

SOCRATES AND THE SEVEN SAGES*

ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates the importance of the Seven Sages to the rhetorical projects of Xenophon and Plato. Though Aristotle represents Socrates as the first to turn philosophy towards ethics, Xenophon and Plato present us with a Socrates who inherited elements of earlier Greek moral thought, and particularly the thought of the Seven Sages. Xenophon's Socrates shares important features with the Sages, such as his 'usefulness' to his friends. In a passage unparalleled in other Socratic literature, he reads and teaches with texts that, as this article proposes, were written by the Sages. The Xenophontic Socrates' respect for (and affinity with) the Sages constitutes an attempt to vindicate Socrates from his reputation for strangeness. Plato, by contrast, fashions the Sages after Socrates. In defiance of traditions attesting their political involvement, Plato makes the Sages, like Socrates, apolitical. Elsewhere, he anachronistically likens their gnomic utterances to Socratic elenchus. In all Platonic passages that mention the Sages, Plato assimilates the Sages' activity with Socrates' methods against those of the sophists. For Plato, then, Socrates' alignment with the Seven Sages places the weight of tradition on the side of philosophy and against sophistry.

Keywords: Seven Sages; Socrates; sophists; ethics; Plato; Xenophon; Aristotle

For Aristotle, Socrates represented a radical break with earlier philosophy. As the first to seek universal principles in the moral world (and not the material one), Socrates stood as the point, according to Aristotle, at which philosophy's focus shifted from nature to ethics (*Metaph.* 987b1).¹ Aristotle's understanding of Socrates' place within the history of philosophy was predictably influential in antiquity. It resounds throughout ancient doxography, echoing in Cicero's picture of Socrates as the first to draw philosophy away from the heavens and compel it to ask questions about good and evil,² in Diogenes Laertius' claim that Socrates 'introduced ethics' to early philosophy,³ and in Augustine's remark that Socrates turned philosophy away from the natural world and towards human behaviour.⁴ For Aristotle and these later writers on the history of philosophy, Socrates was the inflection point at which philosophy became ethical. But unlike Aristotle, who

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¹ In *On the Parts of Animals*, the turn away from nature and towards ethics (642a29–31) is broadened to occur not at the hands of Socrates but 'in Socrates' time' (ἐν Σωκράτους). Even if—as J. Mansfeld, 'Aristotle on Socrates' contributions to philosophy', in J. Mansfeld, *Studies in Early Greek Philosophy: A Collection of Papers and One Review* (Leiden, 2018), 353–67, at 362 suggests—this includes the (here unnamed) sophists, Socrates' is the name associated with the shift.

² *Socrates autem primus philosophiam deuocauit e caelo et in urbibus collocauit et in domus etiam introduxit et coegit de uita et moribus rebusque bonis et malis quaerere* (*Tusc.* 5.10).

³ Σωκράτης ὁ τὴν ἠθικὴν εἰσαγαγὼν, 1.14; πρῶτος περὶ βίου διελέχθη, 2.20.

⁴ *Socrates ergo primus uniuersam philosophiam ad corrigendos componendosque mores flexisse memoratur, cum ante illum omnes magis physicis, id est naturalibus, rebus perscrutandis operam maximam impenderent* (*De ciu. D.* 8.3).

typically begins an enquiry with a *status quaestionis* amounting to a systematic overview of his predecessors' theories,⁵ earlier writers on Socrates—that is, the Socratics, principally Plato and Xenophon—are uninterested in the history of philosophy as such. One might therefore assume that they had little interest in discussing their teacher's position within the history of philosophy, or even in representing philosophy as an enterprise that had a history at all.

But there are important exceptions to the general exclusion of earlier thinkers from Socratic dialogues. Most common of these exceptions are the passages in which Plato makes reference to the views of other philosophers as a counterpoint to the views of Socrates. These fit neatly within Aristotle's picture of Socrates as an ethical innovator. A good example of this is at *Phd.* 96b–d, where Socrates describes the philosophical enquiry that preceded his discovery of intelligible Forms.⁶ Socrates here runs through earlier thinkers' explanations of the mechanism behind causation, the problem that troubled him as a youth. In a kind of philosophical priamel, Socrates lists the ideas that he ultimately came to reject: that heat and cold cause growth; that blood, air or fire is the agent behind cognition; that the brain is the organ of perception. Though these explanations are given no attribution, each, as Plato's contemporaries would surely have recognized, can be traced to an earlier thinker or thinkers.⁷ All, in turn, are rejected by Socrates in favour of the ethical notion that things receive their condition from a choice about what is best (δόξης . . . τοῦ βελτίστου, *Phd.* 99a2). Similarly, in another passage preceding Socrates' exposition of the Forms, Zeno in the *Parmenides* reads aloud the book in which he refutes the existence of a plurality of things—a refutation that Socrates will criticize for paying insufficient attention to immaterial principles, including moral ones (*Prm.* 127c–130a). Though hardly systematic, Plato's summary overviews of earlier philosophers' ideas, like Aristotle's historical expositions, place Socrates in dialogue with his predecessors. They agree with Aristotle's account in that their Socrates rejects the naturalistic study of his predecessors in favour of explanations which appeal to definitional principles beyond the sensory world and centre strongly around ethics.

Socrates' rejection of natural science is such a salient feature of his biography that it is easy to see him the way in which Aristotle did: as an innovator who precipitated a kind of ethical turn in philosophy. This may well be an accurate picture of the historical Socrates. But there is another side to the story. For while the Socrates of both Plato and Xenophon disdains the activity of the natural scientists, he evinces, in passages whose importance I will highlight, great respect for earlier Greek moral thinkers. In particular, Plato's and Xenophon's Socrates esteems the Seven Sages, the semi-historical, semi-legendary figures of august authority who represented the first flowering of Greek moral thought. The passages of Plato and Xenophon to be discussed here, which we might consider to be

⁵ Aristotle describes this method most explicitly in the *Topics*, where he recommends 'noting down the tenets (δόξα) of individuals' before discussing a question (1.11.104b1–8).

⁶ The passage is hardly an accurate guide to the views of the historical Socrates, who had no notion of Forms as entities with independent existence. But that need not concern us here, since our interest will lie in the Platonic (and Xenophonic) representation of Socrates and his relationship with his predecessors.

⁷ J. Burnet, *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford, 1911), ad loc. sees in 'heat and cold' (τὸ θερμὸν καὶ τὸ ψυχρὸν) a reference to Archelaus' theory of the origin of the first animals, though C.J. Rowe, *Plato: Phaedo* (Cambridge, 1993), ad loc. has pointed out that the reference is to how all animals, and not just the first ones, come to be. On this understanding, Socrates is referring more generally to a materialist worldview. D. Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford, 1986), 136 attributes the remaining ideas as follows: Empedocles held that blood gives rise to thought, Anaximenes held that thought is made possible by air or breath, and Heraclitus implies that fire performs this function. The idea that the brain is the organ of perception and therefore of thought is Alcmaeon's.

philosophical genealogies-in-miniature, establish Socrates within the venerable and authoritative intellectual tradition made up by the Sages. For Xenophon, as we will see, the alignment of Socrates' ethics with that of his forebears is a matter of demonstrating Socrates' own moral traditionalism, a quality that will reduce his strangeness in Athenian eyes and so vindicate him posthumously from the charges he faced. For Plato, it is the wisdom tradition itself that will be reshaped, with the Sages put forth as proto-Socratic philosophers.

