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Reason and Persuasion

Three Dialogues By Plato: Euthyphro, Meno, Republic Book I

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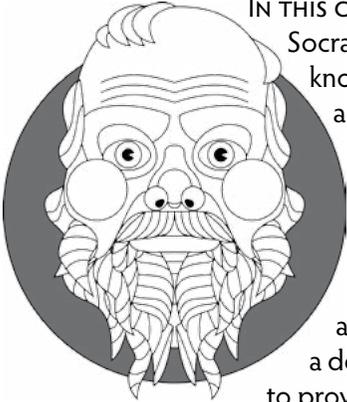
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The text is set in Hypatia Sans Pro.

Chapter 2 Socrates: The Gadfly of Athens

1



IN THIS CHAPTER I present a view of what the real, historical Socrates may have been like — a view the reader now knows to take with a grain of salt. I do so by means of a generous excerpt from Plato's **Apology**, an early dialogue. But first, let me introduce the excerpt itself.

Socrates is thought to have practiced a so-called 'negative method'. Meaning: he asked, he didn't answer. What he asked were ethical questions. **How should I live?** Not broad, metaphysical questions about the nature of the universe. **Apology** gives us a description of this negative procedure and purports to provide, as well, a justification for such a practice.

Apology is not about anyone named 'Apology', nor does it mean **I'm sorry**. **Apologia** means **defense**. The dialogue purports to contain speeches Socrates delivered at the trial at which he was convicted and sentenced to death.

What was the charge? According to Socrates in **Apology**, "it runs somewhat as follows: Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he occupies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the weaker into the stronger argument, and these things he also teaches to others" (18b).

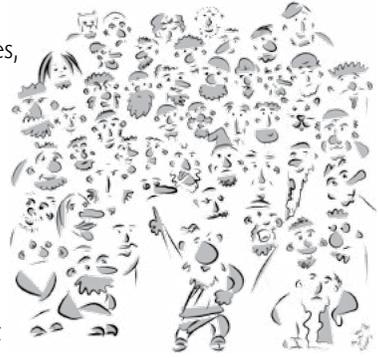
We hear about the case again in **Euthyphro**, where the charge is formulated in slightly different terms. Socrates explains that a young man, Meletus, is seeking to make his mark in politics by prosecuting him for "corrupting the youth." "It sounds like an outlandish business, my friend, when you first hear it. He says I fabricate gods. He indicts me, so he says, on behalf of the old gods, whom I don't believe in, since I'm busy making new ones" (3b).

Euthyphro suggests this accusation must be due to "the divine sign" Socrates says comes to him.

Divine sign?

Socrates says he has a **daimonion** — spirit voice he hears — that only ever says 'no' when he is about to do wrong. In **Apology** Socrates confirms this is, indeed, an item in Meletus' list of charges. But this is not the root of the bad feeling towards him. I'll let (Plato's) Socrates speak for himself. Here he is, pleading innocent as charged, addressing the citizen jury men at his trial:

One of you may well respond: But Socrates, what's the matter with you? Where did all these false accusations against you come from? Obviously all this gossip and talk about you haven't materialized because you were doing nothing more noteworthy than other people — you must have been doing something quite different from most everyone else. So tell us what it was, if you don't want us to make something up ourselves.



This seems like a perfectly fair objection, so I will try to show you what it was that I did to earn this notoriety and disrepute. Listen then — and it may seem to some of you that I'm joking, but be assured that I'm going to tell you the complete truth.

I have gained this reputation, men of Athens, on account of nothing other than a sort of wisdom. What kind of wisdom? It is, perhaps, just human wisdom — for I probably really am wise in this limited respect. The men I was talking about just now may be wise with respect to some greater-than-human wisdom. I don't know how to explain it. I certainly don't understand it, and anyone who says I do is lying and willfully slandering me. And, men of Athens, don't shout and interrupt me, even if you think I'm saying extravagant things; for the words I'm about to speak are not my own, rather, I will refer you to a trustworthy authority. I will offer you the god of Delphi as a witness to my wisdom — such as it is — and its nature. (20c-e)

