouthpiece, Diotima.³⁸ In Diotima's retelling of the myth of Eros, we have a presentation of Eros that emphasizes both its lack or poverty (*Penia*) and its wealth (*Poros*)—that is, the wholeness, even if fleeting, it provides when one experiences it. Love as essential lack is always on the move, ever dissatisfied with its momentary or partial satisfaction. That one desires is both indicative of one's poverty and the condition for the possibility of movement beyond the “place” of one's present contentment in the hope of achieving greater wholeness, satisfaction, or fulfillment; however, the attainment of this temporary “wealth” leads one back to poverty. Thus, Diotima's myth suggests that a constant return to poverty (*Penia*) from wealth (*Poros*) is inevitable. As many commentators observe—Hadot included—Eros and Socrates share several common features. Like Eros, Socrates is not beautiful—that is, he lacks physical beauty. However, does he possess “inner beauty”? If we focus on the structural similarity just mentioned—the ongoing dialectic of poverty and wealth—one does not get the impression that Socrates would describe this all-too-human condition as *beautiful*. In other words, poverty continually haunts Socrates even if it serves as the dialectical “engine,” moving him ever beyond his present place (*topos*) but never granting rest or repose. Both Eros and Socrates are, it seems, *a-topos*, lacking a place of rest; they are, in a word, homeless. And yet this not having, this lack, this being place-less is, ironically, potentially generative and burgeoning with possibilities. But

again Eros, as Socrates's mouthpiece Diotima states explicitly, is not beautiful, nor is Socrates. Just as Socrates portrays the neediness and painful reality of Eros against its, as we might say today, romanticized appearances, Alcibiades offers us a realistic picture of Socrates (or at least a fuller, more human portrayal of Socrates)—namely, one that includes his ugliness and failings as well as what makes him so appealing.

Socrates has Diotima state that Eros inherits cleverness from his father Poros (*Symposium* 203d). As mentioned earlier, I follow Nehamas's and Woodruff's claim that Diotima is Socrates's mouthpiece who was created specifically for this dialogue. Here we have perhaps additional support for this view. Would it not be more accurate to say that Penia (Poverty) shows cleverness and ingenuity in her ensnaring of Poros? Poverty herself—apart from any co-mingling with Poros—is resourceful. This is not an endorsement of Penia's actions, but rather it draws attention to the fact that the traits attributed to Penia and Poros are not as clear-cut as Socrates via Diotima claims. Moreover, if Diotima had her own voice and were a genuinely subversive figure in the all-male dialogue, would she not highlight Penia's cleverness, boldness, and ability to be resourceful (cf. *Symposium* 203d)?

Eros instigates, as does Socrates; both are always on the way but never "there" since both are *atopos*. Both beckon and even seduce others to themselves and yet pull back, hide, or otherwise allude such that fulfillment and, as a result, wholeness can never be fully achieved. Socrates's silenic ways, we might say with a nod to Hadot, consist in pointing beyond himself, signaling an opening of possibilities—as Hadot observes, the etymology of Poros is a "means of access or a 'way out.'"³⁹ Socrates, as we have seen, uses sophistry and seduction and his, all-too-often, stilted and one-sided dialogues do not sit well with the reciprocity that Gadamer emphasizes as a requirement for genuine, transformative dialogue. Socrates's coldness and statue-like response to his interlocutor's emotional needs hinders dialogical effectiveness. This is especially the case with a dialogue partner like Alcibiades, who is not afraid to take Socrates to task. The potential for Socrates to be transformed, challenged, and shown his shortcomings is heightened with these types of dialogue partners. Yet Socrates's engagement with Alcibiades in the *Symposium* falls short of what Gadamer outlines as genuine hermeneutical experience.

