Introduction
Participating in Disillusion and Renewal

The question of philosophy's audience is born with philosophy itself. When Socrates learned that the Oracle had said no man is wiser than Socrates, he interpreted this to mean, we are told, that he knew that he did not know. And we are likely to take this as a bit of faded irony or as a stuffy humility. What I take Socrates to have seen is that, about the questions which were causing him wonder and hope and confusion and pain, he knew that he did not know what no man can know, and that any man could learn what he wanted to learn. No man is in any better position for knowing it than any other man—unless wanting to know is a special position. And this discovery about himself is the same as the discovery of philosophy, when it is the effort to find answers, and permit questions, which nobody knows the way to nor the answer to any better than you yourself.

—STANLEY CAVELL

When, as an undergraduate philosophy major, I first read some of Plato's dialogues, I did not find them fascinating, nor was I captivated by the figure of Socrates. The dialogues were assigned texts; I was a diligent student, so I did the assigned reading. At the time, my main concern was to try to understand the dialogues as vehicles for Plato's thoughts about what my teachers had told me were some of Plato's central
doctrines (the immortality of the human soul, for example, and his theory of knowledge as recollection, and certainly the mysterious notion called the Platonic “Forms” or “Ideas”). My engagement with Plato’s texts was dutiful but uninspired. This may have been due to the fact that I went to those texts not because various questions were (in Stanley Cavell’s words) “causing [me] wonder and hope and confusion and pain,” but rather because the texts were assigned.

After I graduated, I went on to law school, where I encountered firsthand one version of the Socratic method at work. It was a daunting experience. Then, after some years of practicing law, I found my way back to graduate studies in philosophy, at a point in my development where I generally studied philosophical texts for my own reasons as much as for institutional or professional ones. Even so, however, I still found myself—whether as a teaching assistant, or in taking my share of graduate classes, or in preparing for the doctoral preliminary examinations—approaching the Platonic canon with the expectation that Socrates would serve as Plato’s mouthpiece. Given that I approached Plato’s texts with this expectation, it is no surprise that, in my further readings of those dialogues, my expectation was fulfilled.

Reading in this way, what I gained from each text was an impression of Socrates as someone who espoused thoughts and ideas that could be ascribed to Plato’s philosophical commitments. Dramatically speaking, the words in the dialogues may have been uttered by Socrates; but, philosophically speaking, they seemed motivated by Plato’s agenda. These terms seemed pertinent philosophically only insofar as they enabled me to better understand Plato’s system of thought. But then I began to teach in law school. And teaching in law school changed the way that I read these dialogues. It was through my struggles with teaching that the figure of Socrates came to the foreground, while matters of Platonic doctrine receded.

**Learning How to Read by Teaching**

I had come late to teaching, after a five-year stint as a lawyer in Chicago and another five-year span of graduate studies at the University of Michigan (sandwiched around one year at the University of Chicago as
a Bigelow Teaching Fellow). Going into the classroom was a discomfiting experience, especially when I thought about how the law school model of “Socratic teaching” seemed to be far out of my reach. Did I regard myself truly as an inheritor of the Socratic method? Well, no, I did not. I could not ask questions of students with Socrates’ perspicuity, and I could not create at a moment’s notice hypothetical cases for the class to consider and analyze. Nor could I harangue or harass students into humiliation (something that Socrates seemed to do regularly with his interlocutors). And I know that I did not have Socrates’ facility for putting probing queries that promised a full afternoon of interesting investigation and discussion. In all these respects, while conscientious, I was a plodder. I had my own way of working through the materials, and I took very seriously the questions that either I or my students raised. As well, I was committed to engaging my students’ attention in the cases and rules and statutes that we were studying.

But how could this way of teaching compare with Socratic teaching? Was it even clear that my style was inspired by Socrates or that my method related to the way in which Socrates taught? Staring me in the face were the obvious discrepancies between what I did in the classroom and what Socrates managed to achieve in his long-ago Athenian streets and courtyards. Given that the locales were quite different, what really did I share with Socrates in terms of how I went about the task of teaching? And what was Socrates, in his own inimitable way, trying to do back then? These questions bothered me.