2

Who are these men Socrates says may have greater-than-human wisdom? They are the **sophists** — wise ones, wise guys — who charge stiff fees to educate aristocratic Athenian youths. One of these — Gorgias — we hear about from Meno, his student. Thrasymachus is another, in **Republic**, Book 1. Socrates says it is hard for him to separate his reputation from theirs. So they say, Socrates is a sophist, a student of all things in the sky and below the earth, who makes the worse argument the stronger. It isn't true, so he says, but 'they' are hard to argue with. He says the only accuser he can name, besides his prosecutors, is an "author of comedies." Aristophanes was the premier comic playwright of the age. He wrote **The Clouds** (423 BCE), in which Socrates appears as a character, floating above the action in a basket. (Head in the clouds — obvious metaphor.) Socrates is portrayed as master of

a school, the Thinketeria. The action revolves around a pair of fools — father and son. Father makes son enroll in Socrates' school because he has heard they have "two arguments: right and wrong." The son, who has run up too many debts, is ordered to study **wrong**, the one that wins at court, so you don't have to pay your debts. The son dutifully goes off to learn the 'wrong' lesson. Turns out, it is fine to beat elderly parents, because it is fine to beat children, to discipline them. And elderly parents are in their second childhood. QED.

There are plot twists involving the father's own brief, unhappy period of study. But we skip to the happy ending. The father leads a mob to burn down the school, with the philosophers inside. So the story goes, Socrates was present on opening night and took a bow, so everyone could see what he really looked like.



3

The point is not just that Socrates has a bad reputation because he was publicly roasted by a famous comedian. The point is: in his defense speech, he denies he is, or has ever claimed to be, 'above' his fellow humans. No basket in the clouds for him! He does not have special, superior wisdom. And yet, reading on in **Apology**:

You know Chaerephon, I imagine. He was a friend of mine from childhood, and a friend to your democratic party; he went into exile with you and returned with you as well. You know what Chaerephon was like, and how impetuous he was when he had decided to do something. One day he went to Delphi, and was bold enough to ask the oracle this question — and, gentlemen, don't shout and interrupt what I'm saying — he asked whether anyone was wiser than me. The Pythia replied that there was no one wiser than me. And his brother here will offer testimony to this effect, since Chaerephon himself is dead.



In 404, the Peloponnesian War ended with the defeat of democratic Athens by Sparta. The Spartans imposed an oligarchy: rule by a group of wealthy Athenians sympathetic to Sparta's aristocracy, willing to collaborate

in exchange for power. These were the Thirty Tyrants, including Plato's uncle, Critias. Their rule lasted nine months. Democracy was restored in 403 BCE. The exile Socrates mentions was suffered by democrats while the Thirty held power. Socrates is emphasizing his friendship with a democrat while at the same time acknowledging a certain distance. He was critical of democracy and disrespectful to prominent democrats when they were in power. Later he emphasizes how he was also a thorn in the side of the Thirty, refusing an unjust order at the risk of his own life. Still, it may be Socrates was suspected of being a Spartan sympathizer. But, because of an post-restoration amnesty, no charge could be made in such terms. Perhaps the rather vague charge of "corruption of youth and belief in gods other than those of the city" was, to some degree, an attempt to lodge a political charge without saying anything about politics. Reading on:

But consider **why** I am saying these things, for I'm going to tell you where this prejudice against me has come from. Because, when I heard this, I thought to myself, what on earth can the god mean, and what is he hinting at with this riddle? I know perfectly well that I am not very wise — not even a little wise! Then what does he mean by saying I am the wisest? Obviously the god isn't lying; that wouldn't be right for him.

And for a long time I was at a loss as to what he meant, and then I set about — very reluctantly — to investigate him somewhat in the following way.

I went to someone with a reputation for wisdom, thinking that there, if anywhere, I could disprove the divination and show the oracle: Here is one wiser than me, but you said I was the wisest.

Well, I examined the man — I don't need to tell you his name, but it was one of our politicians I was assessing when I had this experience, gentlemen of Athens — and in my discussion with him it struck me that although this man was regarded as wise by many other men, and rated particularly high in his own opinion, he was not, in fact, wise. Then I tried to show him that, though he thought he was wise, he wasn't. But at that point he got mad, and so did a lot of the other people there.