Socrates's Use of Sophistry

Perhaps an aspect of Socrates's constant critique of the poets—especially in the *Republic*—is motivated by an unacknowledged similarity between the two. That is, like the poet, the philosopher employs linguistic creative ingenuity to communicate in imaginative and rhetorically compelling ways. But could we not make a similar claim about the sophist? That is, does the sophist not also play with language in creative, innovative ways to serve his or her end of persuading others? As Sarah Kofman observes, sophistic discourses are those which create a disorienting effect “by weaving together contradictory theses” which serve as traps for his interlocutors.⁴⁰ The sophist, too, is characterized by *metis*, a cunning intelligence employed for self-serving ends. The Platonic dialogues, no doubt, criticize the sophist's deceptive discourses and unethical practices. A Platonic critical characterization of the sophist might be summarized as follows: a sophist is one who uses cunning intelligence for the purpose of self-serving persuasion of others at the expense of truth and lacks concern for the good of others and the community. Yet Socrates engages in at least some of these sophistic strategies; however, so the caveat goes, he does so in an ironic and, therefore, ethically acceptable key. Should we let Socrates off the hook so easily? Socrates's use of sophistry, even if he believes it a necessary yet unpleasant means to a good end, leaves the reader uneasy and at times disappointed and disheartened. For example, consider the figure of Diotima. In the *Symposium*, Socrates describes Diotima as speaking “in the manner of a perfect sophist” (208c2). This is itself a doubly ironic claim given that Diotima is a fictional character, whom Socrates is at pains to present as if she were a real, historical figure, and one who taught Socrates everything he knows about the art of love (*Symposium* 201d5). Diotima, however, is Socrates's fictitious mouthpiece, employed for his own dialogical purposes. Consequently, any hope that a woman might truly have a voice in the dialogue, or that Socrates is here engaging in a countercultural, subversive move is shattered, since the character Diotima is simply Socrates himself speaking through the mask of Diotima. This act of ventriloquism does not negate *tout court* Diotima's contributions to the dialogue. As Gadamer would quickly point out, the meanings of a text always exceed the author's intentions. But it does call for a critical reading of Diotima's conclusions, especially those that seem all too convenient for Socrates's aims.

It is worth asking: Do sophistic means (or tactics) justify the end (the betterment of his interlocutors)? Is this model of philosophical dialogical something in the neighborhood of a noble lie inflected through ironic stratagems? As the case of Alcibiades testifies, such tactics can also

lead to a dizzying despair similar to that produced by genuinely sophistic discourses.⁴¹ My claim is not that Socrates is a straight up sophist (as defined above), but rather that he, too, is human, “on the way” and riddled with shortcomings, although his devotees too often respond to him as if he were divine. By including Alcibiades's critique of Socrates in the *Symposium*, the text invites us to interrogate the philosopher's life, to see whether his words and dialogical deeds cohere. In doing so, we find that Socrates is indeed, as Alcibiades claims, a complex, silenic figure, who simultaneously repels and attracts. In the opening dialogue, we find Socrates standing alone, motionless on a neighbor's porch, unresponsive to the call of the other. What at first seems a rather odd, yet insignificant scene now burgeons with significance. Is Socrates the best dialogue partner? Does he, as Gadamer requires, listen to the other expecting that that other has something to teach him? In order to answer these questions, we must examine Gadamer's analysis of different types of hermeneutical engagement and consider whether Socrates attains what Gadamer identifies as the highest type of hermeneutical engagement or experience or whether he falls short.

A Gadamerian Refiguring and Critique of Socrates's *Atopos*

As we have seen, Socrates contends that *Eros* is not beautiful, since *Eros* is essentially lack and thus is always seeking to possess what it does not have. A Gadamerian refiguring of Socrates's description, which in fact opens a new and fruitful site for dialogical encounter, claims that the movement of *Eros* seeks what it does not have, yet it does not aim to possess the other but rather to learn from the other. Here again the emphasis is on mutual and reciprocal engagement in which both dialogue partners put their views at risk and both open themselves to new ways of thinking and being. All too often Socrates's stilted dialogical exchanges feel more like monologues, wherein Socrates baits his interlocutor having already decided that his position is deficient or that the interlocutor fits a specific type—e.g., the *thumos*-driven Statesman. If Socrates has already concluded what kind of “soul” his interlocutor possesses and what his interlocutor needs in order to stay the proper course, will he not ask skewed questions and expect, in advance, certain answers? If so, what we have is not a dialogue but something closer to a monologue. Perhaps a more accurate description of these types of interactions is to characterize them as asymmetrical dialogues such as one finds in conversations among parents and their children. Clearly, these types of dialogical engagements are not without value and can be extremely beneficial, rewarding, and even life-changing depending upon the situation and the quality of the relationship. However, because of