Much might be said about the actual—that is, historical—continuity between the Sages and Socrates. The most salient congruence between the Sages' lives and Socrates' life is to be found in the anecdote according to which the Sages receive, on the authority of the Delphic oracle, a tripod marked out 'for the wisest', and, what is more, that they modestly refuse the title of 'wisest'.⁸ The anecdote appears to point forward to the statement of the Delphic oracle that no one is wiser than Socrates, as well as to Socrates' professed incredulity that this could be true (*Ap.* 21b). In addition, a tradition that there was a banquet attended by the Sages may prefigure the setting of Plato's *Symposium*.⁹ But I propose to bracket such historical parallels in order to focus on a historiographical question: the question of how Plato and Xenophon represent Socrates as the inheritor of the Sages' ethical σοφία.¹⁰ Such a question treats Socrates not simply as a *person* but as a *figure*, liable to be shaped according to the demands of a text. Likewise, it treats intellectual history—in particular, the history of the Sages—as a past that could be shaped, at the hands of Plato and Xenophon, into conformity with that figure.

Aristotle might here provide another instructive parallel. Scholars have long been aware of the fact that Aristotle's doxographical passages are motivated just as much by his own concerns as by the concerns of the thinkers whose ideas he documents.¹¹ Aristotle makes earlier philosophers conform to his own parameters by retrojecting his own ideas onto an intellectual world where those ideas did not exist. (Consider, for example, his application as at *Metaph.* 898b23–898a17 of the terms 'corporeal' and 'incorporeal' to the Presocratics, who had no such division.) Similarly, the Socratics, especially Plato, discuss the Sages on their own terms. Plato's picture of intellectual history before Socrates is teleological in that it makes the Sages prefigure Socrates,

⁸ For an exposition of the story's variants, see W. Wiersma, 'The Seven Sages and the prize of wisdom', *Mnemosyne* 1 (1933), 150–4. One version of the anecdote appears to be influenced by the Socrates story (B. Snell, *Leben und Meinungen der Sieben Weisen* [Munich, 1971], 114), but this does not necessarily impugn the notion that an oral version of the Sage anecdote predated the story of the Chaerephon oracle.

⁹ The fullest version we possess of a Sages' banquet is Plutarch's *Dinner of the Seven Sages*. The scholarly *communis opinio* is that Plutarch's text represents the only surviving example of a much older tradition of such symposium literature: V. Garulli, *Il Περὶ ποιητῶν di Lobone di Argo* (Bologna, 2004), 19–40. But the direct evidence for such a banquet is, unfortunately, thin. B. Snell, 'Zum Geschichte vom Gastmahl der Sieben Weisen', in O. Hiltbrunner, H. Kornhardt and F. Tietze (edd.), *Thesaurismata: Festschrift für Ida Kapp zum 70. Geburtstag* (Munich, 1954), 105–11 has adduced a papyrus, *PSI IX.1093*, as possible early evidence for a symposium of the Sages.

¹⁰ Here I follow L. Kurke, 'Sophia before/beyond philosophy', in L. Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose* (Princeton, 2011), 95–124, who shows that Plato and Aristotle assimilated the representatives of pre-philosophic σοφία into a teleological narrative of philosophy's development. Like Kurke, my focus is on the rhetoric of Plato and Xenophon, not on those authors' unconscious importation of earlier figures into the image of their teacher, or on the historical Socrates' actual inheritance of motifs associated with the Sages.

¹¹ H. Cherniss, 'The characteristics and effects of Presocratic philosophy', *JHI* 12 (1951), 319–45 is the most influential exposition of this position. For a more recent argument along these lines, see C. Collobert, 'Aristotle's review of the Presocratics: is Aristotle finally a historian of philosophy?', *JHP* 40 (2002), 281–95.

radically modifying their biographies so that they resemble Socrates as type to antitype. Like Aristotle, who believed that earlier thinkers came to a slow and partial understanding of his own ideas,¹² Plato and Xenophon each have a rhetorical interest in representing the history of philosophy the way they do, with the Sages directly preceding or, in Plato's case, prefiguring Socrates. The following discussion will show not only that Plato and Xenophon avoided portraying Socrates as a total ethical innovator but also that they reshape the tradition in order to do so, motivated by their own distinct concerns.

THE SAGES IN XENOPHON

To those familiar with the work of Gray, the notion that traditional forms of wisdom underlie Xenophon's most substantial Socratic work, the *Memorabilia*, will not be new. In the *Memorabilia*'s composite quality—the effect of Xenophon's assembling various edifying scenes, often with minimal concern for the connection between them—Gray has recognized the work's affinity with a type of writing she calls 'advice literature'.¹³ Works of this sort gathered traditional morsels of instruction from various sources and directed it, in a single text, at readers in all stages of life. The material for this literature, which had a long history but continued to be produced by Xenophon's contemporaries (Isocrates' *Ad Demonicum* and *Ad Nicoclem*, Hippias' *Synagoge*), often came from the great wise men of the past: Hippias names Orpheus, Musaeus and the other great poets and prose writers of antiquity as his sources (DK 79 B6).¹⁴ Xenophon adopted wisdom literature's collective form and tendency to address readers of different ages (the interlocutors in the *Memorabilia* range from very young to old). But by making Socrates, rather than the ancient wise men, his speaker, Xenophon associates his teacher with the venerable figures of the Greek wisdom tradition.

A closer look at certain narrative structures within the *Memorabilia* reveals that the Seven Sages have a particularly strong presence within the text. Socrates' conversations are often patterned on models familiar from literature on the Sages. In one typical form of exchange characteristic of the Seven, a Sage is asked a question according to the formula 'what' or 'who is x?', to which he makes a witty and edifying response.¹⁵ The formulation of wisdom in this way goes back at least to the meeting between Solon and Croesus in Herodotus' *Histories* (1.30), wherein Solon's teaching comes as an answer to Croesus' question of who is the most fortunate. Similar, if more abbreviated, exchanges

¹² Again considering the first book of the *Metaphysics*, see e.g. W.D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1924), 1.lxxvi, who reads the beginning of *Metaphysics* A as a demonstration of how earlier thinkers progressively recognized the four causes.

¹³ V. Gray, *The Framing of Socrates: The Literary Interpretation of Xenophon's Memorabilia* (Stuttgart, 1998), 159–77. For the structure of the *Memorabilia*, see L.A. Dorion, 'Introduction: unité et plan', in M. Bandini and L.A. Dorion, *Xenophon: Mémoires. Tome 1. Introduction générale, Livre I* (Paris, 2000), clxxxiii–ccxi and D.M. Johnson, *Xenophon's Socratic Works* (Abingdon and New York, 2021), 50–6. Both Dorion and Johnson see coherence within the text while conceding that many episodes are linked only by a loose association of thought.

¹⁴ Gray (n. 13), 164. For discussion of the fragment and the character of the *Synagoge*, see B. Snell, 'Die Nachrichten über die Lehren des Thales und die Anfänge der griechischen Philosophie- und Literaturgeschichte', in B. Snell, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Göttingen, 1966), 119–28.

¹⁵ As briefly observed by Gray (n. 13), 175 and treated here in more detail.

are frequent in Diogenes Laertius' biographies of the Sages.¹⁶ Sometimes a Sage is asked an entire series of questions according to the formula 'what is *x*?' (for example 'What is easy?—Advising others. What is most pleasant?—Succeeding. What is godly?—That which is without beginning or end').¹⁷ Distinct echoes of this pattern are discernible in the conversations of Xenophon's Socrates with his associates. Aristippus, in an attempt to cross-examine Socrates, asks Socrates first 'if he knows anything good' and then 'if he knows anything beautiful'.¹⁸ Evidently, these are versions of the questions 'what is good?' and 'what is noble?'. On other occasions, Socrates is merely 'asked' a question by an anonymous interlocutor. As with the Sages' conversations reported by Diogenes, these exchanges are reported using a passive form of ἐρωτάω and a verb of speaking.¹⁹ Thus, for example, is Socrates 'asked (ἐρωτώμενος) whether courage can be taught or comes by nature' (*Mem.* 3.9.1). Also like the Sages, Socrates is subjected to a string of 'what is *x*' questions: in one anonymous conversation, he is 'asked what is the best occupation for a man', gives a witty one-word answer (εὐπραξίαν), and is immediately 'asked whether good fortune is an occupation' (3.9.14). The question-and-answer formula for the dispensation of wisdom links Xenophon's Socrates to a form associated with the Seven Sages.