And as I was leaving I thought to myself, well, I **am** actually wiser than that fellow. Probably neither of us knows anything all that wonderful, but he **thinks** he knows something he doesn't know. I, on the other hand, don't think that I know — because I don't. So it seems I **really am** wiser than he is, just to this small extent: I don't think I know the things I don't know.



After this I went on to another man thought to be even wiser, and it was the same story all over again, and at that point people started hating me — both the man in question and many others, too.

From there I went on from one man to the next, realizing that I was widely detested, and upset and fearful about it. Nevertheless I thought I was obligated to consider the god's interests first and foremost. Since I was investigating the oracle's meaning, I had to go around to all those people who were alleged to know something. And, by the Dog, gentlemen of Athens — for I have to tell you the truth — what I experienced was this: those who had the most favorable reputations seemed to me, as I went about my investigations as the god directed, pretty much to be those most lacking in good sense, while many others who were supposed to be much inferior were in fact much more capable men in this regard.

So I must point out to you that my wanderings amounted to a Herculean labor I was performing in an attempt to demonstrate the oracle's infallibility. After the politicians I went to the poets — the tragedians, the lyric poets, and all the rest — thinking that there, at least, I would catch myself red-handed, right in the act of being much less learned than they were. I used to pick up those of their poems that I thought they had elaborated with particular care, and ask them what they meant, so that I could learn something from them at the same time. I'm ashamed to tell you the truth, gentlemen, but it must be told: practically any random bystander could talk more sense about the poems than the authors themselves.

And so, again, I soon came to a realization about the poets, that it wasn't through wisdom that they wrote what they did, but through some natural faculty, and that they were divinely inspired, just as prophets and oracles are; for they say many beautiful things, but have no idea what they're talking about. It seemed clear to me that the poets had much the same experience, and at the same time I saw they thought that **because** they were poets they were the wisest of men with regard to **every** topic — of which they were ignorant. And I left the poets with the same sense of superiority I had acquired from the politicians.

Finally I went to the skilled craftsmen. I was quite conscious of the fact that I am practically without any technical knowledge, and I thought that I would find they knew all sorts of wonderful things. And here I wasn't disappointed. They did indeed know things I didn't, and in this respect they were wiser than I. But, gentlemen of Athens, I thought the skilled craftsmen were making the same error that the poets did — each of them thought that because he knew his own technical subject matter so well that he

was as wise as possible on every other subject too, even the most crucial ones — and this fault seemed to me to outweigh their wisdom. And so I asked myself on behalf of the oracle whether I would rather remain as I was, neither wise with their wisdom, nor ignorant with their ignorance, or, like them, have both at once. My answer to myself and to the oracle was that I was better off as I was. (21b-22e)



4

I present this stretch of text in full because you, the reader, should decide what **you** make of it. Socrates anticipates the jurors will think he's joking, but he assures them he is not. But maybe that assurance is just part of the joke?



What is the relationship between so-called Socratic irony and the so-called Socratic method? There is something **ironic** about that speech, make no mistake.

Who is the Socrates behind this Socrates mask?

Socrates not only swears to the god but comes close to swearing the god in as witness. That is faintly ridiculous. Then the god's message turns out to be almost a parody of what we expect from a divine inspiration. How so?

Imagine a wide-eyed, enthusiastic proselytizer, bursting with inspiration, urgently pressing leaflets and tracts into the hands of passers-by. 'Listen to me! Here is the word from the god! I have been chosen to give you a message!' What does it say? Upon examination, the pages are blank, except for a single sentence:

The god told me to give you the special message that I have no special message to give you!

This is witty enough fortune cookie fodder/performance art that we may declare it wise. Then again, maybe we should not allow ourselves to be won over by the cleverness of the comedy.

Let's try this. Socrates' negative questioning method is called **elenchus**, which just means **refutation**. (As with 'irony', Socrates' performances were so distinctive he made these generics his intellectual property.) Refutation seems straightforward. Ask a question. Get an answer. Repeat. Eventually you have the makings of a contradiction and you hang your debating partner

from that hook. His friends laugh at him, perhaps, and you have taken one more step towards unpopularity.

