THE SEARCH FOR THE HISTORICAL SOCRATES
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We cannot begin our search for the historical Socrates by turning to his writings: there is no
evidence that Socrates wrote anything other than some poetry as he waited in prison for his execution. Thus we have to rely on what others attribute to Socrates and what they say about him. I will start from one of the philosophical ripples radiating from the historical Socrates and make my way backward in an effort to come as close as possible to their actual origin.

Perhaps the most celebrated philosophical row in the Hellenistic period (323–30 B.C.), that
followed Socrates’ death (399 B.C.), was between the Stoics and the Academic Skeptics. The Skeptics
aimed at systematically undermining the theses the Stoics put forth. But one thing the Stoics and Skeptics (who actually wished to be called Socraties) had in common was that each traced their lineage back to Socrates. Since these two schools arose well after Socrates had died, neither founder could have known Socrates personally; their information, like our own, was second-hand. Perhaps neither was as interested in the historic Socrates as they were in trying to appropriate the figure of Socrates for their own philosophical purposes. The story is not that different if we look at another pair of opposed schools from the same era, the Cynics and the Cyrenaics, each of which reasonably traces itself to a founder who was a friend of Socrates. The Cynics, who emphasized asceticism and scorned pleasure, traced their roots to

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2 See Gisela Striker, Plato’s Socrates and the Stoics, in Vander Waerdt, supra note 1, at 241–51.

3 See Julia Annas, Plato the Skeptic, in Vander Waerdt, supra note 1, at 307–40; Christopher Shields, Socrates among the Skeptics, in Vander Waerdt, supra note 1, at 341–66.

4 See Vander Waerdt, supra note 1, at 7.

5 Hellenistic historians provided a genealogy in which Stoicism was traced back to Socrates by a series of intermediary teachers. See Striker, supra note 2, at 241. However, this genealogy does not appear to have as much warrant as the genealogy that traces the Cynics and Cyrenaics back to Socrates. See Voula Tsouna McKirahan, The Socratic Origins of the Cynics and the Cyrenaics, in Vander Waerdt, supra note 1, at 367–91.

6 McKirahan defends the Hellenistic claim that Antisthenes is the founder of the Cynics, and Aristippus is the founder of the Cyrenaics. See McKirahan, supra note 5, at 367–91. However, she also argues that the two founders were not in fact
Antisthenes,\(^7\) perhaps the most prominent among the intimates of Socrates for the first fifteen years following Socrates’ death.\(^8\) The Cyrenaics, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of pleasure. They traced their roots to Aristippus, who like Plato was absent from Socrates’s death.\(^9\) It seems that even among the intimates of Socrates, it was common to disagree on important matters.

Let us now take a step closer to the center from which these ripples emanate. Aristotle gave the name \(\textit{Sôkratikoi logos,}\) or “Socratic discourses,” to the portrayals of Socrates produced by his associates.\(^10\) Among the contenders vying for the title of originator of this literary genre are Plato, Xenophon,\(^11\) the otherwise unknown Simon the Athenian cobbler (who is said to have written thirty-three such works\(^12\)), and Alexamenos of Teos.\(^13\) We have evidence that there were over seventy “Socratic” writings about Socrates.\(^14\) Indeed, nine of the eighteen Socratics named by Plato in the \textit{Phaedo}\(^15\) wrote Socratic discourses. Of these works only those of Plato and Xenophon survive intact, while there are significant remains of the works of Antisthenes, Aeschines, Phaedo, and Euclides.\(^16\) But “Socratic discourses” have a literary precedent in the comic works of the fifth century.\(^17\) Among these is Aristophanes’ Clouds, the only extant work written on Socrates in his lifetime (423 B.C.).\(^18\) The Socrates of the Clouds is a natural philosopher who scorns tradition and seems to have no regard for morality. This Socrates is such an inversion of the Socrates depicted by Plato and praised by Cicero,\(^19\) that many have simply dismissed Aristophanes’ portrayal as not worthy of philosophical interest.\(^20\) This is probably a mistake; the Socratics themselves take this portrayal seriously and respond to it.\(^21\) Indeed, it may well be

\(^7\) See VANDER WAERDT, supra note 1, at 7.

\(^8\) See id.; KAHN, supra note 1, at 4–5.

\(^9\) See PHAEDO, supra note 1, at 59c.


\(^11\) See Clay, supra note 10, at 32–33.

\(^12\) See VANDER WAERDT, supra note 1, at 2.