I now realize that it was the bothersome aspect of this experience that held value for me. Although I failed to realize it at the time, these questions about teaching and learning and inquiring were alive for me in a way that questions concerning Plato’s doctrine of the Forms, or his belief in the immortality of the soul, were not. I had finally stumbled across “questions which were causing [me] wonder and hope and confusion and pain,” and these questions mattered to me. And I had not gone looking for them, nor were they assigned to me by my teachers; rather, my life and its direction or development had posed these problems to me. They found me, not I, them. Or perhaps it would be better to say that I had reached a juncture in my life’s work and found myself at a stand-still. Not knowing whether to go forward or to go back, I set out to find a path on which I could tread. In all events, I was committed to
working out the problems on terms that I could unearth for myself, and on the basis of which I could proceed. This commitment placed me in a profitable relation with a medium or field of work in which I might fruitfully participate and to which I might helpfully contribute. However it came about, I had discovered something that was of philosophical interest to me, even compellingly so.

Giving myself permission to inquire further, I set out trying to answer the questions that were bothering me. I began by rereading some of the dialogues that, either as an undergraduate or as a graduate student, I had read before. I needed a new start with these same texts; after all, given my prior focus when absorbed with these dialogues, how much did I even know or understand about Socrates?

As I worked my way through these dialogues and then began exploring others that I had never read, I came to realize that the lessons made available to us by means of Socrates’ method of inquiry were provisional. A conversation begins between Socrates and someone else; it gathers momentum and gradually finds a rhythm or a course of its own, perhaps it is joined by others, perhaps it goes through an entire series of interlocutors, exhausting them in turn. Eventually, the conversation reaches some mild clarification or apparent conclusion. But rarely (if ever) does the course of the discussion yield certainty; seldom (if ever) does it end in stout-hearted confidence. Rather, some careful formulation of a position or of an opinion, some tentative belief, is offered (usually by Socrates), and this tentative remark gains provisional assent from those participating in the discussion, and perhaps even from those gathered around the conversing parties. But usually this assent is accompanied by an expression of hesitation or doubt about the position reached. There remains, then, the distinct possibility that some factor or some consideration has been overlooked or misstated or forgotten or otherwise neglected. In this respect, Plato’s dialogues are openended. They seem to require (or to call for) completion.

I discovered, as I read, that I was no longer clear about what Socrates was attempting to do in his conversations (or, for that matter, what Plato was trying to do in his dialogues). My earlier certainties vanished, and they were replaced by questions with very few answers. And then it dawned on me that this loss of assurance was the point that Socrates
and Plato were making to any member of the audience who might want to open his eyes and trust his ears.

Openness is not an especially viable position to take in an American law school, either for the teacher or for the student. That was the position, however, in which my rereading of Plato (and my reconsideration of Socrates) left me. I began to ask myself, “What did American law schools (or law professors) know about Socrates? What, specifically, was the image of Socratic activity that found its way into the law school model of teaching?” For all of the talk that one heard in these schools concerning “the Socratic method,” it struck me that most references to Socrates and his method of teaching were long on generalities and short on specifics. Law teachers within my hearing mostly thought that the Socratic method was a way of teaching by questioning one’s students, without oneself ever answering the questions put to the class (or, heaven forbid, answering the occasional questions tossed back by an intrepid student). “The Socratic method” was, in this regard, a title given to some generic nondirective method of teaching, one that did not take away from the law student the fun of intellectual adventure, the thrill of discovering the law for himself or herself. While there is something valuable in this traditional way of teaching law, as a model of teaching it places a heavy emphasis on a particular image of who Socrates was and what he did. Who was Socrates? And how did he conduct himself and his inquiries?

The Figure of Socrates

Plato’s dialogues are our chief source of information about Socrates. Other accounts and portraits of Socrates exist in the ancient literature, of course, but Plato’s dialogues have a special authority. Scholars have debated the extent to which Plato’s dialogues give an accurate account of the historical Socrates who lived in Athens and who ended his life by drinking hemlock in 399 B.C. Gregory Vlastos, some time ago, lent his authority to the idea that “the Socrates of Plato’s early dialogues . . . is a faithful and imaginative recreation of the historical Socrates.” Others have demurred. I have nothing useful to contribute to this debate. I
think that we are left in a Socratic position such that we simply cannot claim to know one way or the other. From my perspective, Alexander Nehamas expresses our dilemma very well: “The Socrates who first practiced living as an art is the figure we find in Plato’s Socratic dialogues. And though . . . we now find it difficult to believe that Plato’s Socrates is not the Socrates of history, the fact is that to all effects and purposes Plato’s literary figure is a fictional character. Even if we could isolate those elements in Plato’s representation that correspond to his historical original, it is the whole character who confronts us in those works, not some smaller cluster of his features, that fired the imagination of the tradition he created.” My interest here is in trying to understand the figure of Socrates as portrayed in several of Plato’s dialogues. It is, I think, only through an engagement with these texts (and whatever consistencies or inconsistencies they may possess) that we can have anything akin to a “figure” with whom to work. I have, accordingly, tried to read these dialogues as though they were tracing the image of one person, historical or fictional, engaged in a series of conversations with various interlocutors.

