Arrogant Dragon:

The Trial of Socrates and the Principle of Wu Wei

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For all the scholarly ink spilled over Socrates' trial, some disquieting questions still linger. One of the more unsettling features of the so-called "Socratic problem" is the persistent reluctance among scholars to engage Plato’s *Apology* as what it manifestly is: a rhetorical performance. As Volpe (1978) aptly observes, “Scholars have studied, argued, conjectured and speculated over this event from the beginning, but they have not recognized or cared much about a strict and narrow rhetorical assessment of the trial. This is all the more regrettable since the event was, whatever else, a rhetorical one” (p. 124). Despite occasional forays into this territory—Stone’s 1988 study, for instance, offers valuable insights into the rhetorical dynamics of the trial, particularly in chapter 7 (pp. 90–97) and chapters 14 and 15 (pp. 181–209), building on earlier contributions by Kennedy (1963, 1980)—serious engagement with Socrates as a rhetorical figure remains comparatively rare. Given the stakes of the trial and its dramatic framing in the *Apology*, this scholarly oversight is as surprising as it is revealing.

Yet when we approach the *Apology* as a rhetorical performance, we are immediately faced with an unsettling question: why does Socrates’ defense fall flat? How is it that Athens’ most renowned master of speech fails to persuade the jury to spare his life? Plato presents us with the striking image of Socrates—the very embodiment of communicative prowess—abandoned by that very skill when it matters most. He stakes his life on his words, and those words ultimately condemn him. Thus, Plato’s portrayal deepens the enigma of the man whom Vlastos famously called “all paradox” (1974, p. 4): the consummate communicator who, with unwavering commitment, chooses a path that silences him forever.

What can one do to have better understanding of this paradox? An answer was offered by Stone (1988) who wrote,

All knowledge may be reduced to comparison and contrast; if only one thing existed in an otherwise void universe, we could not describe or "know" it. Much can be learned in dealing with any Greek problem if we turn to the analogous aspect of Roman civilization. The comparison—and even more, the contrast—between these two kindred but widely divergent societies is illuminating. (p. 6)

Building on Stone’s insights, I take a fresh approach to Socratic rhetoric by viewing it through the lens of Eastern philosophy. In particular, I draw on the *Tao Te Ching* to shed new light on the Socratic paradox. This cross-cultural comparison explores how Plato’s Socrates conducts himself during his trial, set against the ideal of the wise individual as envisioned in the *Tao Te Ching*. Central to this analysis is the concept of *wu wei*—the art of achieving mastery by non-interference. As both a philosophical stance and a communicative strategy, *wu wei* offers a provocative counterbalance to the often hyperactive tendencies of Western discourse, epitomized by Socrates’ relentless engagement in his own defense. By juxtaposing these traditions, we gain a sharper perspective on the possibilities and limits of communicative action in the pursuit of wisdom.

Through this comparison, I pursue two key aims. First, I draw on the contrasting lens of philosophical Taoism to offer a fresh interpretation of Socrates’ communicative choices. Second, I underscore a fundamental divide between Western and Eastern conceptions of persuasive speech.

To show how *wu wei* proves a valuable key to understanding the Socratic paradox, I will: (1) offer a rationale for why I choose to look at Plato's version of Socrates' trial; (2) examine how Socrates is depicted in Plato's *Apology*; (3) introduce comparative philosophy as a means of generating an alternative account of Socrates' performance; and (4) provide a brief explanation of Taoism and the principle of *wu wei* as a means to generate fresh insight into Socrates' failure to persuade the Athenian jury of his innocence.

This paper argues that *wu wei* offers a compelling key to unlocking the Socratic paradox. To make this case, I proceed in four stages. First, I explain why Plato’s account of Socrates’ trial provides the most fruitful ground for this inquiry. Second, I take a close look at Socrates as he appears in the *Apology*, paying special attention to his self-presentation and rhetorical choices. Third, I introduce comparative philosophy as a productive lens through which to reimagine Socrates’ courtroom performance. Finally, I draw on Taoist thought—specifically the principle of *wu wei*—to offer a fresh perspective on why Socrates failed to persuade the Athenian jury of his innocence.

