

**Why did Socrates Deny that he was a Teacher?
Locating Socrates among the new educators and the traditional education in Plato's
*Apology of Socrates***

Was Socrates a teacher? Plato appears to have taken this question quite seriously, so much so that Socrates' and others' teaching and learning are frequent themes in his dialogues. Plato's most serious engagement with the nature of Socratic education is arguably Socrates' defense against corrupting the youth at his trial. Yet, surprisingly, in *The Apology of Socrates*, Socrates does not defend the substance and methods of his teaching. He rather denies that he is a teacher. In this paper, I first describe how scholars typically explain why Plato's Socrates eschews the title of teacher; they essentially distinguish Socrates, who philosophizes, from the sophists, a group of professional teachers. I argue that the resolution is not as straightforward as others have suggested and show that Plato intentionally complicated and impeded such a resolution. Socrates' defense in Plato's *Apology* does not hinge on a distinction between Socrates and the sophists but rather opens up questions on the nature of education generally. Plato's Socrates suggests that he was not only confused with the sophists, but that Athenians conflated several elements of the "new education." Further, Plato's Socrates suggests that elements of the "old education" are in tension with one another, and these tensions exist regardless of the presence of the new education. Ultimately, I argue for anaporetic reading of Plato's *Apology* on the question of defining "teaching" – Plato identifies problems with various definitions of teaching rather than offers his own.

Socrates and the New Educators

In *Clouds*, Aristophanes distinguished the new education (*tēn kainēn paideusin*) from the traditional education (*tous proterous hatt' edidaskes*) (Aristophanes, 1998b, 935-937) and presented the new education as a grave threat to Athenian morality and culture. Socrates was the chief representative of this new education and, in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates says that the general slander against him is attributable to Aristophanes (18d, 19c). The Socrates of the *Clouds* has a school and students who pay fees. The general, old accusations that Socrates mentions in the *Apology* describe the Socrates of *Clouds* quite well: "Socrates does injustice and is meddling, by investigating the things under the earth and the heavenly things, and by making the weaker speech the stronger, and by teaching others these same things" (19b).¹

Socrates' response to the old accusations is striking. Rather than simply distinguishing himself from other new educators, he vehemently denies that he is a teacher: "if you have heard from anyone that I attempt to educate human beings and make money from it, that is not true" (19d). Once he turns to the formal charge of corrupting the youth later in the *Apology*, he reiterates that he has "never been anyone's teacher" (33a) and "never promised or taught any instruction" (33b).

Yet Plato everywhere shows Socrates doing something that could reasonably be described as 'educational'; he draws out brain-children like a midwife in *Theaetetus*, numbs his interlocutor into *aporia*, bewilderment, like a stingray in *Meno*, and in *Apology* Socrates describes himself as the gadfly of Athens, awakening "a great and well-born horse who is rather sluggish because of his great size" (30e). In general, Plato's Socrates questions, cajoles, challenges, encourages, and chastises his interlocutors in an attempt to educate them. Indeed, teachers have christened their pedagogical methods "Socratic" precisely because they take

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

Socrates to be such an inspiring model of a *teacher*. Eric Havelock concludes a paper on Plato's *Apology* by stating that "the familiar profession of Socratic ignorance... is here converted into a denial not only of Socrates' educational purpose and activity, but of its professional and technical standards. It is surely the most dishonest statement in Plato's writings" (1952, p. 108).

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

To oversimplify only slightly, these scholars all draw distinctions in one way or another between a teacher and a philosopher. Plato, they suggest, gives us sufficient grounds to

distinguish, on the one hand, a person who philosophizes with his interlocutors and companions and, on the other hand, a professional teacher, a sophist, who partakes in a formal exchange with students. Socrates seems to invite a distinction exactly along those lines for, immediately after his first denial of teaching for pay, he says, “though this too seems to me to be noble, if one should be able to educate human beings, like Gorgias of Leontini, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis.” Socrates describes them as sophists and adds Evenus of Paros to the list (19e - 20c).

There is surely something of value in distinguishing Socrates from the sophists, philosophizing from teaching. However, the distinction is not as straightforward as is often suggested. If Plato wanted to distinguish Socrates from the sophists on the basis of a formal identity as a paid teacher, he could have done so easily, just as Xenophon did in his *Apology of Socrates*. Xenophon’s Socrates says, “[I] benefitted those I conversed with by freely teaching [*proika didaskōn*] them any good thing I could” (Xenophon, 1990, 26). Xenophon’s Socrates does not deny teaching, but he clearly distinguishes himself from sophists in that he does his teaching *proika*, without reward, as a gift, freely. Plato does not take this path in his version of the defense speech.