Considering Socrates on this basis, the value that I find in what the law school tradition takes from his way of conducting himself as a man of inquiry, is the idea that Socratic inquiries are meant to be undertaken by each individual investing himself or herself in the process of conversation. Each participant is exposed to the excitement that comes from pursuing answers to questions and problems and concerns that are alive and real for that participant. To the extent, then, that the law school tradition of teaching Socratically makes a conscious commitment to active inquiry conducted by both students and teachers within the law school community, this tradition seems to me to remain true to the figure of Socrates in Plato’s dialogues.

Still, our law school tradition may slight other aspects of Socrates’ practice. Earlier, I spoke of a general tendency in law teaching to engage in a generic nondirective method of teaching. The danger here is that this tendency can lead a teacher to overemphasize the need to be nondirective. In my experience, such an emphasis can translate into a failure of the law teacher fully to participate in the search or the inquiry being enacted in the classroom. Nondirective teachers do not themselves risk refutation; they do not risk Socratic humiliation because their non-
directive teaching style entails that they not supply answers to the questions and problems posed in class. When this occurs, such teachers avoid committing themselves to a position or to an answer that can be criticized and refuted by the students or even, on second thought, by the teachers themselves. In such instances, the educational exercise in the classroom is just that—an exercise, not an inquiry.

Socrates in Plato's dialogues often exposes himself to the risk of refutation. He does so, for example, when he offers some definition or some argument during the process of discussion. He also frequently criticizes himself when he comes to bethink himself of what he has been saying; or, for that matter, when he reminds himself of something that he had neglected or forgotten during the course of the conversation. In addition, as humiliating as Socrates can be toward others (and sometimes I find him painfully so), he can be equally curt and dismissive toward himself. In Plato's dialogues, we often find Socrates expressing his dissatisfaction or disgust with his own feeble try at making an argument or giving an explanation or formulating a definition.

If Socrates acts this way, why does he do so? Behaving in this manner enables him to acknowledge that he has no greater assurance than anyone else involved in the conversation of knowing what he claims to know, no better position from which he can claim to be correct. Socrates has many thoughts and ideas to offer, and during the course of the discussion, he is not fainthearted about offering them; often he leads the discussion. But he remains adamant in his claim of ignorance (his disavowal of knowledge). He does this, in part, so that he can enact the equality of the seekers. Socrates is only one person among equals—an important member of the group, granted, but still only one person, one source of data among many. In this regard, he is as willing to expose himself to humiliation, refutation, or censure as he is willing to subject any other person in the conversation to the same withering criticism.

Gregory Vlastos characterizes Socrates' way of proceeding as "his method of moral inquiry." Moral inquiry is, in this regard, one person confronting another person and arguing with her or examining him. These two people confront one another on the same level; they have access to the same knowledge or ignorance, to the same claims or excuses. Thus, Vlastos says, Socrates' method "makes moral inquiry a common human enterprise, open to every man. Its practice calls for no adherence
to a philosophical system, or mastery of a specialized technique, or acquisition of a technical vocabulary. It calls for common sense and common speech. And this is as it should be, for how man should live is every man's business. But while the Socratic method makes moral inquiry open to everyone, it makes it easy for no one. Not even for Socrates himself. Or, perhaps, especially not for Socrates, for he is at least as demanding of himself as he is of others. And his demands are daunting. Vlastos enumerates the challenge of Socrates' method of moral inquiry in these terms: "It calls not only for the highest degree of mental alertness of which anyone is capable, but also for moral qualities of a high order: sincerity, humility, courage."