Any serious critic of Socrates’ trial is immediately faced with a thorny question: who gets to claim the “true” version of events? We are left with only two substantial sources that recount Socrates’ words and deeds at his trial—the *Apology* of Xenophon and the *Apology* of Plato. Yet these two accounts, while agreeing on some basic facts (Beckman, 1979, p. 78), diverge sharply in tone, structure, purpose, and philosophical outlook (Larson, 1980, p. 17). In fact, Beckman (1979, p. 78) goes so far as to call them “fundamentally and systematically incompatible.” The scholarly debate over Socrates’ defense strategy reflects this tension. Some argue, following Xenophon, that Socrates barely defended himself, if at all (Oldfather, 1938; Chroust, 1957). Others contend that Socrates could have done more to save his own skin but deliberately chose not to (Stone, 1988). Still others insist he fought vigorously to refute the charges laid against him (Kennedy, 1963; Sallis, 1975). The debate, like the trial itself, remains as provocative as ever.

 Any effort to reconstruct a historical event inevitably bears the imprint of the historian's own assumptions, biases, and interpretive choices. As a result, even when working from the “same” set of facts, historians frequently produce strikingly different narratives. The quest to isolate some objective, unmediated “real event” beneath these interpretations is ultimately a futile endeavor; every account is inescapably shaped by the perspective of the one who tells it. Rather than measuring histories against an elusive standard of absolute historicity, we must recognize each account as a legitimate and meaningful interpretation in its own right.

Plato’s Socrates is famously critical of the Sophists and their rhetoric, a stance that has led many to the hasty conclusion that he rejects persuasive speech altogether. At first glance, Plato seems to encourage this view. Consider the opening line of the *Apology*: “How you, men of Athens, have been affected by my accusers I do not know; but, however that may be, I almost forgot who I was, so persuasively did they speak; and yet there is hardly a word of truth in what they have said” (17a). Socrates’ complaint is not about persuasion *per se*, but about persuasion that divorces speech from truth. Time and again, in this and other dialogues—such as the *Menexenus* (234c–235c)—he criticizes speakers who weave words so skillfully that truth is smothered beneath their polished phrases.

Reading Plato's Apology, one cannot shake the sense that Socrates himself is deftly manipulating language, orchestrating his words to elicit precisely the reactions he intends. Far from passively submitting to judgment, he guides the jury, prompting them to ask—and answer—the very questions he deems most urgent. His claim to possess no fixed doctrines of his own does not render him neutral or disengaged. On the contrary, Socrates appears intent on persuading his fellow Athenians, not of conventional truths, but of an entirely different order of thought—one that stands in stark contrast to the familiar formulas and rhetorical strategies of Sophistic *techne*.

There are other indications that Socrates came to his distaste for rhetoric via an intricate knowledge of how it works. Plato wants us to see this knowledge at work in Socrates' first speech of the *Apology*. Traditionally, the arrangement of an Athenian court speech was divided into four parts: (1) the *prooemium* or introduction; (2) the *narration* or exposition of background; (3) the *proof* or evidence; and (4) the *epilogue* or conclusion. Kennedy (1963) sees the *Apology* as conforming to these rules of oratorical partition:

There is at first a *prooemium* which points out the speaker's lack of court experience and apologizes for his language... There follows (18a35 ff.) a statement of the case which fulfills the functions of a narration, then the refutation of the charges, a section (28a1 ff.) like those found in speeches of Lysias demonstrating Socrates' character, and finally a peroration (34b6 ff.) which tries to achieve its objective of demonstrating moral integrity by specifically rejecting the usual pathetic conventions. (p. 151)

Moreover, Socrates is apparently willing to use his rhetorical skill in the service of persuading others of his ideas. As he says,

[I have tried] to persuade each of you not to have a greater concern for anything you have than for yourselves, that each of you may be the best and wisest person possible nor to consider the affairs of the city in preference to the well-being of the city itself. (36c)

Socrates emerges here as a man both eager to persuade and masterful in the art of persuasion. And yet, despite his skill and determination, his ultimate aim—acquittal—eludes him. By conventional measures, then, his rhetorical endeavor falls short. (I will return shortly to the alternative view that Socrates may have sought his own death.) To grasp how events unfolded as they did, we must first take a closer look at Athenian court procedure.