On my count, the verb *didaskō*, to instruct or teach, and its related forms appear 18 times in Plato’s *Apology*, and the verb *paideuō*, to teach or educate, and its related forms appear three times. When Socrates denies that he teaches, he uses both words – *paideuō* at 19d9 and 19e2 and *didaskō* at 33a5 and 33b6. Yet despite the weight of these words in a speech that supposedly attempts to demonstrate that Socrates is not a teacher who claims an expertise and collects fees, he uses the words in ways that clearly show that he understands teaching to be broader than the specialized role he assigns it. Socrates says at 19d2 that the jury members should teach,

didaskēin, and tell, *phrazēin*, one another about whether they have actually seen him do what he is accused of in the “old accusations.” Clearly he understands that teaching may be done in a non-technical, informal way.² Further, Socrates tells the jury that he will *teach them* at 21b1, “I am going to teach you where the slander against me has come from,” and 35c2, “to me it does not seem to be just to beg the judge, nor to be acquitted by begging, but rather to teach and to persuade.”³ If Socrates is only a “persuader” and “exhorter,” why does he say here that he will both teach, *didaskō*, and persuade, *peithō*?⁴ And why did he say that the jury should teach, *didaskō*, and tell, *phrazō*? I submit that Plato is far too careful a writer to have used *didaskō* in addition to *peithō* and *phrazō* in Socrates’ comments to the jury by accident, especially when using *peithein* or *phrazēin* alone would have allowed the distinction to hold between, on the one hand, teaching and, on the other, philosophizing/persuading/exhorting or telling/advising/counseling.

As further evidence of the problematic distinction of philosopher and teacher, consider another way that Socrates distinguishes himself from the sophists. He says that anyone who so desires can associate with him, but since he promises nothing, takes no fees, and denies responsibility for any consequences of the associations, they should be understood as listeners rather than students (as Brickhouse and Smith put it) and the encounter should be understood as a gift exchange rather than a market exchange (as Scott puts it). Once again, this manner of distinguishing Socrates from the sophists seems to be invited by the text. Returning to 33a-b, Socrates says

² Reeve also notes this use to criticize scholars who claim that Socrates merely denies teaching in a technical sense (1989, p. 162).

³ Additionally, at 35d4 he adds that it would be possible for him to teach the jury badly.

⁴ Persuading alone would be problematic because, from the Socratic perspective, it is among orators’ and sophists’ dubious skills. However, persuading is indeed the appropriate activity when addressing a large jury, as Socrates must at this trial.

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

Responsibility is precisely what is at stake in the trial and Socrates' disavowal of it based on the fact that he promises nothing, accepts no fees and establishes no formal relationships with his students is not quite convincing.⁵ But the most challenging part about accepting that Socrates' free attachments make him a different kind of teacher, or not a teacher at all, is that Socrates explicitly invokes a degree of formality when he talks about the relationships that he has with young men. Socrates identifies several of the fathers and brothers of the young men with whom he associated in the courtroom (33e-34a). Socrates says to the jury that if he had corrupted the young, someone would come forward to say so or, at least, their fathers or families would. Since these fathers would be able to attest to a sufficiently prolonged and harmless association, of which they were aware and of which they approved, the relationships are something more than merely informal, even if they are not bound by formal exchanges. Further, if Socrates merely had informal relationships with the many young men who listen to him conversing, would he really be able to identify so readily the families that can attest to his harmless influence?

Socrates' disavowal of formal relations with young men is further undermined when, after the jury's decision, he threatens, "I affirm, you men who condemned me to death, that

⁵ Brann's analysis of this passage is insightful:

if he takes no money, that only means that he is uncontrollable—he cannot be engaged or dismissed, as a parent might hire or fire a professional. And if he takes no responsibility for the careers of his young associates, why, that is usually called irresponsibility. But if he conveys no positive matter to these young men, that is the very worst of all, in the light of what he shows them instead... He goes about engaging public men, poets and craftsmen in conversations which are really examinations, in the course of which it emerges that they do not, in truth, know what they are doing, although they think they know it well enough while the young men stand by and watch and smile... This is what Socrates calls "not being anyone's teacher," and this is how he makes himself palatable to his fellow-citizens! (1978, pp. 11-12; see also West, 1979, p. 193)