\(^13\) See KAHN, supra note 1, at 1.

\(^14\) See Clay, supra note 10, at 26 (citations omitted).

\(^15\) See PHAEDO, supra note 1, at 59b–59c; VANDER WAERDT, supra note 1, at 3.

\(^16\) See KAHN, supra note 1, at 1.

\(^17\) See Clay, supra note 10, at 37–41. See also Paul Vander Waerdt, \textit{Socrates in the Clouds, in} VANDER WAERDT, supra note 1, at 48–86 [hereinafter \textit{Socrates in the Clouds}].

\(^18\) See \textit{Socrates in the Clouds, supra} note 17, at 52.

\(^19\) In his famous dictum, Cicero calls Socrates the man who “first called philosophy down from the heavens.” VANDER WAERDT, supra note 1, at 1 (citing MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO, \textit{TUSCULAN DISPUTATIONS} 5.10–11).

\(^20\) See VANDER WAERDT, supra note 1, n.13 (citing Gregory Vlastos as holding this view).

\(^21\) See id. at 5.
that Aristophanes’ target is Socrates at an earlier stage of his philosophical career (nearly a quarter of a century before his death), whereas Plato and Cicero are speaking of the later, more mature Socrates. 22 Thus, if we are concerned with the mature historical Socrates, we must turn to the Socratic discourses.

Do the Socratic discourses provide a sound basis for an account of the historical Socrates? This is a long-debated, and contentious question. 23 But I believe that for the most part, the answer is no if we are concerned with Socrates’s own philosophy rather than with his physical appearance, facility in argument, and well-attested public actions. The recent work of Paul Vander Waerdt and Charles Kahn, taking account of the extant literature of this genre, both support Arnaldo Momigliano’s earlier conclusion in 1971 that “[t]he Socratics experimented in biography, and the experiments were directed towards capturing the potentialities rather than the realities of individual lives. Socrates, the main subject of their considerations, was not so much the real Socrates as the potential Socrates.” 24 Kahn concludes that, while there is a family resemblance that unites the portraits of Socrates, 25 the nature of the Socratic literature is essentially “imaginative” and “fictional.” 26 This claim probably comes as a surprise to those familiar with the prevailing view among Anglo-American philosophers that one can find the historical Socrates in the “early” Platonic dialogues. 27 Kahn undermines the most important argument for this view by demonstrating that both Xenophon and Aristotle rely on Plato for so much of their Socratic material that they do not provide any independent evidence for the practice of the historical Socrates. 28 Kahn believes that only Plato’s Apology provides a reasonably accurate account of the philosophy of the historical Socrates. Unlike the rest of Plato’s Socratic writings, the Apology portrays a very public event at which Plato claims he was present, the trial of Socrates. 29 To make a plausible defense of Socrates, Plato had to “present a picture of Socrates in court that could be recognized as authentic.” 30 Surely Plato applied his great literary skills to enhancing this portrait of Socrates, but if we are to find the historical Socrates anywhere, this is the place to look.

22 See Socrates in the Clouds, supra note 17, at 48–86.
23 See KAHN, supra note 1, at 72–73 (“The question has been debated for more than two centuries, with no sign of any consensus emerging”) (citing A. Patzer, Der historische Socrates 6–40 (1987)).
24 See KAHN, supra note 1, at 34 (quoting A. Momigliano, The Development of Greek Biography 46 (1971)).
25 See id. at 3.
26 See id. at 2.
27 See VANDER WAERDT, supra note 1, at 9–10. See also KAHN, supra note 1, at 73–75.
28 See KAHN, supra note 1, at 79–87.
29 Some writers, including some ancient ones, suggest that even Plato’s Apology is wholly fictional. See Thomas C. Brickhouse & Nicholas D. Smith, Socrates on Trial 1–10 (1989). For Plato’s presence at the trial, see Plato, Apology, in Five Dialogues 34a and 38b (George Maximilian Anthony Grube trans., 1981). Xenophon also writes an account of Socrates’ trial. See Xenophon, Apology, in 4 Xenophon in Seven Volumes 1 (O.J. Todd trans., 1979), (or see <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3AText%3A1999.01.0212> (visited May 17, 2000) for this text). However, unlike Plato, Xenophon was not at the trial. The trial was in 399; Xenophon left Athens in 401 and returned to Greece in 394. See KAHN, supra note 1, at 30.
30 KAHN, supra note 1, at 89.