the asymmetrical power and/or knowledge differential, these dialogical engagements fall short of what Gadamer considers to be the highest type of hermeneutical experience (*Erfahrung*). In *Truth and Method* Gadamer sketches three types of hermeneutical experience that have analogues in three types of I/Thou encounters. Importantly, in an I/Thou relationship, the “Thou is not an object” but rather “relates itself to us.”⁴² The problem with the first type of experience Gadamer describes is that it ultimately remains detached and uninvolved with its subject-matter, which is similar to an I/Thou relationship in which the Thou is approached as an object of study and is in the end instrumentalized. Gadamer’s example of this type of I/Thou interaction is when one “tries to discover typical behavior in one’s fellowmen and can make predictions about others on the basis of experience. We call this a knowledge of human nature. We understand the other person in the same way that we understand any other *typical* event in our experiential field—i.e., he is predictable. His behavior is as much a means to our end as any other means.”⁴³ The corresponding hermeneutical experience is “naïve faith” and reliance upon certain methods (the *elenchus* for Socrates?) and procedure-following which results in treating the subject-matter as an object and comporting oneself toward it in a distant, detached, “uninvolved way.”⁴⁴ In context, Gadamer has in view the methods employed in the social sciences. However, one can apply the insight to Socrates, since he is frequently considered an astute “reader” of personality types, who interacts with his dialogue partners in accord with his evaluation of whether they are ruled by appetite, spiritedness, or are budding philosophers. Again, approaching the other or the subject matter in this way has its place in certain circumstances or as a point of departure; yet, on Gadamer’s view it falls short of the highest sort of reciprocal dialogical engagement.

What about the second I/Thou experience and its analogue in hermeneutical experience? Here we have a step up from the previous type in that the Thou is not treated as an object but is acknowledged as a person; however, a genuine concern for the other’s good is missing and the interactions are agonistic because mutual recognition has not been achieved to the degree that allows for hearing the other as other and the other of oneself. As Gadamer explains, “[t]o every claim there is a counterclaim. This is why it is possible for each of the partners in the relationship reflectively to outdo the other. One claims to know the other’s claim from his point of view and even to understand the other better than the other understands himself.”⁴⁵ Gadamer goes on to say when one purports to know the other in this way “one robs his claims of their legitimacy. [...] The claim to understand the other person in advance functions to keep the other person’s claim at a

distance. We are familiar with this from the teacher-pupil relationship.”⁴⁶ Does Socrates embody this type of I/Thou relationship with some, most, or even all of his dialogue partners? For example, in the *Republic* does he engage with Glaucon or Adeimantus expecting that they have something valuable and insightful to say? Or does he expect that their answers will be inadequate, having already classified them as certain character-types who are in need of his instruction?

Finally, we arrive at what Gadamer identifies as the highest type of hermeneutical experience and its I/Thou analogue. Of the latter, Gadamer says the following:

In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another.⁴⁷

Gadamer adds that such openness does *not* mean that one slavishly capitulates to what the other says, nor when understanding takes place does it mean that we now, as we might put it today, “get” the other person, as this would be to deny the other’s alterity. Instead, “[o]penness to another includes therefore the recognition that I must accept something within myself that is against myself, even if there were no one else, who would raise it against me.”⁴⁸ Putting these two passages together, we see that openness to the other is an acknowledgment that I belong to the other and the other belongs to me; however, hermeneutical openness does more than simply acknowledge this belongingness; it moves toward the other in an ongoing intentional act of anticipatory listening. Having also acknowledged my finitude and limitedness, I approach the other with the expectation that my own prejudgments may be wrong—i.e., that which is “within myself that is against myself”—and am willing to have, as difficult and even painful as it might be, my views corrected. Similarly, in the highest type of hermeneutical experience, one allows the other—whether a text, tradition, or work of art to “say something.”⁴⁹ This type of experience, having on multiple occasions experienced its lack and limitations, is committed to staying open to the other’s claims to truth. In short, for Gadamer, “hermeneutical consciousness culminates not in methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man