The Apology unfolds in three distinct speeches delivered by Socrates. The first—and by far the longest—is his formal defense against the charges brought against him. Despite his eloquence, the jury finds him guilty, likely by a narrow margin of 280 to 221 (36a-b). Under Athenian law, a guilty verdict did not automatically determine the penalty; instead, both prosecution and defense proposed punishments for the jury to consider. The accusers demanded death. Socrates, in characteristic defiance, countered with the suggestion of a modest fine. This counterproposal forms the substance of his second speech. The jury responds by sentencing him to death. In the brief, poignant third speech, delivered as the formalities of his execution are set in motion, Socrates offers his reflections on the verdict, his fate, and the nature of life and death.

Plato makes it clear that, from Socrates' words in the first speech, he was sincerely trying to win acquittal:

Very well, then, I must begin my defense, gentlemen, and I must try, in the short time that I have, to rid your minds of a false impression which is the work of many years. I should like this to be the result, gentlemen, assuming it to be for your advantage and my own... I should like to be successful in my defense..."(*Apology*, 19a).

That he does not achieve this stated goal is shown by the vote.

Not all commentators accept the traditional view of Socrates' conduct at his trial. Some argue, for instance, that the proceedings were predetermined—rigged from the start (Chroust, 1957, p. 190)—and that a man of Socrates’ penetrating intellect would have recognized the futility of his defense early on. On this reading, his apparent stubbornness becomes the resignation of someone who knows the outcome is sealed. Yet Plato’s Apology offers compelling reasons to doubt that the verdict was ever a foregone conclusion.

To begin with, the vote itself was strikingly close—a fact that surprises even Socrates (Apology, 36a-b). This narrow margin suggests a sharply divided jury, hardly the consensus one would expect if the trial’s result had been inevitable. Moreover, Socrates’ initial speech is anything but perfunctory. It is not merely a defense against formal charges; it is, as Sallis aptly puts it, Socrates’ “definitive answer to the question, ‘Who is Socrates?’” (Sallis, 1975, pp. 25–27). It strains credulity to imagine Socrates delivering such an intricate and earnest self-portrait if he believed the exercise was pointless.

Further, the charges themselves are flimsy—a cobbled-together litany of popular grievances: sophistry, impiety, heresy, and the corruption of youth. The case against him, far from airtight, reeks of political opportunism and moral panic. Finally, few readers can fail to be struck by the force and clarity with which Socrates answers his accusers. His first speech is not the defiance of a man who knows he is doomed, but the reasoned defense of one who believes he still has something to fight for.

When it comes to the audience's reaction to Socrates' speech, several key points emerge with clarity. First, Socrates enters the courtroom facing an uphill battle, yet with a real—if slim—chance of acquittal. Second, he delivers a defense that is both cogent and provocative, adhering to the conventional norms of oratory and judicial rhetoric; as Kennedy (1963, p. 151) puts it, he says "the conventional things in the conventional place." Third, his argument is persuasive enough that nearly half the jury casts their vote for his acquittal. And yet, strikingly, many of those who initially support him go on to vote for his execution after hearing his second speech. It is hard to miss the trajectory in Plato’s account: the steady unraveling of Socrates’ rapport with his audience. If a speaker begins as a master of rhetoric with at least a fighting chance and ends with former allies calling for his death, something has gone profoundly wrong in the art of persuasion.

The question of how a master communicator like Socrates managed to alienate the Athenian jury has puzzled scholars for millennia. Yet, debates over this enduring mystery have remained largely confined within the boundaries of Western philosophical traditions. This narrow focus has overshadowed an equally compelling avenue of inquiry: approaching the Socratic paradox through the lens of comparative philosophy. In an effort to broaden the conversation, I turn to a prominent Eastern perspective—philosophical Taoism—to reexamine the trial of Plato’s Socrates and shed new light on his fate.

*Comparative Philosophy and Alternative Accounts of*

*Socrates' Failure to Persuade*

 Much of the analysis surrounding Socrates’ trial has unfolded within the parameters of distinctly Western intellectual traditions, shaped by familiar epistemological and ontological frameworks. Yet, as Redding and Martyn-Johns (1979) compellingly argue, Western modes of thought are far from the only lens through which to interpret the world. Eastern philosophies offer an equally sophisticated, yet fundamentally different, perspective—one that invites a rethinking of long-held assumptions.