This formal association is strengthened by the fact that Socrates shares with earlier wisdom figures—and, again, with the Sages in particular—a disposition towards practical instruction. Xenophon's Socrates is concerned with household management (*Mem.* 2.7, 3.4, 3.6), providing for old age (2.8) and making good—that is, useful—friends (2.4–6). A core tenet of his teaching in the *Memorabilia* is that something is beautiful or good only to the extent to which it is useful (stated most explicitly at 3.8.5). In this vein, Socrates denies that there is a distinction between wisdom and prudence (3.9.5). This aspect of his instruction is supported by the fact that Socrates himself is said to be supremely 'useful' or 'profitable' to his companions (οὐδὲν ὀφελιμώτερον ἦν τοῦ Σωκράτει συνεῖναι, 4.1.1). Indeed, the substantial part of the *Memorabilia* is dedicated to showing that Socrates, by his character and his conversation, 'benefitted' his friends (ὠφελεῖν, 1.3.1).²⁰ In this pragmatism, Socrates possesses something of the practicality of traditional advisors, like the Hesiod of *Works and Days*, who instructs his brother in how to run a productive farm. But no ancient person or group had been as strongly associated with 'usefulness' as the Sages, who were especially marked out, like Xenophon's Socrates, for this quality.²¹ Similar to Xenophon's beneficial Socrates, they receive the distinction of being named the 'most useful' (ὀνηϊστῶ, Diog. Laert. 1.28) of the wise, conferred on them via an honorific dish.²² Their usefulness is well documented

¹⁶ See e.g. Anacharsis' response to the question of which boats are safest (1.104) and Bias' answer to the question of what is difficult (1.86). Diogenes is a late source, but one who drew extensively on earlier ones: see J. Mejer, *Diogenes Laertius and his Hellenistic Background* (Wiesbaden, 1978).

¹⁷ Diog. Laert. 1.36; cf. Diog. Laert. 1.104–5 and Plut. *Conu. sept. sap.* 153A, 153C–D.

¹⁸ ἤρετο εἴ τι εἰδείη ἀγαθόν (3.8.2); ἐρωτῶντος αὐτὸν εἴ τι εἰδείη καλόν (3.8.4).

¹⁹ The typical formula for the question and answer in Diogenes is ἐρωτηθεῖς ... ἔφη (*uel sim.*). ἐρωτηθεῖς is used with a verb of speaking of Anacharsis (x5), Bias (x4), Solon (x2), Thales (x1), Chilon (x1), Pittacus (x1) and Periander (x1). But the formula also occurs in variations such as πρὸς τὸν παθόμενον or πρὸς τὸν ἐρόμενον (1.26, 1.36).

²⁰ After two chapters in which he responds directly to the charges levelled against Socrates (1.1–2), Xenophon begins his recollections with a programmatic statement about the benefits Socrates conferred.

²¹ On the Sages' practicality, see R.P. Martin, 'The Seven Sages as performers of wisdom', in C. Dougherty and L. Kurke (edd.), *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece: Cult, Performance, Politics* (Oxford, 1998), 108–28, at 119.

²² The story exists in different versions; Diog. Laert. 1.27–33 provides a summary.

in the kinds of advice they are said to have given, as in Chilon's injunction to marry modestly (Diog. Laert. 1.70) and in Myson's suggestion to prepare early for the harvest (Diog. Laert. 1.106). Socrates' usefulness is a direct inheritance from the Sages.

Another such inheritance is Socrates' adoption of the maxim 'Know yourself' (γνῶθι σεαυτόν). The phrase had a long-standing, if contested, attribution to various Sages. Plato tells us that the Sages collectively dedicated the maxim to Apollo as the first-fruits of their wisdom by inscribing it at the temple of Delphi (*Prt.* 343a–b), and the Peripatetic Clearchus says it was uttered by the Pythia to the Sage Chilon when he asked what is the best thing.²³ Porphyry lists Bias, Thales and Chilon (all Sages) as some of its possible sources,²⁴ though the phrase's most common attribution was to Chilon.²⁵ Given the maxim's well-known connection with the Sages, it is significant that Xenophon's Socrates invokes it as part of his instruction of the young Euthydemus (*Mem.* 4.2.24). In the course of this instruction, Socrates treats self-knowledge as the starting point of right living by equating it with knowledge of what is good and what is bad for oneself. He adduces a host of practical benefits that come with knowledge of oneself, including personal success, avoidance of misfortune, positive relations with others, and social and political prestige. In his commentary on the maxim, Xenophon's Socrates establishes a direct connection between personal flourishing as a result of the practice of philosophy and the Sages' teaching. He does not need to name the Sages for Euthydemus to know that they, as the representatives of traditionalist wisdom, form the background to the conversation.

Socrates' invocation of the maxim suggests that he engages consciously with the Greek wisdom tradition. Not only, in other words, is he made to resemble a Sage; but he actually takes an interest in their teaching. It is with this in mind that we might read a passage that, at least superficially, makes little sense in the context of other Socratic works. In this passage, Socrates, who otherwise has almost no associations with written texts,²⁶ is represented in the guise of a reader (*Mem.* 1.6.14):

καὶ ἐάν τι ἔχω ἀγαθόν, διδάσκω, καὶ ἄλλοις συνίστημι παρ' ὧν ἂν ἡγῶμαι ὠφελήσεσθαι τι αὐτοὺς εἰς ἀρετήν· καὶ τοὺς θησαυροὺς τῶν πάλαι σοφῶν ἀνδρῶν, οὓς ἐκεῖνοι κατέλιπον ἐν βιβλίοις γράψαντες, ἀνελίσσων κοινῇ σὺν τοῖς φίλοις διέρχομαι, καὶ ἂν τι ὀρώμεν ἀγαθὸν ἐκλεγόμεθα· καὶ μέγα νομίζομεν κέρδος, ἐὰν ἀλλήλοις φίλοι γιγνώμεθα.

and if I possess anything good, I teach it, and I put my friends in the company of those who I think will benefit them in some way when it comes to virtue. **And together with friends I roll out and read thoroughly the treasures of the wise men of old, which they wrote down and left in books, and if we see something good we excerpt it.** And we consider it a great profit if we become dear to one another.²⁷

Socrates is shown here to use texts as a tool for instruction. Because he considers the writings of the ancients to be 'treasures', he could even be said to approach his books with a kind of reverence. What is more, Xenophon includes details that foreground the

²³ See G. Verhasselt, 'Dikaiarchus (1400)', in S. Schorn (ed.), *Jacoby Online* (Leiden, 2022), 520 for the sources reporting Clearchus' attribution of the maxim.

²⁴ Porphyry F273 Smith.

²⁵ Verhasselt (n. 23), 521.

²⁶ Socrates defends the verbal—that is, non-textual—aspect of his method in the *Phaedrus*, where he characterizes dialectic, and not writing, as the discourse of one who really knows (274b–277a). Socrates references the contents of a book of Anaxagoras at *Apol.* 26d–e, and he again mentions hearing someone read from Anaxagoras' book at *Phd.* 97b–c. But neither passage suggests a sustained personal relationship with the text in question.