from the man captivated by dogma.”⁵⁰ It should be clear that the kind of experience (*Erfahrung*) that Gadamer has in mind is not reducible to one’s private, subjective, momentary experience (*Erlebnis*) of this or that; rather, experience is something accumulated over time through various practices and engagements with others. One who is experienced (*erfahren*) is, for Gadamer, one who has through various experiences (*Erlebnisse*) been made aware of her “finitude and limitedness.”⁵¹ One could argue that Socrates is, indeed, aware of his finitude and limitedness, but one does not get the impression that he has accepted it, much less embraced it. Alcibiades’s criticisms of Socrates, as I have tried to argue, bring this lack of acceptance into sharp relief.

In a section of *Truth and Method* entitled “The Model of Platonic Dialogue,” Gadamer highlights Socrates’s claim to know that he does not know. As Gadamer explains, this statement sums up “the famous Socratic *docta ignoranta*,” which “opens up the way to the true superiority of questions.”⁵² However, a question that I want to pose to both Gadamer and Plato’s Socrates is whether simply knowing that one does not know is enough. Or is it rather, appealing to Gadamer against Gadamer, that one must approach the subject-matter or the other (if one is engaging with a human dialogue partner) not only knowing that one does not know or that one’s knowledge is only partial but also and perhaps most importantly *deciding* to listen to and really hear the other as other and believing—making a leap of faith—that the other might have something to teach me. As Gadamer would be the first to point out, such hermeneutical openness and anticipatory listening does not mean that we must first rid ourselves of our biases and pre-judgments, many of which we are not even aware. Rather, it means that when unfounded and distorting biases and pre-judgments surface *in and through* our dialogical engagements with others, we follow the truth of the subject-matter at hand, allowing it to lead us, to expand and, when appropriate, to correct our views.

In his discussion of the logical structure of openness vis-à-vis the Platonic dialogues, Gadamer stresses the priority of the question—namely, how difficult it is to ask good questions, questions that disclose and bring the subject-matter into the open. Regarding Plato, Gadamer states that he offers us “a profound recognition of the priority of the question in all knowledge and discourse that really reveals something of an object. Discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that thing to be broken open by the question.”⁵³ The type of dialectic that makes possible genuine and potentially transformative dialogue is one saturated with questions that bring the subject-matter “into the open. The openness that is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled.”⁵⁴ A question that is properly posed both grants this openness but at the same time also

provides a limiting horizon. Such horizons permit one's prejudgments about a specific subject-matter to surface so that they can be recognized and tested. Thus, a rightly posed question both breaks open the subject-matter and simultaneously properly limits the horizon of the discussion thus allowing interlocutors' prejudices to be put in play and challenged. Given Socrates's often skewed questions and his failure to achieve what Gadamer outlines as both the highest hermeneutical experience and the highest I/Thou engagement, Socrates—and especially so in his interaction with Alcibiades in the *Symposium*—does not approach the other in openness or in a mode of anticipatory listening.

Concluding Remarks

Having peeled back Socrates's masks, I conclude that Plato's Socrates is on many occasions not the ideal dialogue partner. Even so, the reading that I have offered intimates that Plato himself recognized the possibility of philosophical *Eros* going awry—that is, a longing for escape from this world that fails to appreciate and be attuned to the beauty, profundity, and fragility of human relationships and emotional connections. If this the case, then Plato is willing to risk and to expose the dangers or pitfalls of a certain kind of philosophical life. Along these lines, I have argued that in the *Symposium* Plato does not allow Socrates, as it were, the “last word” as the series of speeches do not end after Diotima's (i.e., Socrates's speech).⁵⁵ Such risk and openness to subject the philosopher's life and way of being-in-the-world with others to the test resonate with the hermeneutical virtues that Gadamer extols and open up the possibility of genuine hermeneutical experience. If so, it seems that Plato, in refraining from offering a “last word” and opening up a space for the ongoing critique of philosophical practices and the philosophical life, is a better dialogue partner than Plato's Socrates.