Redding and Martyn-Johns highlight several key divergences between Western and Eastern worldviews. First, their logics differ: Western thought typically favors deductive, axiomatic reasoning, while Eastern traditions often embrace complementary and paradoxical logics. Second, their modes of perception diverge: where Westerners tend to categorize and compartmentalize, Eastern thinkers are more attuned to contextual relationships and dynamic interconnections. Third, their cosmologies contrast sharply: Western cosmologies frequently center on predetermination and linear causality, whereas Eastern frameworks imagine a self-generating, self-organizing cosmos.

Re-examining Socrates through this alternative lens offers more than an academic exercise; it opens the door to an entirely new narrative about an age-old problem. By stepping outside the familiar Western frame, we may uncover insights into Socrates’ life, trial, and philosophy that have long remained hidden in plain sight.

The power of a comparative lens becomes especially clear when we consider a particular explanation for Socrates’ behavior that recurs throughout Western literature. This interpretation—most clearly articulated by Stone (1988), though it can be traced back to a stance preserved in Libanius—suggests that Socrates wanted to die. According to this view, his famously provocative defense was not a miscalculation or a misjudgment, but an intentional strategy designed to seal his own fate: suicide by rhetoric, as it were. Socrates’ combative style, his conspicuous obstinacy during the trial, and his refusal to appease the jury are all read here as the deliberate actions of a man who had resolved not to live. As Stone puts it, “He chose death over a renewed chance of life. The choice he made was voluntary and therefore the equivalent of suicide” (1988, p. 195).

From this vantage point, Socrates’ communicative performance emerges as an almost inevitable outgrowth of the social and political climate so meticulously detailed by Stone. In this reading, Socrates' rhetorical choices are less about shaping the circumstances of his trial and more about giving voice to a position he had already firmly embraced. His performance becomes a vehicle for expressing a predetermined stance, rather than an active force in influencing the environment of the proceedings. Stone is unequivocal on this point, asserting that he knows the “real reason” behind Socrates’ approach: “The Socratic strategy clearly was to lose, not only [the] first vote on guilt or innocence but the second vote on the penalty” (p. 183).

Taking Stone’s account as emblematic of much Western thought—particularly along the lines outlined by Redding and Martyn-Johns—one finds a familiar pattern: deductive reasoning, categorical distinctions, and a vision of Socrates’ death as predestined, an outcome rendered inevitable by his character and the temper of Athens. Most strikingly, Stone casts Socrates as the architect of his own downfall. He frames the philosopher’s demise in terms of linear, unidirectional causality—and in tracing such causal chains, few historians can rival Stone’s precision.

Yet for all its rigor, Stone’s answer to the question, “Why did Socrates fail to persuade?” feels curiously constrained. His painstaking analysis delivers a narrative that is thorough but narrow. One cannot shake the sense that something is missing. Stone leaves us with a rather stark conclusion: Socrates rejected what the Athenians stood for, they reciprocated his disdain, and he recognized—perhaps even embraced—that his manner of engaging them would inexorably end in condemnation. It’s a compelling case, but it risks oversimplifying a far more complex and enigmatic historical moment.

It was precisely this lingering sense of unease that compelled me to venture beyond the boundaries of Western thought in search of alternative perspectives on Socrates’ behavior. Turning to Eastern philosophies, with their distinctive embrace of complementary logics, contextual sensibilities, and self-generating cosmologies, I found a striking contrast. These traditions often ground their models of human action in the rhythms of nature itself, where success lies not in imposing will but in achieving harmony with the natural order. Actions that stray from this alignment are seen as excessive—destined, ultimately, to fail. In philosophical Taoism in particular, human beings are understood as integral participants in a self-generating, self-organizing cosmos, inseparable from the dynamic processes of nature itself.

Taoism holds that nature is ultimately unknowable—its vast complexity resists full comprehension or mastery. At best, humans can aspire to partial and imperfect imitation. Yet even this limited emulation offers profound insights. Consider the willow tree, which yields beneath the heavy snow, bending rather than breaking. In this quiet act of flexibility lies a powerful lesson: by yielding at the right moment, one avoids ruin and, paradoxically, secures enduring strength. Nature defies tidy explanations or linear causality, but its very ineffability makes it an enduring and potent model for human conduct.