²⁷ Translations are mine.

textuality of Socrates' activity. The vivid participle ἀνελίττων ('unrolling') allows us to imagine Socrates with scroll in hand, combing the texts (διέρχομαι is somewhat more marked than the normal ἀναγιγνώσκω) and excerpting (ἐκλεγόμεθα) choice passages. The activity is communal and paideutic, since it is done 'in common with friends' (κοινῇ σὺν τοῖς φίλοις) and with the object of moral improvement. This description is unique in the surviving Socratic literature, because nowhere else do we find Socrates teaching with texts.

We learn more about Socrates' views on reading later in the *Memorabilia*, when Socrates confronts a young man who is, apparently, reading these same books. Euthydemus considers himself wise—mistakenly, it will turn out. He is also a collector of books written by poets and wise men (γράμματα πολλὰ συνειλεγμένον ποιητῶν τε καὶ σοφιστῶν τῶν εὐδοκιμωτάτων, 4.2.1). Socrates, seeking to bring him to a recognition of his own ignorance, begins by acknowledging the library Euthydemus has amassed for himself (*Mem.* 4.2.8–9):

εἰπέ μοι, ἔφη, ὦ Εὐθύδημε, τῷ ὄντι, ὥσπερ ἐγὼ ἀκούω, πολλὰ γράμματα συνήχας τῶν λεγομένων σοφῶν ἀνδρῶν γεγονέναι; καὶ ὁ Εὐθύδημος, νῆ τὸν Δί', ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες· καὶ ἔτι γε συνάγω, ἕως ἂν κτήσωμαι ὡς ἂν δύνωμαι πλεῖστα. νῆ τὴν Ἥραν, ἔφη ὁ Σωκράτης, ἀγαμαὶ γέ σου, διότι οὐκ ἀργυρίου καὶ χρυσίου προεἰδὼν θησαυροὺς κεκτήσθαι μᾶλλον ἢ σοφίας· δῆλον γὰρ ὅτι νομίζεις ἀργύριον καὶ χρυσίον οὐδὲν βελτίους ποιεῖν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, τὰς δὲ τῶν σοφῶν ἀνδρῶν γνώμας ἀρετῇ πλουτίζειν τοὺς κεκτημένους.

'Tell me, Euthydemus,' he said, 'is it true that **you have collected many works of those said to be wise?**' 'Yes, by Zeus, Socrates,' said Euthydemus 'and I will go on collecting them until I acquire as many as I can.' 'By Hera,' said Socrates, 'I admire you, because you have not preferred to collect treasures of silver and gold rather than of wisdom. For it is clear that you think that silver and gold do not make people better at all, but that **the maxims of the wise men** enrich their possessors with virtue.'

Like Socrates, Euthydemus reads the books of the wise. The word θησαυρούς, used in reference to these books, connects this passage with the earlier one (1.4.16), where Socrates had described the books he reads in the same way.²⁸ The term is serious, not ironic, since the criticism will be directed not at the wisdom to be gleaned from books but at Euthydemus, who does not know what to do with it.²⁹ In fact, earlier in this passage Socrates had shown his esteem for 'the wise' (τῶν σοφῶν) by implying that it was through their association that Themistocles benefited the state (4.2.2). In this second encounter with the books of the wise men, then, Socrates has again shown that he values them positively.

Socrates uses the terms σοφῶν (4.2.8–9) and σοφιστῶν (4.2.1) to describe the authors of Euthydemus' books. When he calls them σοφιστῶν, he invokes the term's pre-Platonic usage as an indication of genuine wisdom by qualifying it with the adjective εὐδοκιμωτάτων ('of excellent reputation') and by placing these 'wise men' with the poets, a traditional conceptualization of wisdom's lineage.³⁰ Diogenes Laertius remarks of the term that pre-philosophic wisdom figures were called both σοφοί and σοφισταί (1.12). And it was in this sense that Herodotus had described the 'wise men' who journeyed from Greece to Sardis, among whom is Solon, as σοφισταί (1.29). So there is nothing odd about Xenophon using the term here as a mark of ancient figures' wisdom. In any case, Xenophon's positive assessment of the books' authors is made unambiguous

²⁸ For advice literature as a treasury, cf. Isocr. *Ad Demonicum* 44.

²⁹ O. Gigon, *Kommentar zum ersten Buch von Xenophons Memorabilien* (Basel, 1953), 163.

³⁰ Kurke (n. 10), 95–124.

by the fact that they are also said to be σοφῶν. The term σοφισταί carries none of the negative valence that it had when Socrates used it to describe the natural scientists (1.1.11).³¹

All this points to Socrates' genuine admiration for a group of wise men (σοφοί, 1.4.16, 4.2.8–9; or σοφισταί, 4.2.1) who lived long ago (πάλαι, 1.6.14). These wise men wrote books that contain their maxims (γνώμαι) and contribute to the virtue (ἀρετή) of their readers (4.2.9). They must be distinct from natural philosophers, because Socrates discusses the activity of that group with disdain (1.1.11). In the ancient wise men Socrates reads and so admires, I think we can recognize the poets and the Seven Sages.³²

There are a few reasons to think that the Sages should be included among the authors of Socrates' and Euthydemus' books. For one, they are often associated with the terms πόλαι or παλαιός.³³ Then, too, they are normally called σοφοί, but the word σοφιστής is also used of them, even well after it was employed polemically by Aristophanes, Plato and Isocrates.³⁴ Aristotle (F5 Rose), Aristarchus (*apud* Plut. *Mor.* 478B–C), Plutarch (*Mor.* 96A) and Iamblichus (*VP* 83) all use σοφιστής as a positive appellation to designate the Seven Sages,³⁵ meaning that Xenophon's vocabulary is consistent with the well-attested usage.

Moreover, many of the Sages are described by later sources as writers. A Hellenistic author indicates that the writing (γεγραμμένα) of Thales came to 200 lines, and Diogenes Laertius reports a tradition that Thales wrote (συνέγραψε) an *On Solstice* and an *Equinoxes*.³⁶ Diogenes indicates that Anacharsis wrote (συνέγραψε) three prose works (1.101) and that Pherecydes wrote a book (τό τε βιβλίον ὃ συνέγραψεν, 1.119). He also reports that most of the other Sages composed poetry, and he provides titles and line numbers for each work.³⁷ While the verb used in these instances, ποιεῖν, leaves ambiguous whether the composition was oral or textual, Plutarch seemed to think that Solon, at least, had written his poetry down (γέγραφε, *Conu. sept. sap.* 155F). Though Plutarch and Diogenes are late sources, there is some evidence that, already in the fifth century B.C.E., short skolia had been attributed to Thales, Solon, Chilon, Pittacus, Bias and Cleobolus via a work of symposium literature.³⁸ So it is quite plausible that a person of Xenophon's day could have associated the Sages with books.

We are told that these books contain the wise men's γνώμαι ('opinions' or 'maxims', 4.2.9)—a strong indication that their authors ought to be identified with the Seven Sages,

³¹ For the argument that σοφισταί there refers pejoratively to natural scientists (i.e. the Presocratics), see L.A. Dorion, 'Xenophon and Greek philosophy', in M.A. Flower (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Xenophon* (Cambridge, 2016), 37–56, at 38.

³² There have been other attempts to identify the authors of these books. G.B. Kerford, 'The first Greek sophists', *CR* 64 (1950), 8–10, at 8 thinks that we should count the Presocratics among their possible authors. But Socrates' disdain for natural philosophy weighs against that, as does the fact that—with the exception of Thales, who is considered to be both Presocratic and Sage—the Presocratics are not generally known for their coinage of morally useful maxims. C. Moore, *Calling Philosophers Names: On the Origin of a Discipline* (Princeton, 2020), 175 suggests that the contemporary sophist Hippias, who features in the *Memorabilia* (4.4), was an author of Euthydemus' books. But he could not have written any of Socrates' books, because Socrates reads the ancients.