For example, in **Euthyphro** the priest wants to maintain the following:

- 1) **What the gods love is holy. What they hate is unholy.**
- 2) **Different gods love and hate different things.**
- 3) **Nothing is both holy and unholy.**

Lay them out like that and it's obvious: they don't fit. The truth of 1 plus 2 implies the falsehood of 3. (Zeus loves what you are doing, so it is holy. Kronos hates it, so it is unholy. So it is holy **and** unholy.) Logicians say 1-3 is an inconsistent set. But how does the discovery that your beliefs are inconsistent help you become wiser?

You wise up by clearing up the contradiction.

But how do you do **that**?

Euthyphro modifies 1 (see 9e); he seems potentially willing to let go of 3 (see 9d). But he might fiddle with 2 instead (8b). In general, how can you know you haven't dropped the **true** and kept the **false**? It is easy to form a consistent set of false propositions. No contradiction is implied. The pieces fit, but the picture they show isn't **true**. It seems

the only way to use **elenchus** as a method for becoming wise — for attaining knowledge of anything — is by having at least some knowledge to begin with; some touchstone of truth. You need a secure point you can build out from, testing other beliefs as you go.

Let's consider the matter practically, in terms of what has come to be known as the Socratic method: **teaching by questioning**. Teachers who employ this method do not lecture but ask questions which students answer. Sometimes it is suggested this works for questions to which there is no one 'right' answer. But that can't be quite right. No one bothers to apply the Socratic method to answers to 'what is your favorite color?'-type 'no right answer' questions. There may be something to the notion that the Socratic method is suited to The Big Questions, to which there are no final, right answers. But this much seems right: there must be better and worse answers, in some solid sense, or the method has no point. Pedagogically, the idea is that students won't understand how and why better answers **are** better except by seeing what was worse about what they were at first inclined to say.

This approach corresponds, roughly, to Socrates' method of roughing up his fellow citizens, when they get puffed up with a sense of wisdom. But there



is a difference, apparently. A teacher who conducts her class this way had better know better than her students. Teachers who set questions like traps along wrong paths, or trail them like bread crumbs along more promising ones, had better know which is which. You don't teach by asking questions at random. For their part, the students need to have some notion of what the subject is about, as opposed to having no notion whatsoever. They need to have ideas bad enough that they stand in need of knowing better, not **so** bad that they are unteachable in this way. You can't pull anything out of an empty head. The students' beliefs need to touch down on the truth, need to be half-right to start with. The teacher must see and seize on this point of contact; firm it up, expand it.

A Socratic teaching style must straddle right and wrong (better and worse) ways of thinking in specific and often delicate ways. It isn't **easy** to teach this way.

So who does Socrates — this man of no special wisdom — think he is, employing such a delicate method? Here is another famous passage from **Apology**:

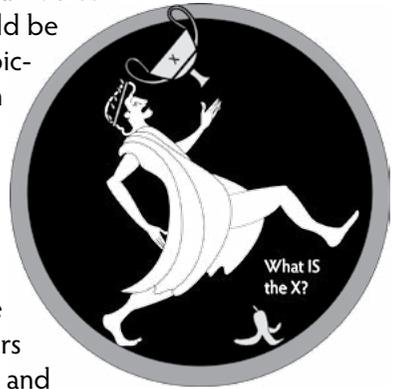


I was attached to this city by the god — though it seems a ridiculous thing to say — as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its bulk and needed to be roused up by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill such a purpose that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never leave off rousing each and every one of you, persuading and reproaching you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company. (30e)

Gadfly stings **hurt**. In **Meno**, Anytus says as much about Socrates' signature provocations: "it is probably easier to do people harm than good" (94e). How can Socrates be so sure he is improving his fellow citizens by stinging them all day, unless he has superior — if not divine — knowledge of the very things he denies knowing: namely, the answers to his questions? If he doesn't have answers, how can he be sure this pattern of stings isn't making his fellow citizens worse. Pain, no gain? (Perhaps he is 'corrupting youth'? Well, he could be, for all **he** claims to know to the contrary.) On the other hand, if he **does** have answers, why not tell us? It may sound fine to say we have to figure out for ourselves what is so wrong with our dumb ideas; but couldn't he at least provide clearer, more positive hints?