Here I want to develop Vlastos's observation that what is wanted during the course of Socrates' engagement with others is a sample of "common sense and common speech," not some specialized knowledge or technical expertise. In a Socratic inquiry, we seek to investigate those aspects of the world and of our experience that we share in common. For example, Socrates frequently declares that he does not know. In such situations, do we? Do we know any better (or any more) than Socrates? I doubt it, and yet we may think or claim that we do. Here it may help to recall how Cavell (in the epigraph to this chapter) formulates the lesson of this particular Socratic declaration: "What I take Socrates to have seen is that . . . he knew that he did not know what no man can know, and that any man could learn what he wanted to learn. No man is in any better position for knowing it than any other man." Some kinds of claimed knowledge are beyond our ken, no matter who we are or in what position we may find ourselves. Socrates, at least, realizes that he does not know "what no man can know." And his recognition of the limits of human knowledge helps him not to overstep those bounds. Socrates' declaration also suggests, on the other hand, that he appreciates the fact that "any man [can] learn what he want[s] to learn." Learning what we want or need to know is in part a matter of our seeking to learn, and then too of our persevering in the search.

Granting oneself the right to pursue these questions further in one's own way is not an escape into solipsism or egotism, because one must simultaneously grant to others engaged in the inquiry an equal right. As it stands, our positions are the same. This ancient aspect of Socrates' practice shares with the modern practice known as "ordinary language
philosophy” a concern for philosophical inquiry that is based upon (and guided by) remarks and revelations that generate self-knowledge.\textsuperscript{10} Cavell states the relevant connection this way:

But in the philosophy which proceeds from ordinary language, . . . the way you must rely upon yourself as a source of what is said when, demands that you grant full title to others as sources of that data—not out of politeness, but because the nature of the claim you make for yourself is repudiated without that acknowledgment: it is a claim that no one knows better than you whether and when a thing is said, and if this is not to be taken as a claim to expertise (a way of taking it which repudiates it) then it must be understood to mean that you know no better than others what you claim to know. With respect to the data of philosophy our positions are the same. This is scarcely a discovery of ordinary language philosophy; it is the latest confirmation of what the oracle said to Socrates.\textsuperscript{11}

As Cavell says, the commitment of ordinary language philosophy to using ourselves as the sources of data (as sources, for example, of “what we say when”) is simply a late instance of Socratic investigation. We still are proceeding on the basis of inquiries directed toward what Vlastos calls “common sense and common speech.” These are matters that we all share, both in terms of our possessing them jointly and in terms of our passing them on to others, sharing them with others, distributing them through the act of expressing our varied samples of “common sense and common speech,” and discoursing with one another about them. We are seeking to find answers and to permit questions, “which nobody knows the way to nor the answer to any better than” we ourselves. And the way to these questions and answers is not known a priori; rather, its discovery or establishment is itself a part of the search.

Socrates proceeds conversationally. Anyone who can speak can join the discussion and can contribute to it.\textsuperscript{12} No one is ruled out (or ruled in) a priori; instead, we must wait and see, we must test and examine and scrutinize and criticize, and then we must think again. As Cavell has reminded us, for any person (including Socrates), “[Y]ou know no better than others what you claim to know. With respect to the data of philosophy our positions are the same.” We all are sources of the data of
philosophy, because we all can think and speak—and that is what it takes to generate the data from which to produce any satisfying answers or solutions to our philosophical problems and questions.

There is no time like the present; and there is no one more qualified to respond to this challenge than you and I are—we who speak together, we who speak the same language. Cavell describes this particular aspect of ordinary language philosophy as it is exemplified in the practice of J. L. Austin: “The matter of ordinary language philosophy—its content, so to speak—is trivial, is nothing, without its method(s). . . . The questions raised here are to be decided by us, here and now. No one knows more about what mistakes and accidents are, or heedlessness or lack of thought, than we do, whatever we think we do or do not know. It is a frightening, exhilarating prospect.” When Socrates proceeds to examine himself and his companions in Plato's dialogues, he is putting himself and others to the test. The scrutiny being undergone is both real and threatening. This is why Vlastos reminds us that, “while the Socratic method makes moral inquiry open to everyone, it makes it easy for no one.” This also is why, I take it, Vlastos lists for us not only the mental requirement of alertness but also the moral qualities of “sincerity, humility, courage” as traits that Socrates’ method demands of its participants.