³³ E.g. Pl. *Hp. mai.* 281c; *Prt.* 343b; Plut. *Conu. sept. sap.* 159C (of Orpheus, whom Hippobotus considered one of the Seven Sages [F6 Gigante = Diog. Laert. 1.42]).

³⁴ See H. Tell, *Plato's Counterfeit Sophists* (Washington, D.C., 2011), 21–38 for σοφιστής as a term of disparagement in Plato and Isocrates.

³⁵ Kerford (n. 32), 8. Some editors print σοφοῦ for σοφιστοῦ at Plut. *Mor.* 96A.

³⁶ Diog. Laert. 1.23. The Hellenistic author is a certain Lobon of Argos, cited by Diogenes (1.34). On the dating of this Lobon, see Garulli (n. 9).

³⁷ Chilon at Diog. Laert. 1.68, Pittacus at 1.79, Bias at 1.85, Cleobolus at 1.89 and Periander at 1.97.

³⁸ Garulli (n. 9), 136.

who were known above all for their coinage of moralizing apophthegms (for example ‘Nothing in excess’ μηδὲν ἄγαν and ‘Make a contract and trouble is at hand’ ἐγγύα πάρα δ’ ἄτα). Socrates’ claim that Euthydemus’ books ‘enrich their possessors with virtue’ (4.2.9) is also consistent with what we know of the Sages’ works. The skolia that Diogenes records for the Sages have an explicitly moralizing and didactic tone. The skolion of Pittacus, for example, warns against the duplicity of bad men, Thales’ advises brevity in speech, and Cleobulus’ counsels that gratitude should not be in vain. Solon’s poetry is full of traditional gnomic wisdom,³⁹ and the title of Periander’s work, *Proverbs* (Diog. Laert. 1.97), suggests that it was of a similar nature. By contrast, Xenophon elsewhere complains that the books of the sophists are devoid of morally acceptable content. In his *Cynegeticus*, Xenophon attacks the books of ‘those called sophists’ for being vain and frivolous because they contain nothing to make men good. Xenophon complains that the books contain ‘contrived phraseology but no correct γνῶμαι by which the youth might be educated in virtue’ (13.3).⁴⁰ Xenophon’s complaint allows him to imagine a set of gnomic works that inculcate virtue. It must have been something of this sort, authored by the Sages, that Socrates (as Xenophon imagined him) read with his friends and that Euthydemus had in his growing library.

Let us reconsider, in light of all this, Socrates’ otherwise-unattested practice of reading with his friends. Whether or not the historical Socrates actually did such a thing, the image is a telling part of the rhetorical construction of Socrates. The connection between Socrates and the Sages is so important to Xenophon that he makes the philosopher not just resemble a Sage but actually *read* them—a point requiring Xenophon to distort the prevailing image of a Socrates who teaches through conversation alone. By so emphasizing the philosopher’s continuity with the intellectual tradition, Xenophon attempts to counteract Socrates’ reputation for novelty.⁴¹ Socrates had been charged with introducing new gods to the city (*Mem.* 1.1.5). He had a reputation for ‘strangeness’, both of his character and of his arguments (Pl. *Symp.* 221d). Working against this reputation, Xenophon is concerned to represent Socrates not as the herald of a new way of living but as a preceptor in the tradition of old and familiar wisdom.

THE SAGES IN PLATO

Plato is the first extant author to refer to the Sages as a canon of seven. The reference occurs in the *Protagoras*, when Socrates and the eponymous sophist are discussing a poem of Simonides containing the maxim of the Sage Pittacus ‘It is difficult to be good’ (χαλεπὸν ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι, 339b = Simon. fr. 260 Poltera). Socrates explains the poem with reference to its intellectual context, claiming that Pittacus’ saying is an instance of succinct Spartan wisdom (*Prt.* 342e–343b):

τοῦτο οὖν αὐτὸ καὶ τῶν νῦν εἰσὶν οἱ κατανεοήκασι καὶ τῶν πάλαι, ὅτι τὸ λακωνίζειν πολὺ μᾶλλον ἐστὶν φιλοσοφεῖν ἢ φιλογυμναστεῖν, εἰδότες ὅτι τοιαῦτα οἷόν τ’ εἶναι ῥήματα φθέγγεσθαι τελέως πεπαιδευμένου ἐστὶν ἀνθρώπου. τούτων ἦν καὶ Θαλῆς ὁ Μιλήσιος καὶ Πιττακὸς ὁ Μυτιληναῖος καὶ Βίας ὁ Πριηνεὺς καὶ Σόλων ὁ ἡμέτερος καὶ Κλεόβουλος ὁ Λίνδιος καὶ Μύσων ὁ Χινηεύς, καὶ ἕβδομος ἐν τούτοις ἐλέγετο Λακεδαιμόνιος Χίλων. οὗτοι πάντες ζηλωταὶ καὶ ἐρασταὶ καὶ μαθηταὶ ἦσαν τῆς Λακεδαιμονίων παιδείας, καὶ καταμάθοι

³⁹ See e.g. F13 Gerber.

⁴⁰ μέφομαι οὖν αὐτοῖς τὰ μὲν μεγάλα μειζόνως· περὶ δὲ ὧν γράφουσιν, ὅτι τὰ μὲν ῥήματα αὐτοῖς ἐζήτηται, γνῶμαι δὲ ὀρθῶς ἔχουσαι, αἷς ἂν παιδεύοντο οἱ νεώτεροι ἐπ’ ἀρετὴν, οὐδαμοῦ.

⁴¹ Gray (n. 13), 177, 192.

ἄν τις αὐτῶν τὴν σοφίαν τοιαύτην οὖσαν, ῥήματα βραχέα ἀξιωμακόμενα ἐκάστω εἰρημένα· . . . τοῦ δὲ ἔνεκα ταῦτα λέγω; ὅτι οὗτος ὁ τρόπος ἦν τῶν παλαιῶν τῆς φιλοσοφίας, βραχυλογία τις Λακωνική· καὶ δὴ καὶ τοῦ Πιττακοῦ ἰδίᾳ περιεφέρετο τοῦτο τὸ ῥῆμα ἐγκωμιαζόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν σοφῶν, τὸ “χαλεπὸν ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι”.

Both now and in antiquity there have been those who have recognized that Spartanizing consists much more in loving wisdom (φιλοσοφεῖν) than in loving exercise, and who know that the ability to utter maxims belongs to a perfectly educated person. Such were Thales of Miletus, Pittacus of Mytilene, Bias of Priene, our Solon, Cleobolus of Lindos and Myson of Chen, and the seventh among these was said to be Chilon of Sparta. These were all admirers, lovers and students of the Spartan education, and anyone can recognize that their wisdom consisted of their short, memorable sayings . . . Why do I say this? Because a kind of Laconic brevity was the ancients' manner of doing philosophy. And Pittacus privately circulated this maxim, which had the approval of the Sages: 'It is difficult to be good.'

Like the Socrates of Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Plato's Socrates voices respect for the intellectual achievements of the Seven Sages. He refers to their ability to formulate pithy maxims as characteristic of a 'perfectly educated' person, and he lauds their wisdom and the memorable nature of their sayings. There is nothing remarkable about this fairly conventional praise.