vengeance will come upon you right after my death, and much harsher, by Zeus, than the sort you give me by killing me... There will be more who will refute you, *whom I have now been holding back; you did not perceive them*" (39c-d; my emphasis). If the relationship is free and informal, if young men merely follow him around and find it amusing when Athenian citizens "who suppose they are wise, but are not" are exposed through Socrates' questions (33c), how does Socrates have the power to hold people back? Socrates here suggests not the relationship between informal conversational partners but, rather, the tightly knit bonds of a teacher and his faithful disciples. Socrates' own testimony challenges his denial of teaching and the reader is left – in the same position as Socrates' jury and most Athenians – with a question about whether Socrates is a teacher and, if so, what kind of teacher he is.

Thus far I have argued that Plato may very well suggest that the Athenians have confused Socrates with a sophist, but he does not equip readers with a straightforward means of making the distinction. Plato further complicates matters by portraying the "new education" as comprised of more than merely sophists and Socrates. In *Apology*, Socrates' first distinguishes himself not from a sophist but, at the outset of his speech, from an orator (17b). Speaking well was traditionally celebrated by Greeks.⁶ By Plato's time, there was much suspicion about the power of *logos*, speech, and the people who claimed to teach it, and the label "orator," much like "philosopher," was viewed by many as disreputable.⁷ Lycon, who supported Meletus' prosecution, was vexed "on behalf of the orators" (23e).⁸ In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates seems to

⁶ Consider Phoenix's remark that he had been charged with teaching Achilles to be both a "speaker of words (*rhētēr*) and a doer of deeds (Homer, 1999, 9.443). Nestor is described as "sweet of speech, the clear-voiced orator [*agorētēs*] of the men of Pylos, he from whose tongue speech flowed sweeter than honey" (Homer, 1999, 1.247-249).

⁷ Phaedrus mentions that Lysias was recently derisively called a "speech writer" in *Phaedrus* (Plato, 1995, 257c). By the fifth and fourth centuries, oratory and its teachers were subject to scathing attacks; consider, for example, Isocrates' need for a defense of his teaching in *Antidosis* (in Isocrates, 2000).

⁸ In Plato's *Menexenus*, in which Socrates perhaps playfully delivers a great oratorical display, Menexenus says, "You're forever making fun of the orators, Socrates" (Plato, 1997b, 235c).

identify the absurdity in that he is both a target of the orators and believed by others to be a teacher of the kind of oratory and clever speaking that enable young men to “make the weaker argument the stronger” (23d).

After discussing teachers of oratory, Socrates next distinguishes himself from natural philosophers, those “investigating the things under the earth and the heavenly things” (19d). Socrates gets Meletus to assert that Socrates believes that “the sun is stone and moon is earth” (26d) and responds that Meletus has confused him and Anaxagoras, thereby distancing himself from the natural philosophers. While Socrates attempts to separate orators, natural philosophers, sophists and, perhaps, a philosopher like himself, there was much overlap in these categories. Gorgias, for example, speculated on the nature of being, taught oratory, and, to many, was simply a sophist.⁹ Protagoras proudly called himself a sophist,¹⁰ and stands at the forefront of the sophistic tradition, yet his innovations in oratory and its teaching were also widely recognized.¹¹ One could go on, but the importance of the issue with respect to *Apology* is that Socrates suggests that he has been confused with three types of new educators, among whom clean distinctions are difficult, if not impossible. To determine what kind of teacher Socrates is, if he is a teacher at all, requires determining how the Socratic education stands in relation to the other new educational alternatives. This question remains open at the conclusion of Socrates’ defense speech.

⁹ The evidence on Gorgias has inspired controversy. Some scholars have dismissed his work “On Not-Being” as a spoof, but others, including some ancient sources, treat it as serious. Scholars also continue to debate whether Gorgias should be considered a sophist. Philostratus wrote, “we must consider that the art of the sophists carries back to [Gorgias] as though he were its father” (Philostratus, 1922, 492). In *Gorgias*, Plato seems to treat him as an orator alone, as Socrates distinguishes oratory from sophistry in that dialogue (Plato, 2007, 463a-466a & 519e-520b). But Socrates’ distinction rests on shaky premises and it remains an open question whether he is arguing in favor of the distinction or prompting readers to consider whether such a distinction is sustainable. Socrates himself questions the distinction at 520a (“the sophist and the rhetor are the same thing, or nearly the same and virtually the same”), but he may simply be provoking Callicles.