The Eastern perspective emphasizes causation as inherently mutual and multiple. Events unfold not merely through human intention or external compulsion, but through the dynamic interplay of both. Stone, however, focuses narrowly on a model of unidirectional causation: he argues that the socio-political context drives Socrates’ decision to die, which in turn explains his communicative performance at the trial. In doing so, he overlooks the reverse dynamic—namely, that Socrates’ defiant communicative performance, precisely because it defies the natural order, inexorably precipitates the circumstances in which he is compelled to "choose" death. Stone’s framework excludes this kind of reciprocal causality, reflecting a distinctly Western inclination toward isolating a single causal narrative and defending it through discursive argumentation.

The implications of this distinction are both provocative and revealing. From an Eastern perspective, Stone’s claim that Socrates “volunteered” to die—as well as similar claims advanced by earlier commentators—can only be sustained by stretching the concept of “voluntary” to its furthest limits, if not beyond. Indeed, one suspects that even Stone might concede, upon close reading of both Plato and Xenophon, that Socrates’ so-called "decision" to die cannot be located in any single act or moment. Rather, it emerges through a complex sequence of events, each unfolding with a certain inexorability.

Even if we grant Stone’s argument that Socrates relinquished his desire to go on living, the notion that he transformed his trial into a deliberate occasion for “suicide” only gains traction once it was apparent that the Athenians were resolute in their intent to indict him. Socrates did not march into court demanding a death sentence; such a proposition strains credulity. To characterize his refusal to recant during his defense speeches—or his later rejection of the chance to escape prison—as “voluntary” choices is to miss the larger, more consequential point.

Socrates’ execution was no more a voluntary choice than the fateful decision of a shopkeeper to shoot an armed intruder. Technically, there is a choice—but it is one constrained, even coerced, by the situation at hand. In this light, Socrates' trial and death must be understood within the broader constellation of social, political, and personal forces at play, rather than through a reductive lens that privileges a singular, supposedly "most likely" interpretation of events.

From an Eastern perspective, Socrates’ communicative performance would not be viewed as a straightforward expression of his personal intention. Rather, any intention he might have is seen as emerging organically from the unfolding of the communicative act itself—an act shaped by the surrounding social environment. In this view, causes and effects are not neatly separated: each result loops back to influence its many causes, and vice versa. Socrates’ performance, his willingness (or intention) to die, and the social conditions he inhabits continually shape and constrain one another, forming a dynamic interplay in which none of the three can be isolated as the sole driving force. Instead, they exist in an ongoing, reciprocal configuration, each one giving form and limit to the others within a larger, integrated whole.

A comparison of these two perspectives reveals a fundamental divergence between Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. I will explore this distinction in greater depth later on, but for now, we can frame it succinctly: a narrative that seems depleted of possibilities within one cultural paradigm may, when reconsidered through another, disclose fresh insights. In this case, the principle of *wu wei*—as articulated in the Chinese classic *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-Tzu—offers precisely such an alternative vantage point.

*Taoism and the principle of wu wei.* Wu wei—often rendered as "actionless action" or "effortless efficacy"—stands at the heart of philosophical Taoism. The term itself is a paradox that invites deeper reflection. Wu conveys notions of "absence," "non-being," or simply "without," while wei denotes "to do," "to act," or "action" (Wu, 1978: 155–158). Brought together, these two characters—one evoking emptiness, the other implying activity—form a concept that appears contradictory at first glance. Yet, it is precisely this tension between "something" and "nothing" that captures the subtle genius of *wu wei*: acting by not acting, achieving without striving, doing nothing in such a way that everything gets done.

My primary source for exploring *wu wei* is the *Tao Te Ching* (Chan, 1963). This slender text—barely 5,000 characters long—has sparked debates as vigorous and enduring as those surrounding Socrates’ defense. Scholars continue to wrestle with fundamental questions: Was the *Tao Te Ching* truly authored by Lao-Tzu, the enigmatic sage to whom it is traditionally ascribed? When exactly was it composed? And, perhaps most provocatively, did Lao-Tzu himself ever exist at all?