Notes

1. See, for example, Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue*, esp. chapter 3. According to Nightingale, “[s]ince Alcibiades's character distorts his perceptions, we must be especially wary when he claims to reveal the ‘inner’ Socrates” (123). See also Nichols, “Philosophy and Empire: On Socrates and Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium*.”

2. See, for example, Metcalf, “The Trial of Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*.” See also Rosen, *Plato’s Symposium*, esp. chapter 8. Although Metcalf’s and Rosen’s analyses of Alcibiades’s speech share important overlaps, Rosen’s commentary on Alcibiades paints the latter in a more negative light. Contra Rosen, this essay argues that Alcibiades has at least tasted the fruit of a contemplative life, which makes his fall even more tragic.
3. See Halperin, “Plato and the Erotics of Narrativity,” for a fascinating study of Apollodorus’s dramatic role in the *Symposium*.
4. It is worth noting that although Gadamer wrote extensively on Plato, to my knowledge he does not offer an extended study of Plato’s *Symposium*. Rather, one encounters passing references to specific passages of the *Symposium* such as his mention of Aristophanes’s myth in his essay “The Relevance of the Beautiful” (see, for example, 31–32).
5. Hadot, “The Figure of Socrates,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* 148.
6. See, for example, Plato, *Symposium* 65 n.101 (Nehamas and Woodruff trans.) Nehamas and Woodruff note that satyrs possessed inordinate sexual appetites. As Rosen observes, Alcibiades need not focus on every characteristic of satyrs to communicate his point. Alcibiades makes clear that the analogous features of Socrates and satyrs (and Sileni) that he will discuss are the following: (1) the opposition between their exterior qualities or behaviors and what is concealed within, and (2) their ability to enchant and “conquer.” See also Rosen, *Plato’s Symposium* 296.
7. Plato, *Symposium* 215d1.
8. Rosen contends that Alcibiades, not Socrates, “is another instance of the hybristic circle-men, who imitate completeness by a harmony of opposites” (*Plato’s Symposium* 280). My claim is that *both* Socrates and Alcibiades are hubristic and exhibit tensions within themselves that manifest in their actions.
9. In fact, both Agathon (at *Symposium* 175e7) and Alcibiades (at 215b10) explicitly call Socrates *hybristês*.
10. Rosen, *Plato’s Symposium* 281.
11. Rosen, *Plato’s Symposium* 282.
12. Rosen, for example, distinguishes between a purely human madness and a divine madness. On his view, the former characterizes Alcibiades, the latter Socrates. See *Plato’s Symposium* chapter 8.

13. For similar remarks concerning Socrates's insensitivity and contempt for bodily desires and the human condition, see Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* 44.
14. Plato, *Symposium* 216d3–4; see also Rosen, *Plato's Symposium* chapter 8. Rosen highlights Alcibiades's critique of Socrates's feigned ignorance and (human) eros: "Socrates is neither the one nor the other (216d2–5). His temperance is a scorn for human things and so for 'us' mortals as well (216d7–e4)" (*Plato's Symposium* 301). See also Nussbaum's comments on the "stone of Socratic virtue" (*The Fragility of Goodness* 195).
15. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* 195.
16. Rosen, for example, cites favorably Plutarch's claim that "Alcibiades's lovers appealed to his love of glory and reputation rather than to his sensuality" (*Plato's Symposium* 280).
17. It was precisely here that Agathon called Socrates *hybristês*. See *Symposium* 175e8.
18. Plato, *Alcibiades I* 105b7–c4, 559 (*Complete Works*, ed. Cooper).
19. Plato, *Symposium* 216b3–6.
20. *Ibid.*, 216b7–9.
21. As Martha Nussbaum observes, "[e]nergy and intellectual power had made him [Alcibiades] one of the best commanders and strategists Athens had known, one of the most skillful orators ever to enchant her people" (*The Fragility of Goodness* 165).
22. See, for example, 214e8–9–215a1–3: "for as far as my will goes, I shall not lie. Now if in reminiscing [*anamimneskomenos*] I speak of one thing and then another, don't be surprised; for it is not at all easy for me in the condition I am in to enumerate fluently and consecutively your strangeness [*atopia*] (Benardete trans., 45) and 215a5–7. See also, Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan 170–71.
23. Whether this is the case or not, Aristotle's development of the categories of continence and incontinence indicate that a more nuanced view is needed.
24. See, for example, *Symposium* 216a1–216c5.
25. This insight was suggested by an anonymous reviewer.
26. See also Rosen, who says rather provocatively that given the doubt that Socrates's engagements with Alcibiades produced, one can consider Socrates "with some justice as the corrupter of Alcibiades. The initial enchantment of contact with Socrates produces confusion and self-doubt, but not virtue" (*Plato's Symposium* 290).
27. Hadot, "The Figure of Socrates," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* 153; emphasis added.