What is surprising about this description is that Socrates calls the Sages' activity of coining maxims 'the ancients' manner of doing philosophy' (*Prt.* 343b4). This is striking terminology. In literature before Plato, the Sages are called 'wise' (σοφός or σοφιστής).⁴² The word 'philosopher' and its related forms appear rarely before the fourth century, and they do not have the specialized meaning, bestowed upon them by Plato, of a Socratic 'seeker after wisdom'.⁴³ In the Platonic corpus, the term 'philosopher', with its specialized meaning, is mainly restricted to Socrates. As Nightingale has demonstrated, it is not a designation that Plato bestows lightly.⁴⁴ Plato refuses to call the intellectual activity of those whom he labels 'sophists' by the name of philosophy. His vision of a philosopher, presented over the course of Books 5–7 of the *Republic*, is extremely limiting. The term connotes one who has made the difficult intellectual ascent from sensible things to ideas, who has kept out of the affairs of the world, and who has resisted the advancement that comes with flattering the *demos*. The number of people who fit this definition, according to Socrates, is πάνσμικρον—tiny (496a). Neither the Presocratics nor the so-called 'sophists' belong, for Plato, in this category. So, it is curious that Plato calls the Sages' activity, as well as the Spartan education that it emulates, 'philosophy', and that he does so not only here but three times in the course of Socrates' conversation with Protagoras (342a7, 342d5, 343b4).

We cannot take these comments at face value.⁴⁵ Protagoras had earlier proposed that Homer, Orpheus and other heroes of Greek culture were secret sophists (316d4–317c7).

⁴² See e.g. Hdt. 1.29 (of Solon and others), 7.235 (of Chilon), cf. 4.76 (of Anacharsis); Simon. fr. 260 Poltera (of Pittacus).

⁴³ A.W. Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1995), 14–15; Moore (n. 32), 66–106 (though see 190 for Plato's occasional diffidence about the term).

⁴⁴ Nightingale (n. 43), 17–19.

⁴⁵ J. Adam and A.M. Adam, *Platonis Protagoras* (Cambridge, 1928), 156 and C.C.W. Taylor, *Plato: Protagoras* (Oxford, 1976), on 342a7–b1 both suggest that the passage is ironic without explaining how this irony might operate. The view is developed in greater detail by D. De Brasi, *L'immagine di Sparta nei dialoghi Platonic: il giudizio di un filosofo su una presunta polis modello* (Berlin, 2013), 62–81. Scholars are, however, divided on the matter of Socrates' tone here: see N. Humble, 'Sparta in Xenophon and Plato', in G. Danzig, D. Johnson and D. Morrison (edd.), *Plato and Xenophon: Comparative Studies* (Leiden, 2018), 547–75, at 552 for a concise overview of the debate.

Socrates' claim that the Spartans are philosophers—and that they are eager to conceal this fact (342a7–d4)—parodies Protagoras' argument. But Socrates' irony does not preclude a rhetorical purpose that goes beyond his humour, as some scholars have shown.⁴⁶ Socrates' praise of Laconic brevity associates the Spartans' and, more importantly, the Sages' discourse with his own.⁴⁷ Socrates had just demanded that Protagoras forego the long rhetorical set-pieces that are his favoured mode of argument and give only short answers to Socrates' questions (334d–335a). Under the pretext of talking about the Sages, Socrates can say that short speech is characteristic of philosophy—the true, and not the apparent, love of wisdom. By invoking the esteemed ancients as the first practitioners of philosophy, whose most salient characteristic is conceived here to be brevity, Socrates gives his own intellectual practice, not Protagoras', the weight of tradition.

Implying a parallel between the Sages' speech and his own requires Socrates to collapse the distinction between their maxims, which make positive moral assertions, and his elenchus, which so often destroys traditional ethical convictions. But such universalizing anachronism, which retrojects Socratic speech and thought onto earlier intellectual figures, is at the core of Socrates' interpretation of Simonides' poem. Consider Socrates' interpretation of the following lines (*Prt.* 345d2–4 = Simon. fr. 260.27–9 Poltera):

πάντας δ' ἐπαίνημι καὶ φιλέω
ἐκὼν ὅστις ἔρδῃ
μηδὲν αἰσχρόν· ἀνάγκη δ'
οὐδὲ θεοὶ μάχονται·

I praise and love all
who willingly do
no wrong: for not even the gods fight necessity.

Socrates refuses to entertain the idea that Simonides meant to praise those who do no wrong willingly. This, he says, would suggest that Simonides was 'uneducated', because, as all of the wise men (= the Seven Sages) knew, no one does wrong willingly (*Prt.* 345e). His solution is to construe the adverb ἐκὼν ('willingly') with the line preceding it, so that the poem's sense becomes 'I willingly praise and love all who do no wrong'. As has been widely observed, his reading is tendentious both philologically, in that it requires an awkward hyperbaton, and philosophically, in that it anachronistically attributes to a much earlier period the central premise of Platonic ethics that no one willingly does wrong. But this anachronism, which turns the sixth-century Simonides

⁴⁶ D. Frede, 'The impossibility of perfection: Socrates' criticism of Simonides' poem in the *Protagoras*', *RMeta* 39 (1986), 729–53, at 740 thinks that Socrates' description of Spartan philosophy is purely fanciful. Of those who take the comments more seriously, C.L. Griswold, Jr., 'Relying on your own voice: an unsettled rivalry of moral ideas in Plato's *Protagoras*', *RMeta* 53 (1999), 283–307, at 304 suggests that Socrates embodies Spartan self-reliance and independence, which makes some sense of his connection of the Spartans with his own practice of philosophy. F.V. Trivigno, 'Childish nonsense? The value of interpretation in Plato's *Protagoras*', *JHPH* 51 (2013), 509–43, at 520 sees the comic implausibility of the claim that Spartans are philosophers as a fitting introduction to Socrates' parodic interpretation of Simonides' poem. Most recently, C. Moore, 'Spartan philosophy and sage wisdom in Plato's *Protagoras*', *Epoché* 20 (2016), 281–305, at 285–90 has shown that Socrates invokes philosophy's Spartan background to explain Simonides' competitive approach to wisdom.

⁴⁷ Cf. Griswold (n. 46), 304 n. 62, who observes that Socrates' discussion of the Sages 'underlin[es] his allegiance to short dicta'. Trivigno (n. 46), 520, whom I follow here, suggests that Socrates 'attributes his own methodological preference for brevity to the ancients'. Trivigno remarks that Socrates attributes the elenchus to Simonides; as I suggest below, he also attributes it to the Sages.

into a proto-Socrates, is precisely the point. Socrates' anachronism allows Plato to give his philosophy an ancient and irreproachable lineage.

One might ask whether Socrates believed in his own interpretation of the poem, or whether Plato wanted us to think that he did. It is hard to imagine so.⁴⁸ In his response to Protagoras' questions about the poem, Socrates demonstrates that he can beat the sophist at his own game, spinning an implausible but well-argued interpretation of a line to show that he, too, is capable of the verbal dexterity with which Protagoras charms an audience.⁴⁹ Likewise, Socrates' characterization of the Sages as philosophy's earliest practitioners is not an earnest attempt to discern who, if anyone, was his intellectual forerunner. But it is an important part of Plato's rhetoric against the sophists, because it is in contrast to sophistry that Plato has Socrates define the Sages within his own—and not the sophists'—lineage. Plato's characterization of the Sages as Socratic philosophers is a rhetorical move calculated to show that the weight of tradition is on Socrates', not on Protagoras', side.

It is no accident, then, that the single other discussion of the Sages as a group in Plato comes in the *Hippias Major*, in the course of Socrates' conversation with another sophist—Hippias. Hippias has been boasting that he often makes public missions on behalf of his city (while also earning a fortune as a private teacher). Socrates responds by asking the sophist how he would explain the fact that the Sages made no such missions (*Hp. mai.* 281c):

ἀτάρ, ὦ Ἰππία, τί ποτε τὸ αἴτιον ὅτι οἱ παλαιοὶ ἐκεῖνοι, ὧν ὀνόματα μεγάλη λέγεται ἐπὶ σοφία, Πιττακοῦ τε καὶ Βιάντος καὶ τῶν ἄμφι τὸν Μιλήσιον Θαλῆν καὶ ἔτι τῶν ὕστερον μέχρι Ἀναξαγόρου, ὥς ἢ πάντες ἢ οἱ πολλοὶ αὐτῶν φαίνονται ἀπεχόμενοι τῶν πολιτικῶν πράξεων;

But, Hippias, what could be the reason that all, or at least most, of those men of old whose names are singled out for their distinction in wisdom—Pittacus and Bias and the circle of Thales of Miletus and those still later, up to Anaxagoras—manifestly abstained from political affairs?