5

Let's start over. The suggestion that the historical Socrates' method was purely negative may simply be wrong. We should not assume, just because we can't really know much about the historical Socrates' philosophy, that there can't have been much to know. (Absence of evidence not evidence of absence!) Some scholars argue that we can be confident about a good deal more.¹ What would be the basis? Basically, you trust the standard picture (sketched in chapter 1) according to which Plato's portrait of his teacher is fairly accurate, at least in what we are sure are the early dialogues. Suppose we decide to be trusting. What further features of Socrates' philosophy emerge? The most significant is, perhaps, the following: Socrates seeks definitions. He does not try to trip up his debating partners just any which way. He tangles them up, again and again, with **What is X?** (or **the X**.)



He does so because he believes virtue — ethical excellence — to be a matter of intellectual knowledge of essences. Being a good person is more a matter of **knowing that** than **know-how**. It's intellectual, not a practical knack. Furthermore, from the fact that there **is** something latently "great and noble" in his fellow citizens (so he says!) it seems to follow that Socrates thinks this **knowledge** is latent in them. We know it, but we don't **know** we know it.

But then Socrates must think he and his fellow humans know a great deal, after all, notwithstanding that know-nothing line he takes with the jury. He thinks he knows that, by nudging fellow citizens to regard ethics as a known unknown, as it were, he can activate it in them as a kind of ... unknown known?

Does that make sense?

Can't we keep it simpler? Surely Socrates can know he is helping his fellow citizens somewhat. Surely proving there must be **something** wrong with his fellow citizens' beliefs is some help. Then again, unless there is some

1 See, for example, Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cornell UP, 1991), especially Chapter 1. Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), Chapter 3, presents a more 'minimal' view.

way to take positive steps to fix the problem, is it clear this is so? Mightn't it be depressing or paralyzing, or just a way to take advantage of people?

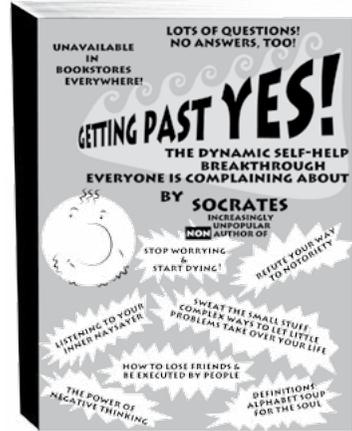
Take advantage? How?

Suppose you have the knack for spying contradictions in an opponent's positions. If you are in the persuasion business, teasing out contradictions is a handy talent. Let's say you are a lawyer. It's no accident the Socratic method is sometimes practiced in law schools. Lawyers argue tough 'what should be done?' cases. Such cases require that we balance contrary considerations. Here's a good trick. In cross-examination, demand a simple answer to some question that has no simple answer. Then, if your opponent is fool enough to play your game, draw out a contradiction or unwanted implication. The opponent whose position is exposed in this way may be opened up to ethical improvement — or you can just play it for the win! **He's down, you're up!** Your audience sees his tongue tied in your thought knot. Now say anything! You look smart, so the audience will probably buy whatever you want to sell. The Socratic method is a great way to make yourself look smart, and other people look dumb, whether you know what you are talking about or not! It's a powerful rhetorical tool.

Is it any wonder the Athenians distrust Socrates, even while they are grudgingly respectful of his logic chops? The way to get ahead in modern, up-to-the-minute ancient Athens is to be an effective speaker. The money and the power are in politics and the courts. Socrates is the master of a powerful, flexible, forensic technique. No wonder rich young Athenians follow him around, trying to pick up a trick or two.

If Socrates truly is practicing this dialectical martial art **ignorantly** — tearing away any and all beliefs within arm's reach without any sort of higher wisdom to guide him — there seems to be no reason to assume he is doing more good than haphazard harm. And if he knows what he's doing, he's dishonest. Because he isn't saying what he thinks he knows. Why shouldn't people suspect he is just softening them up to sell them something? Why should the sluggish horse of Athens trust its Gadfly is good for its health?

That's not a rhetorical question.



6

Let me conclude this sketch of the historical Socrates by returning to my Chapter 1 question: what is the relationship between Plato and Socrates? One possible answer is that it doesn't really matter. If the ideas and arguments in these dialogues have value for us today, it can't be crucial to settle whose intellectual property they were in the first place, over 2,000 years ago.