¹⁰ At least, he boasts that he is a sophist in Plato’s *Protagoras* (Plato, 2004, 317b), though the appropriateness of the title in Protagoras’ case is not debated.

¹¹ Numerous sources attest Protagoras’ innovations in and teaching of rhetoric; e.g. DK 80 A4, A21, A26 (Sprague, 1972). It may be worth noting that Protagoras and Socrates share many similarities (see Mintz, 2011).

Socrates and the Traditional Education

I am not arguing that Socrates cannot be distinguished from the sophists, the orators and the natural philosophers. Plato certainly invites readers to consider how to do so. Thus far I have only argued that it is more difficult to do so than is typically supposed. I now want to suggest that Plato's defense of Socrates against the charge of corrupting the youth goes beyond showing how Socrates differs from, and is superior to, the sophists specifically, and the new education generally. Plato's Socrates suggests that the traditional education is not as coherent and stable as Athenians assume. It rather entails many parts: families, noble citizens, the city's laws or regime, poets, and the city's religion. Though all of these elements may potentially work towards the same end, they often conflict and, in the *Apology*, and in the Platonic corpus generally, Plato draws readers' attention to these tensions.

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

There is good reason to believe that the concern about transferring allegiance to Socrates was a factor in bringing Socrates to trial. In Xenophon's *Apology*, Meletus says, "I most certainly

know of those whom you have persuaded to listen to you rather than to their parents” (Xenophon, 1990, 20). Anytus, who supported Meletus’ indictment, was a parent with whom Socrates had disagreed about an appropriate education for his son. Xenophon’s Socrates says “my brief acquaintance with Anytus’ son led me to believe that he was a person of some caliber.” But Socrates offers a prophecy that highlights the disagreement with Anytus: “my prediction is that he will not remain in the servile occupation his father has arranged for him; but because there is no one of principle to take him in hand, he will succumb to some base motivation and make considerable progress as a degenerate” (Xenophon, 1990, 29-30).

Plato’s Socrates suggests that he does not necessarily undermine parents’ wishes and, as discussed above, points to many people in the courtroom who do not object to his associations with their sons (33d-34a). Yet he also asserts, “I always do your business, going to each of you privately, as a father or an older brother might do, persuading you to care for virtue” (31b). This line suggests that he is perfectly willing to serve, and even enthusiastic about serving, as a father, whether or not he deems a father to have fulfilled his paternal duties. In making this claim, Socrates points to a larger problem about entrusting one’s children’s education to anyone beyond the family, and the traditional education already featured precisely that sort of outside influence – fathers hoped to find noble citizens with whom their sons could associate. In his ominous encounter with Socrates in *Meno*, Anytus insists that the city’s young men can become virtuous by spending time with any *kalos k’agathos* citizen, any noble and good gentleman.¹² Meletus is drawn into a brief exchange in Plato’s *Apology* and ends up arguing similarly that all Athenian citizens – the judges at the trial, the Councilmen, the members of the Assembly – make the

¹² When pressed into naming who makes the young virtuous by Socrates, Anytus says “Why give the name of one individual? Any Athenian gentleman [*kalōn k’agathōn*] he may meet, if he is willing to be persuaded, will make him a better man than the sophists would” and that “these men have learned from those who were gentlemen before them” (Plato, 1997c, 92e). Consider also the requests of fathers to have Socrates associate with their sons in *Theages* (127a) and *Laches* (200c-d).

young better (24e-25a). Socrates asks Meletus, “then all the Athenians, as it appears, make them noble and good [*kalous k’agathous*] except me, and I alone corrupt them. Is this what you are saying?” Meletus responds, “I do say this, most vehemently” (25a).

Since Athenian fathers relied on positive associations with local citizens, they needed to decide with whom their sons should associate. A father would control the education of his son insofar as he could control these associations. However, by allowing even a citizen he selects himself to influence his child, he cedes some control over the education, and the allegiance of the young man may be tested. And clearly at stake in Plato’s *Apology* is what one ought to look for in an ideal citizen with whom one’s son should associate. The case that Socrates presents is that *he* is such a person, one who exhorts people to care for living well rather than wealth, fame and political power – the trappings that are high on the list for many Athenian young men *and* their fathers.