Socrates' question implicitly contrasts the wise men, whom he claims to have been apolitical, with the publicly engaged (and handsomely compensated) Hippias. Like the *Protagoras* passage, Socrates here constructs a dichotomy between sophist and Sage. While the *Protagoras* discussion centred on a contrast between the sophist's prolixity and the Sage's/philosopher's concision, the contrast here is between political engagement, characteristic of Hippias, and political abstention, characteristic of the Sages. Socrates will condemn the sophist's public speaking by showing it is done without moral foundation, in ignorance of τὸ καλόν. The Sages' political disengagement means that they are not compromised by the sophistic activity of manipulating an audience.

This would all be very well, except for the fact that the Sages were widely reputed to have been politically active as lawgivers and advisors. Thales was said to have served as a military engineer on behalf of Croesus against the Persians and to have advised the

⁴⁸ This is the standard view: see e.g. Frede (n. 46), 746; Trivigno (n. 46); and L. Woodbury, 'Simonides on ἀρετή', *TAPhA* 84 (1953), 135–63, at 146.

⁴⁹ Socrates parodies sophistic cleverness when he gets Prodicus to agree that by χαλεπόν ('hard, difficult') Pittacus means δεινόν ('terrible', in a negative sense, 341a–c). By this understanding, Pittacus' maxim means 'it is bad to be good', and Simonides is censuring him for not distinguishing words correctly (341c). Socrates proceeds to demonstrate the fallacy of this interpretation, explaining that it was a joke (παίξειν, 341d). For the interpretation as parody, see especially Trivigno (n. 46).

Ionians to convene at Teos at the start of the Persian Wars.⁵⁰ Bias, another of the Sages mentioned explicitly by Plato, is reported to have given the Ionians such good counsel during this period that, had they followed it, they would have saved themselves from destruction.⁵¹ Pittacus overthrew the tyrant of Lesbos, commanded the forces of Mytilene in a battle against Athens, and finally ruled that city for a period of ten years, during which time he acted as lawgiver.⁵² Cleobulus was tyrant of Lindos,⁵³ and the Spartan Chilon served as Ephor and introduced the practice of having Ephors accompany kings.⁵⁴ And no Athenian reader would have been ignorant of Solon's career as statesman and nomothete: as the tradition goes, Solon was so beloved of the Athenian people that they offered to make him tyrant.⁵⁵

By making the Sages apolitical, Plato is manipulating the tradition so that the ancient wise men conform to his own model of a philosopher. Plato's Socrates advocated political disengagement for philosophers, warning that 'one truly fighting for justice must lead a private life and not take part in politics if he is to survive even for a short time' (*Ap.* 32a). Socrates avers that his own divine sign prevented him from entering the assembly and advising the city, and for good reason: he was nearly killed for opposing an illegal action during his membership of the Council (32b). True to his sign, Socrates, the paradigm of ethical living, never once entered voluntarily into politics.⁵⁶ In the *Republic*, Socrates makes abstention from politics a necessity if one is to be called a philosopher, claiming that a 'noble character' can be saved from entering into public affairs by exile, by physical illness or by being born in a small town (496a–c). When Socrates makes the Sages apolitical—just as when he made them the practitioners of brief Socratic speech in the *Protagoras*—he is shaping them into his philosophical forebears.

Similarly, Socrates claims that, in contrast to Gorgias, Prodicus and Protagoras, 'none of the ancient wise men thought it right to accept payment' for their teaching (*Hp. mai.* 282c–d). It is true enough that no Sage is said to have cashed in his wisdom for a fee: Protagoras was famously the first to do this.⁵⁷ But Socrates, who made his resistance to the practice of charging for instruction a frequent point of discussion, is straining the facts: the matter of payment simply never arises among the Sages, who did not inhabit an intellectual world in which money was exchanged for wisdom. When Socrates claims that the ancients, like him, did not 'think it right' (ἡξιῶσεν) to accept money, he anachronistically implies that they considered the practice at all.

The way in which Plato discusses Thales offers a particularly striking example of how a Sage could be made to resemble a Platonic philosopher. Various ancient sources inform us that Thales was a mathematician, natural philosopher, engineer, political advisor and coiner of ethical maxims. Plato reports nothing of his political or engineering careers. However, he plays up Thales' activity as a mathematician and ethicist (*Hp. mai.* 281c; *Leg.* 899b; *Tht.* 174a–c, 175d). In order to demonstrate Thales' aloofness from earthly

⁵⁰ For the story about Thales' diversion of the river Halys during Croesus' campaign against the Persians, see Hdt. 1.75 and Diog. Laert. 1.38. For the story about his advice to the Ionians, see Hdt. 1.170.

⁵¹ Hdt. 1.170.

⁵² Diog. Laert. 1.74–6; Plut. *Conu. sept. sap.* 155F; Arist. *Pol.* 2.12, 2.13; *Eth. Nic.* 3.5, 3.8.

⁵³ Plut. *On the E at Delphi.* 3; Clem. Al. *Strom.* 4.9.

⁵⁴ Diog. Laert. 1.68.

⁵⁵ Diog. Laert. 1.49.

⁵⁶ Council members were selected by lot; and though they took their positions willingly, the large number of members required annually means that Socrates' service does not contradict his claim to abstention from a political career.

⁵⁷ Protagoras' fee-charging is dramatized at Gell. *NA* 5.10 and Diog. Laert. 9.56.

affairs, he recounts the story that Thales was so engrossed in his study of the stars that he fell into a well (*Tht.* 174a). The anecdote is intended to exemplify the philosopher's unconcern for the things and bodies around him. If Plato were our only source on Thales, we might think he was a detached and otherworldly mathematician. In a telling contrast, Aristotle emphasizes Thales' career as a natural philosopher (*Eth. Nic.* 6.7, 1141b3–8).

Let us turn to a final distinctive element of Plato's discussion of the Sages. Consider the list of seven Sages that Socrates gives in the *Protagoras* (343a):

τούτων ἦν καὶ Θαλῆς ὁ Μιλήσιος καὶ Πιττακὸς ὁ Μυτιληναῖος καὶ Βίας ὁ Πριηνεὺς καὶ Σόλων ὁ ἡμέτερος καὶ Κλεόβουλος ὁ Λίνδιος καὶ Μύσων ὁ Χηνεὺς, καὶ ἑβδομος ἐν τούτοις ἐλέγετο Λακεδαιμόνιος Χίλων.

Such were Thales of Miletus, Pittacus of Mytilene, Bias of Priene, our Solon, Cleobolus of Lindos and Myson of Chen, and the seventh among these was said to be Chilon of Sparta.