28. Ibid., 154.
29. Ibid.
30. See, for example, *Symposium* 216a–c. On Alcibiades’s shame and the impact of Socrates’s *logoi*, see also, Metcalf, “The Trial of Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*.” That Alcibiades still experiences shame in Socrates’s presence—a presence that stands for the “bite of philosophy”—suggests that he understands (rather than lacks understanding or knowledge of) his character flaws.
31. Benardete trans., 33–34. In a subsequent section, I claim that Socrates’s/Diotima’s description of the traits of Penia and Poros is not as clear-cut as he/she suggests.
32. Hadot, “The Figure of Socrates,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* 147–48.
33. See also Kofman, “Beyond Aporia?” Kofman highlights the genealogical connections between the philosopher and *metis* and contends that the philosopher’s *metis* “is at least as cunning as that of the sophist” (11).
34. See also, Metcalf, “The Trial of Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*.”
35. See also Rosen, who makes a similar point. “Alcibiades is our best witness concerning the nature of Socrates, better than Apollodorus and Aristodemus, whose discipleship makes them suspect as accurate observers of the elusive ironist” (*Plato’s Symposium* 290).
36. Hadot, “The Figure of Socrates,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* 158.
37. Ibid.
38. As Nehamas and Woodruff observe in n.77, Diotima’s reference to [Aristophanes’s] speech [at 206e5] makes it hard to believe that Socrates is reporting a conversation he actually had with a woman named Diotima and lends credence to the hypothesis that Diotima is a character Socrates dreamed up for this occasion” (*Symposium* 52.)
39. Hadot, “The Figure of Socrates,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* 162.
40. Kofman, “Beyond Aporia?” 15.
41. However, on my account, it is also the case that Alcibiades grasped the truth and implications of Socrates’s claims regarding the former’s life and nonetheless chose otherwise.
42. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 358.
43. Ibid.
44. See *ibid.*, 358–59.

45. Ibid., 359.

46. Ibid., 360.

47. Ibid.

48. My translation. The German reads: "Offenheit für den anderen schließt also die Anerkennung ein, daß ich in mir etwas gegen mich gelten lassen muß, auch wenn es keinen anderen gäbe, der es gegen mich geltend machte" (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* 367).

49. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 361.

50. Ibid., 362.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., 363.

54. Ibid.

55. Granted, the dialogue ends with a scene in which Socrates flirts with Agathon for the seemingly sole purpose of annoying Alcibiades, who from this point on is absent from the festivities. Most of the guests have either passed out or have excused themselves and gone home. The three remaining central figures are Socrates, Agathon, and Aristophanes. Once again Dionysian revelry is in full swing and our poets and philosopher take turns imbibing from a large cup filled with wine. Again, Socrates drinks excessively, out-drinking both Agathon and Aristophanes, and yet does not become drunk. Moreover, we are told that Socrates was "trying to prove to them that authors should be able to write both comedy and tragedy" and that "[h]e was just about to clinch the argument," but his drunken interlocutors were not able to follow his reasoning and eventually fell asleep, Aristophanes nodding off first and then Agathon (*Symposium* 223d). What is the significance of Socrates's walking away with only his sycophantic disciple Aristodemus following him and then resuming his daily activities as if overdrinking and lack of sleep do not faze him? Given what I have argued, whatever it means it does not give Socrates the "last word" but rather reemphasizes his otherworldliness, his disparagement of the body, and his inability or refusal to enter into a dialogue with Alcibiades, which comes across as even more callous given Alcibiades's feelings for Socrates.

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