Individual citizens and families are only a part of the picture of the initiation of new members into society. Education happens through these associations but also generally on account of the fact that a person is reared in a community in which there is a shared language, a shared set of customs, and a shared law.¹³ Throughout Greece, there was a high value placed on *homonoiia*, like-mindedness or solidarity. Though Athens in the fifth century was known for its relative freedoms, *homonoiia* was still crucial.¹⁴ In a city that was more often than not at war, a unified populace was understood both to support the political regime and to prevent the death and enslavement of its inhabitants. Shared customs and laws provided an education through socialization. It is highly relevant that Meletus’ first response to Socrates’ question about who makes the youth better is, simply, “the laws [*nomoi*]” (24d). The laws of a city and its political

¹³ Notably *nomos* means both custom and law.

¹⁴ See Rahe on the importance of *homonoiia* in Athens (1994, pp. 172-204).

regime, *politeia*, cultivate citizens. Socrates presents what was the commonly accepted view in his funeral oration in *Menexenus*: “a polity [*politeia*] molds its people; a goodly one molds good men, the opposed bad” (Plato, 1997b, 238c).¹⁵ One might infer from Meletus’ response that any educational force that interferes with that socialization is subversive and threatens *homonoia*.

Socrates’ defense against the charge of corrupting the youth involves identifying a problem fundamental to all societies: how can *homonoia* be preserved in the face of individual families with their own interests and a diverse array of educational options beyond the family, be they noble citizens or new educators. Plato was well aware of the Spartan solution to this problem – common education. Xenophon describes the superiority of the Spartan approach as follows:

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

Aristotle endorses this solution of common education to the problem of *homonoia* as well;

since the whole city has one end, it is manifest that everyone must also have one and the same education and that taking care of this education must be a common matter. It must not be private in the way it is now, when everyone takes care of their own children privately and teaches them whatever private learning they think best. Of common things the training too must be common. (Aristotle, 1997, 1337a21-26)

In the *Apology*, Plato raises the very problem that Xenophon and Aristotle address. How can Athenians maintain that *homonoia* is of paramount importance if they have failed to recognize the value of a common education? Since no such common education existed, should they not inquire into the potential value of the new educators?

¹⁵ Plato’s Socrates seems to endorse this idea in *The Republic*.

Given the importance of *homonoia* and the simultaneous suspicion of formal teachers beyond instructors of children in Athens, one may come to appreciate the educational role of the poetic-religious tradition. The charge of impiety that Socrates faced was not distinct from the charge of corrupting the youth but was rather inextricably bound to it. If Socrates does injustice “by not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other *daimonia* that are novel” (24b), his injustice is not his private belief. It matters very little what he *privately* believed. It is the *public* challenge to the gods of the city that threatens *homonoia* and that corrupts the young. Religious rights and rituals educate the young through socialization in appropriate codes of conduct and beliefs, essentially providing a foundation for a civic education that was frequently challenged by the new education. Plato’s Socrates reverses the order of the charges by placing “corrupting the young” before the charges regarding the gods, at least as they are preserved by Diogenes Laertius and Xenophon.¹⁶ On my reading of Plato’s *Apology*, this inversion makes perfect sense since the defense centers on education and the charges of impiety are subsumed under the charges of corrupting.

That Plato dramatically links *Euthyphro* to the *Apology* is telling, for in *Euthyphro* Plato demonstrates that there are already tensions within the traditional education, even without the challenges of the new educators. Euthyphro is on his way to court to try his father for the murder of a hired hand. Euthyphro believes that his loyalty to the religious teachings of the state take priority over his duty to his father and his family. The dramatic tension arises as Euthyphro considers which aspect of his traditional education takes priority, and Plato thereby draws attention to a tension within the traditional education itself.

The poets, who straddle the traditional and the new education, had a crucial educational role in Greece. Herodotus attributed the religious education of Greece to Homer and Hesiod

¹⁶ See West’s note (in Plato, 1998, pp. 73, n38).

(1972, 2.53). In *The Republic*, Socrates noted that most Greeks believe that Homer is “the poet who has educated Greece.” Further, people believe “that we should learn from him and follow this poet in the arrangement and conduct of the whole of our own lives” (Plato, 2000, 606e-607a).