The canon of Sages was unstable in antiquity, especially among classical and early Hellenistic writers. Although the number seven was rarely questioned, the canon's members varied between authors.⁵⁸ Because Plato is the earliest author to adduce a canon of Sages, there are no contemporary sources to which we may compare his list. But a Hellenistic source indicates that Plato's canon was atypical. The Peripatetic Dicaearchus tells us that four Sages are generally accepted as canonical—these align with Plato's first four—and that there are six others from whom the remaining three may be chosen: Aristodemus, Pamphylus, Chilon, Cleobulus, Anacharsis and Periander.⁵⁹ The sixth Sage named by Plato's Socrates, Myson, does not appear on this list of conventional alternates. Other sources implicitly corroborate Myson's absence from the canon. Myson is called 'wise' by Hipponax (fr. 63 West), but he is included as a member of the college only by Eudoxus of Cnidus (fr. 371 Lasserre), himself a student of Plato and so likely following Plato's list; by Hermippus (F10 Jacoby), on whose list Myson's name is the reconstruction of Casaubon; and by Hippobotus (F6 Gigante). Myson is missing from the lists of Leandrius (F16), Ephorus (F182), Demetrius of Phalerum (F87), Callimachus (*Iamb.* 1.52–77), Plutarch (*Conuiuium septem sapientium*) and Ausonius (*Ludus septem sapientium*).⁶⁰ In fact, Myson was a relatively obscure figure in antiquity. Aristoxenus tells us that he was more or less 'unknown' (ἄδοξος).⁶¹ There are few anecdotes about him, and his biography is the shortest of any of the Sages' given by Diogenes Laertius. Much of the testimony that comes down to us about Myson concerns debates about his birthplace, a village called Χήν that was so obscure as to have been of uncertain location.⁶² Myson was a self-isolating and misanthropic farmer. According to one anecdote about him, he was seen laughing alone in the wilderness, and when asked why he was laughing when no one was present, he said: 'that's exactly why' (Diog. Laert. 1.108). Certainly, he appears to be an odd choice for Plato's canon.

⁵⁸ See Verhasselt (n. 23) on Dicaearchus F54.

⁵⁹ Diog. Laert. 1.41–2 (= Dicaearchus F54).

⁶⁰ Verhasselt (n. 23) takes Hermippus and Hippobotus as evidence that Dicaearchus was atypical for excluding Myson, not Plato for including him. But both Hermippus and Hippobotus may well have followed Plato. Even if Myson was a common choice, Plato's selection of the canon's most reclusive member was deliberate, since there were around seventeen Sages to choose from.

⁶¹ Diog. Laert. 1.108.

⁶² Sosicrates (F8), citing Hermippus (F19), says that Chen is either in Oeta or in Laconia. Alternatively, Myson may have been from a place called Etea, whose location was also subject to dispute: according to Diogenes Laertius, Parmenides said it was Laconia (1.107), but Euthyphro (F1) located it on Crete.

The reason for Plato's inclusion of Myson may be sought in a comment Diogenes Laertius makes about the *Protagoras* passage in question. Diogenes twice remarks on Plato's unusual selection of Sages, both times indicating that Plato includes Myson in place of the tyrant Periander (1.30, 1.41). Plato was not the only writer to consider Periander, the tyrant who killed his pregnant wife in a fit of rage,⁶³ as unfit for inclusion among the wise men of old. Periander's tyrannical behaviour was so obviously discordant with his proverbs that Sotion (F2), Heraclides of Pontus (F29), Pamphile (F5) and Neanthes of Cyzicus (F19) all claim that there were two Perianders, the tyrant and an Ambracian wise man. While it is unsurprising that Plato would want to excise Periander from his list, it is significant that he chooses Myson, who is so politically disengaged as practically to abhor human contact, to replace him. By replacing the hyper-political Periander with the reclusive Myson, Plato's Socrates can imply, against a strong tradition to the contrary, that the Sages were, like him, apolitical. Few of the Sages actually fit this description. Myson, however, does: his presence in Plato's list signals Plato's attempt to characterize the Sages not as political advisors or rulers but as contemplative, and even reclusive, figures.

The list of wise men in the *Hippias Major* is incomplete, but it too can tell us something about Plato's reshaping of the ancient tradition. Here, Plato names 'Pittacus and Bias ... up to Anaxagoras' as the wise men of old (*Hp. mai.* 281c). Anaxagoras is not normally included in catalogues of the ancient Sages. Unlike the other, semi-legendary members of the canon, whose traditions begin to coalesce sometime around the sixth century, Anaxagoras was a figure of recent memory who had been in Athens for a good portion of Socrates' young adult life.⁶⁴ Also unlike the other figures listed in the passage, Anaxagoras was no coiner of ethical maxims but a theorist who postulated mind as the cause of all things. Socrates describes the formative impact Anaxagoras' books had on him as a student, and credits an important part of his own intellectual development to Anaxagoras' theory, even if he ultimately condemns Anaxagoras (*Phd.* 97c–99d). By inserting him into the canon, Socrates is expanding that canon to include a figure who might, more comfortably than the ancient Sages, be called his predecessor.⁶⁵ In doing so, Socrates implies his own intellectual inheritance of the wisdom of the past through a smooth line of transmission.

What are we to make of all this? In the most literal sense, Plato is guilty of anachronism. He has assimilated the Sages' brief style of speech to Socrates' elenchus, an improbable parallel that elides the difference between their gnomic utterances and Socrates' probing enquiry. He has turned the Sages—lawgivers, rulers and advisors—into apolitical thinkers. He has excised the tyrant Periander from their numbers and replaced him with the obscure and reclusive Myson, and he has brought the list down to Socrates' older contemporary Anaxagoras. This can be no serious attempt to articulate the forerunners of Socratic philosophy. It is, rather, a rhetoricized history—a genealogy of Socratic thought and discourse, defined in contrast with sophistry. Plato's reinvention of traditions about the Sages, put into the mouth of Socrates, establishes the antiquity and

⁶³ Diog. Laert. 1.94, Hdt. 3.48–51. For other stories of Periander's cruelty, see Hdt. 5.92ζ–η.

⁶⁴ See D. Sider, *The Fragments of Anaxagoras: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Sankt Augustin, 2005), 5 for the dating of the events of Anaxagoras' life.

⁶⁵ It might be objected that the inclusion of Anaxagoras, who taught Pericles, brings politics into the canon. But the tie to Pericles seems to have made Anaxagoras no more of a political figure than Socrates' ties to Alcibiades and Critias made Socrates.

authority of Socratic philosophy in the face of the sophists' art. By creating the impression of a continuous intellectual lineage from the Seven Sages to Socrates, Plato bolsters Socrates' refutations of the sophists.

CONCLUSION

Three centuries after the death of Plato and Xenophon, Cicero would designate two of the Sages—Pittacus and Solon—as Greece's first practitioners of rhetoric (*De or.* 3.56). Their wisdom, says Cicero, consisted in the 'science of thinking and speaking, and the power of eloquence'.⁶⁶ In associating the Sages with eloquence, Cicero makes the Sages the intellectual forerunners of orators like himself. His claim is the reverse of Plato's, which had set the Sages in opposition to rhetoric by placing them on the side of philosophy. But Cicero's appropriation of the Sages in his history of oratory demonstrates the intellectual prestige they represented—a prestige that was liable to be claimed by all sides.

Both Plato and Xenophon adopt traditions about the Sages as part of their mythology of Socrates. In an indication of the Sages' importance to their rhetorical projects, both are willing to distort the tradition—whether of Socrates or of the Sages—in order to incorporate the ancient wise men into the story of Socrates. With Xenophon, we hear of Socrates teaching in a way he does nowhere else in the literature: by reading and excerpting the texts of the Sages with his students. His connection with the ancient wise men is strengthened by the fact that his conversations are occasionally patterned off a model distinctive of the Sages. With Plato, the case is, as it were, reversed, with stories about the Sages manipulated into conformity with the Socratic tradition. If Xenophon turns Socrates into a latter-day Sage, then Plato makes the Sages into proto-Socratics.

Along with the doxographers who followed him, Aristotle considered Socrates to be the founder of an ethical tradition. It is true that he represented a new way of life and thought. But the pictures of Socrates we have from Xenophon and Plato, albeit different, ground Socrates' life, activity and philosophy in the past. For Xenophon, Socrates' alignment with the Sages is a defence against suspicions of his newfangled ways. For Plato, it was a defiant assertion of his own practice against the sophists'.

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⁶⁶ *cogitandi pronuntiandique rationem uimque dicendi.*