The *Tao Te Ching* undertakes a paradoxical endeavor: to articulate the nature of the *tao*—often rendered as "the way"—even as it insists, from the very first line, that such articulation is inherently impossible. "The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way; the name that can be named is not the constant name." This declaration sets the tone for a text that gestures toward a reality beyond the limits of language. While a full exploration of the nuances of *tao* lies beyond the scope of this essay, it may suffice to say that, within the *Tao Te Ching*, *tao* is the underlying principle that governs the rhythms of the cosmos: the ceaseless cycles of increase and decrease, each unfolding in its proper season. The sage’s task, then, is not to resist this ebb and flow through restless striving, but to discern the current of existence and move in harmony with it.

*Wu wei*, often translated as “effortless action” or “effective inaction,” arises from the fundamental Taoist principle of non-interference with the Tao. The sage understands that deliberate action frequently triggers counteraction—a disruption of the natural equilibrium that spirals into further turmoil and imbalance. In light of this, wisdom lies in mastering the art of doing by not doing, allowing harmony to emerge through 'effective inaction.'"

*Wu wei* has been aptly described as “Ockham’s Razor in a Chinese version” (Wu, 1978, p. 164). Just as William of Ockham championed parsimony in thought—urging us not to multiply entities beyond necessity—*wu wei* advocates for a comparable economy in action. At its core, it is the art of *effective inaction*: a deliberate choice not to act, grounded in deep awareness and inner strength, even when external pressures seem to demand intervention. The individual who embodies *wu wei* succeeds not by doing more, but by doing less—and only when truly necessary. As the *Tao Te Ching* puts it, “The man of superior virtue takes no action and has no ulterior motive for doing so; the man of inferior virtue takes action and harbors ulterior motives” (Chan, 1963, p. 167).

Wu Wei *and Plato's Socrates*

 At its core, it seems fair to say that Plato’s Socrates would have found himself deeply at odds with the principle of *wu wei*. His tireless questioning, his dogged interference in matters others deemed none of his business, and his claim to be guided by an inner voice—his *daimon* (Apology 31c-d)—all stand in stark contrast to the effortless harmony prized by Taoist thought. In each case, Socrates draws attention not to his alignment with the natural order, but to his own restless individuality—traits that, from a Taoist perspective, appear less the marks of a sage and more the signs of someone out of step with the Tao.

 Viewing Western philosophy through an Eastern lens opens up fresh avenues for exploring the enduring enigma of Socrates. In particular, this perspective sheds new light on three distinctive features of Plato’s portrayal of Socrates’ persuasive strategy. These are: (1) the use of the *elenchus* as a method of persuasion; (2) the shift in the audience’s perception of Socrates between his first and second speeches; and (3) the paradoxical emphasis on the speaker in a style of delivery ostensibly centered on the message. For each of these features, I will first outline the relevant aspects of Socratic practice. Then, drawing on key passages from the *Tao Te Ching*, I will offer insights that deepen our understanding of Socrates’ method by bringing Eastern philosophy into the conversation.

*The Socratic elenchus*.

 The first point to consider is the *elenchus* of Socrates, the hallmark of his relationship with Athenians. The meanings of *elenchus* are explained by Robinson (1971):

Elenchus in the wider sense means examining a person with regard to a statement he has made, by putting to him questions calling for further statements, in the hope that they will determine the meaning and the truth-value of his first statement. Most often the true-value expected is falsehood; and so 'elenchus' in the narrow sense is a form of cross-examination or refutation. (p. 78)

 The elenchus stands as the hallmark of Socratic discourse in Plato’s early dialogues. Here, Socrates is portrayed engaging Athenians from every walk of life in sharp, probing exchanges—dynamic question-and-answer sessions aimed at nailing down clearer definitions of fundamental philosophical concepts.

 By the time Plato composed his account of Socrates’ trial, the *elenchus* had emerged as the defining feature of Socrates’ public persona—indeed, it had become “almost the exclusive issue of the *Apology*” (Sallis, 1975, p. 55). Two key factors contributed to this elevation. First, Socrates’ relentless and unconventional questioning had stirred widespread public resentment. Second, his defense hinged on the claim that the *elenchus* was not merely a method of interrogation but the most effective means of testing the Delphic oracle’s proclamation to Chaerephon: that no one was wiser than Socrates.