Aristophanes in *Frogs* reveals that the living poets of the fifth century continued to be viewed as the city’s educators. Hence, in the comedic contest of supremacy between Aeschylus and Euripides in *Frogs*, each poet argues that his works are more educationally beneficial for Greek audiences than are his rival’s. Euripides replies to a question about the qualities of good poets by saying that they should demonstrate “skill [*dexiotētos*] and good counsel... because we make people better members of their communities” (Aristophanes, 1998a, 1009). Later in the discussion, Aeschylus says, “the poet has a special duty to conceal what’s wicked, not stage it or teach it. For children the teacher is the one who instructs, but grownups have the poet. It’s very important that we tell them things that are good” (1053-4).¹⁷

What Aristophanes’ *Frogs* makes clear is that the mere fact that a poet receives the honor of having his work publicly performed in Greece does not necessarily mean that one should assume that the poet is a good educator.¹⁸ The contemporary poets end up straddling the new and the traditional education because the poets make Athenians reflect upon their society, customs and gods. The fifth century poets carefully attended to the education they provided Greek citizens, and thereby were on common ground with the various new educators. Yet poets saw themselves as superior to the new educators. They traced their lineage directly to the likes of Homer and Hesiod, they performed publicly-sanctioned and even adored works, and thereby claimed that they were the rightful (and best equipped) educators of the polity.

¹⁷ The poets undoubtedly instructed the young as well. Consider, for example, Plato’s Protagoras comments about the role of the poets in moral education (Plato, 2004, 326a).

¹⁸ Aristophanes may have been making his own claim to educational supremacy (see Euben, 1997, pp. 109-138).

With this context of the poets' role in Greece in mind, one can better understand the insult of Socrates' determination "that [poets] do not make what they make by wisdom, but by some sort of oracles" (22b-c). Among a group whose members prided themselves on their ability to educate and improve citizens, Socrates' remark was insulting, denying both their ability to make wise judgments about what they portray and that there is an art to their practice.¹⁹ It is therefore unsurprising that, when Socrates specifies the groups that are represented by his accusers, he says that Meletus was "vexed on behalf of the poets" (23e).²⁰ Socrates suggests that poets have a choice. On the one hand, they can accept that they are educators who put no thought into what their poetry teaches, and are thereby part of the unthinking, uncritical traditional education. On the other hand, they may accept that they care about the education of the city and, therefore, their poetry may be in conflict with the others' and their works may be in tension with other elements of the traditional education. Since the education of the city is at stake, a matter about which Socrates cares deeply, he will not allow the poets to have it both ways.

As Aristophanes makes clear, his contemporary poets do not offer a unified religio-poetic education that forms the basis of the traditional education. We can add to the fractured religio-poetic education the fact that young men might be pulled in different directions through their educational socialization in the company of their family, other citizens, and education through the city's laws and way of life. In the end, Plato shows that the new education is not the only challenge to the traditional education, the traditional education is fractured and challenges itself.

¹⁹ Likewise, in Plato's *Ion* (1997a), Socrates specifically denies Ion, a rhapsode, and the poets whose work he performs, a claim to an art or craft (*technē*).

²⁰ Meletus may not have been a poet himself. West contends that he was, although "no doubt one of the artless, ordinary poets, possessed by someone else's wisdom" (1979, pp. 134-135). Nails argues that he was probably the son of a poet, though not a poet himself (2002, Meletus II, s.v.).

Conclusion

Education is not an incidental theme in Plato's *Apology*. The nature of teaching and learning resides at the core of Socrates' defense. Therefore, constructing a Platonic definition of "teacher" from the explicit comments Socrates makes about teaching in the speech is problematic. Socrates continuously returns to teaching throughout the speech and several definitions of teaching are suggested. I contend that *Apology* may be read as an aporetic work on the question of teaching; that is, like in other dialogues, after pointing to various problems with ways that one might understand the nature of teaching, Plato closes the dialogue without offering a clear resolution to that question.

Why would Plato offer such an aporetic response to the question of Socrates as teacher? The main substance of Plato's *Apology* is an argument that Socrates' accusers, and the Athenians in general, had very little sense of the monumental changes of the educational currents in their time. Further, they did not understand at all how Socrates – or the new education generally – fit into this picture beyond recognizing the fact that the tides were changing and the new teachers and intellectuals were contributing to the change. The Athenians failed to recognize that the traditional education was already in tension with itself, and was no longer a stable foundation for *homonoiia*. Nor did the Athenians comprehend the danger and potential of the new educators, who were conflated and uniformly disparaged. Plato's ultimate defense of Socrates, therefore, does not depend on validating Socratic philosophizing. It is rather that no one can assign blame to someone for corrupting the youth without first inquiring into the nature, provision and purpose of education. In the *Apology* and elsewhere, Plato suggests that answering these questions is the key to living a worthwhile life and living in a just community.

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