I should note that in all of this there is an element that is apt to make us feel uncomfortable. We were, for example, just speaking of qualities and character traits demanded of people who are involved in a Socratic inquiry. What we may find off-putting is the aspect of Socrates’ method of inquiry that involves us in examining and criticizing other people or ourselves. This suggests that Socrates is as interested in gaining knowledge of people as he is in getting to know something about propositions or doctrines or rules or laws, matters that may strike us as being more objective than is the search for and acquisition of knowledge of persons. Even if distasteful, this aspect of Socrates’ practice seems to me to be unavoidable and undeniable. Vlastos confronts it, I believe, when he identifies Socrates’ manner of proceeding as being a “method of moral inquiry.” To my way of thinking, this label suggests that the Socratic method of inquiry directs our attention toward trying to understand people and their lives—rather than its being, for instance, a way for a teacher to present the results of his or her inquiries, didacted...
for the students. In his book, *The Art of Living*, Nehamas also locates a similar aspect of Socrates’ practice. He there names Socrates as the progenitor of the practice of philosophy as an art. On this reading, Socrates’ method is one means by which we not only learn but also learn to live. “Philosophy as the art of living began with Socrates.”

It is true that traditionally Western philosophy has concentrated its attention on the study of issues such as what we can or cannot know; and what we mean by what we say as well as the truth or falsity of any particular claim that we make about the world; and what rules or laws we may or must live by; and other such matters. But I take Nehamas to be staking the claim that, equally important with these considerations, is the matter of who we are as people, as individuals. In Nehamas’s view, following Socrates, the philosopher of the art of living is concerned with creating a self by means of what Nehamas calls “caring for the self.” In this respect, the Socratic project includes becoming a critical, self-examining individual who leads a life unafraid of examination and testing. For Nehamas, to proceed Socratically is to engage in discovering who we may become if we master the art of philosophy: “the truth of one’s views is still an issue, but what also matters is the kind of person, the sort of self, one manages to construct as a result of accepting them.”

Or, as Nehamas later puts it, “The [Platonic] dialogues ask their readers . . . to make their life harmonize with their views.”

Vlastos emphasizes Socrates’ method as a matter of “moral inquiry.” Combine this emphasis with Nehamas’s notion that a Socratic commitment to the art of living depends upon the possibility of philosophically caring for the self. Both of these conceptions lead me to think that we should conceive of Socrates’ project in a way that sufficiently accounts for the Socratic aim of gaining personal knowledge, or a knowledge of persons. If we consider a Socratic inquiry to be a matter of investigating the fitness or condition of the self, then it is possible for Socratic activity (beheld in this light) to become an example of what Cavell calls “moral perfectionism.” This is an approach to moral inquiry that in some respects refuses the approach to moral issues made respectable by the two traditional schools of moral thought in Western philosophy, namely, teleology and deontology. So how are we to understand Cavell’s conception of moral perfectionism?
“Perfectionism,” says Cavell, “proposes confrontation and conversation as the means of determining whether we can live together, accept one another into the aspirations of our lives.”\textsuperscript{18} Such a philosophy, he goes on to say, makes upon us “the moral demand for intelligibility.”\textsuperscript{19} What this comes to is summarized by Cavell as follows: “The claim of this field of concern to the status of morality is that the conversation required to assess my life . . . is one designed to make myself intelligible (to others, by way of making myself intelligible to myself). One could say that in the more academically established dispensations of morality I must justify myself (offer or refuse reasons on which I am acting) whereas in perfectionism I must reveal myself, . . . What links the exchanges in these domains is the sense of moral confrontation as one soul’s examination of another.”\textsuperscript{20} For Socrates, we make ourselves intelligible, either to others or to ourselves, by examining what we say and do.

We confront ourselves with our words, actions, and thoughts or beliefs. In such a confrontation, we examine what is said, what is claimed, what is believed. And we do so in part so that we can assess the consistency of these propositions and assertions and beliefs, which may involve investigating and testing both the meaning and the truth of what we say and believe. But we also and equally examine these matters for the light that they shed upon who we are, and on the kind of a life that we are leading and where it may be taking us. What we say expresses the person who says such things; what we do reveals the person who does such things. These expressions and actions are ways of making the self intelligible, of revealing the self, because they are commitments of the self. Our words and our deeds are our representations and our representatives. Their examination becomes an examination of a person, of a self: “one soul’s examination of another.”

\textbf{Lessons in Disillusion and Renewal}

I have been describing the progress of my rereading of some of Plato’s dialogues, and how this reengagement with those texts left me placed. I found myself learning to appreciate that Socrates’ method was a way to pursue inquiries that concern our persons and our lives—inquiries into