I want to explain to you how the attack upon my reputation first started. When I heard about the oracle's answer, I said to myself, what does the god mean? (Apology, 21b)… After puzzling about it for some time, I set myself at last with considerable reluctance to check the truth of it in the following way. I went to interview a man with a high reputation for wisdom, because I felt that here if anywhere I should succeed in disproving the oracle and pointing out to my divine authority, you said that I was the wisest of men, but here is a man who is wiser than I am (21b-c).

 Socrates soon discovered that this man, like so many others, could not withstand the scrutiny of the elenchus. Undeterred, he moved from one prominent Athenian to the next, relentlessly testing their claims to wisdom—and time and again exposing their pretensions, not only to himself but to Apollo and to all who cared to watch. In the end, it is no exaggeration to claim that Socrates’ unyielding commitment to this method of questioning is what brought him to trial.

Viewed through the unforgiving lens of *wu wei*, such a course of action seems fated to collapse under its own weight. Socrates’ mission, after all, is the pursuit of knowledge—not merely for his own edification, but as a gift to be shared with others. On the face of it, this seems an unassailable aim. What philosopher would dispute the value of acquiring knowledge? And yet, the *Tao Te Ching* offers a strikingly different perspective: *“In ancient times, those who practiced the Tao did not seek to enlighten the people, but to make them ignorant. The people are hard to govern because they know too much.”* Here, knowledge is not an unqualified good, but a dangerous surplus. Where Socrates sees wisdom as liberation, the Taoist sage sees it as a burden—and possibly a trap.

At first glance, the passage strikes a disturbingly Machiavellian chord. But the *Tao Te Ching* points to a deeper, more insidious issue than the mere violence that arises when people cling too tightly to their rules. The greater danger, as Welch (1957:30) notes, lies in "the damage to men's character which results from ambition and greed." From a Taoist perspective, the relentless pursuit of definition—so central to the Platonic Socrates and his method of elenchus—is a futile endeavor. Far from illuminating truth, it merely feeds the mind’s insatiable hunger for knowledge, inflaming desire and disturbing the effortless harmony of *wu wei*.

 While such a notion may strike the Western mind as dubious, two features of Plato’s dialogues seem to lend surprising support to the Taoist perspective. First, Plato never depicts Socrates as fully content with any answer he receives through his elenctic questioning (Nakhnikian, 1971, p. 157). This persistent dissatisfaction echoes the Tao Te Ching’s warning that “there is no greater guilt than discontentment” (46). In this light, Socrates’ refusal to rest, his endless probing, suggests a fundamental unrest that keeps him from attaining true wisdom.

 Moreover, the pattern of the dialogues themselves underscores this restless energy. Each one ends after a single session, with Socrates’ interlocutors declining any further engagement (Santas, 1979, p. 6). Rather than cultivating an ongoing conversation over time, Socrates flits from person to person, in true gadfly fashion (Apology, 30c), stinging first one Athenian and then another. He seems genuinely perplexed that none will return for a second round, though it’s hardly surprising given his relentless method.

 From a Taoist standpoint, Socrates’ approach appears to violate the principle of *wu wei*. Instead of harmonizing with the flow, he repeatedly hurls himself against brick walls—and then laments the inevitable headache.

A second reason Taoists might take issue with the Socratic *elenchus* lies in its heavy dependence on language. As the *Tao Te Ching* observes, “Nature says few words” (23)—and in following nature’s example, the wise person, too, should speak sparingly, transmitting their understanding through action or presence rather than endless explanation: they “spread their doctrines without words” (2). The Taoist principle of *wu wei*, or effortless action, extends to language as well. Prolonged debate and verbal sparring, far from yielding deeper insight, often exhaust meaning and drive people further apart in their struggle to articulate elusive truths. As the *Tao Te Ching* warns, “Much talk will of course come to a dead end” (5). It is no coincidence, then, that it declares: “Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know” (56).