This makes sense and certainly promises to simplify matters. It might be objected that it **oversimplifies**, flattening layers of literary complexity. But you can appreciate a great novel without being sure you can quite tell author from narrator. It might be that one can appreciate the subtle drama of Plato's dialogues, as well as the abstract ideas and argument they present, without deciding whether one of the characters is really Socrates or really Plato or a bit of both.

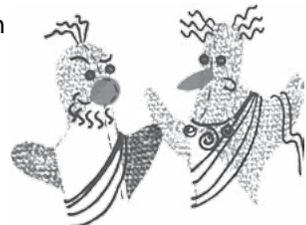
But let me sketch one final view, according to which making a judgment about the relationship between Plato and Socrates is an important step, even if it is never going to be one we can take with a high degree of confidence.

So the story goes: a young Plato was preparing to submit a set of tragedies he had written as competition entries for the Festival of Dionysus (the god Dionysus is a great patron of the arts.) On the way Plato met Socrates. After their conversation, he returned home and burnt all his poetic works. This sounds to me like a story that can't be true because it sounds **too** true. Because this much is true: Plato has a love-hate relationship with the arts. In **Republic** his Socrates refers to philosophy's long-standing 'quarrel with the poets.' Philosophy aims at truth, at reality; poets, by contrast, are in the lies and illusions business.



In the ideal city sketched in **Republic**, poetry and drama will be severely censored. Plato is especially stern on the subject of comedy: low-minded foolery, ugly masks provoking violent outbursts of laughter. All this is **bad**, he suggests.

In **Laws** — a very late dialogue, the one in which Socrates does not appear — Plato considers what might happen if artists were permitted to stage puppet shows as entries in dramatic contests.



They might win.

The kids would love it!

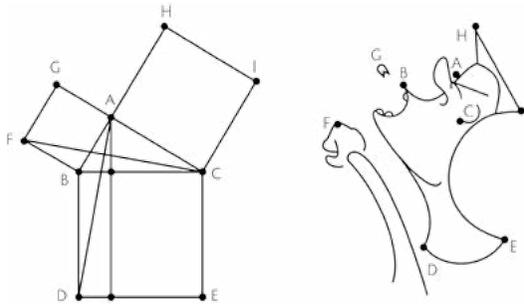
Plato would not approve.

But isn't Plato himself a dramatist, even a comedian?

Even a puppeteer? Plato is writer, director and producer of these dialogues, which are, for the most part, dramas of human weakness. Socrates' debating partners are (not to put too fine a point on it) mostly fools. In comedies, fools are mostly for laughs. In Plato's case, we infer that there is supposed to be much more to all the banana-peel slippage of failed definitions than just a good laugh at someone's expense. But what more is there? In **Laws**, which never cracks a smile, Plato suggests we humans are like puppets in the hands of the gods, who put on a show by manipulating us.

To be a puppeteer is, then, a divine calling. How not?

But how so? Perhaps Plato is not simply speaking through Socrates. Perhaps we should imagine him hovering above, with an air of superiority, commenting on the whole scene. He is telling us something by pulling the strings just **so**. Maybe dramatizing Socrates knocking the competition with such an air of effortless superiority is Plato's way of saying Socrates must have been on the right track. Or his way of up-selling abstract truths to an audience not yet sold on anything but verbal fights.



On the other hand, maybe we should regard the dialogues as dramatized anthropological investigations of how and why Socrates, although he was on the right track, was a failure. Socrates' whole 'how to lose friends and be executed by people' martial arts style of divinely-inspired self-help is insufficiently **winning**. It is rational but unpersuasive. Those who need a slap upside the head, for medicinal purposes, won't take their medicine.

Don't take it from me, however. And don't assume there has to be **one** answer to the question of what the message of this medium has to be.

By the way: how do they **play**, these dialogues? Sometimes the dramatic effect is bit wooden, which can be off-putting. Still, it is skillful and fascinating. Even the stiffness of certain movements can become an attractive feature. Superficial crudity can be a subtle affair. If artists were permitted to stage puppet shows, as entries in intellectual contests, **philosophers** might love it.