It is striking to consider that Socrates’ execution can plausibly be traced back to a single, fateful word: *wiser*. When the Delphic oracle proclaimed that “no one is wiser than Socrates,” it set in motion a chain of events that would ultimately lead to his death. For Plato’s Socrates, this divine assertion sparked an unsettling sense of disquiet—a restless compulsion to interrogate both himself and others—that propelled him down a path of relentless inquiry and, ultimately, self-destruction.

It is readily apparent that the oracle is engaging in a practice characteristic of all oracles—delivering pronouncements so artfully ambiguous that every listener finds justification for their own hopes or fears. The Delphic oracle, in particular, earned lasting notoriety for this calculated vagueness, skillfully hedging its bets through linguistic sleight of hand. In the turbulent and often volatile political landscape of fifth-century B.C. Greece, such ambiguity ensured that, regardless of who emerged victorious, Delphi’s sanctuaries remained richly endowed and its priests unassailable.

Nevertheless, Plato’s Socrates proceeds—or at least claims to proceed—as though the Delphic pronouncement were a clear and authoritative statement of divine truth. A Taoist observer might see in this a textbook case of what happens when life is governed by words. One word—*wiser*—gives rise to another—*what does the god mean?*—which spawns still more: *elenchus*, *formal charges*, the *first speech of the Apology*, the *verdict*, and ultimately, the *sentence of death*. In this cascade of language, words chase words, until lives are upended. And yet, for all this verbal entanglement, Socrates and his fellow Athenians find themselves no closer to understanding Apollo’s message than when they started. Socrates concludes, with characteristic irony, that "real knowledge is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value" (23). A Taoist might well wonder why he couldn’t have accepted that truth at the outset—and spared himself, and Athens, the turmoil his words unleashed.

Up to this point, comparing the *Apology* with the *Tao Te Ching* through the lens of *wu wei* has brought two striking insights into the Socratic use of the *elenchus*. First, the relentless pursuit of knowledge by way of the *elenchus* appears to offer Socrates no tangible benefit. Second, Socrates' virtuosity in questioning—so central to Plato's dialogues—lures him into an excess of words that ultimately does him harm. In the first case, the *elenchus* accomplishes nothing; in the second, it turns against him.

 What, then, is the significance of these conclusions? Quite simply this: within the Western tradition of communication, it is almost universally taken for granted that the pursuit of knowledge and mastery of language are unqualified assets in human interaction. Yet, when we reconsider Socrates through the lens of *wu wei*, a different picture emerges. In this case, at least, neither the relentless quest for knowledge nor its articulation through language yields any real advantage.

 Yet the insights of the Tao Te Ching do not end there. To challenge another deeply entrenched assumption about communication, we must take a closer look at how the jury’s perception of Socrates shifts between his first speech—the defense against the charges—and his second speech, in which he proposes an alternative penalty.

 *Change in audience perception of Socrates*. One of the most powerful forces shaping an audience’s response to a speaker is the speaker’s evolving—or unchanging—attitude toward both their message and their listeners. Skilled speakers know how to leverage this dynamic, perhaps by opening with detached, factual analysis and gradually building toward an emotional crescendo, or by starting with an air of aloofness and moving steadily into personal connection. The permutations are endless. Yet nowhere is this principle more vividly at play than in the courtroom, before a jury. There, the speaker’s shifting stance can carry decisive weight, turning the tide of judgment like few other rhetorical strategies can.

 Virtually every commentator on *Apology* has wrestled with Socrates’ baffling refusal to soften his stance during the second speech. One would think that, having just witnessed the failure of his persuasive strategy—sealed by the jury’s “guilty” verdict—Socrates might pivot, seek common ground, or offer some form of compromise. Instead, he doubles down, pressing the jurors further into a corner, as if daring them to condemn him outright. The Greeks had a word for this kind of ruinous pride: *hybris*—that reckless confidence in one’s own power that led Oedipus to hunt a murderer, only to find himself the quarry. A Taoist might offer a simpler diagnosis: ignorance of the *tao*.

The title of this article invokes the term "arrogant dragon." In contrast to its familiar Western connotations, the dragon carries a markedly different significance in the Chinese philosophical tradition. As noted in the ancient classic *I Ching* (*The Book of Changes*), the dragon is not merely a mythical beast but a profound symbol with layered meanings.

The dragon is a symbol of the electrically charged, arousing force that manifests itself in the thunderstorm. In winter this energy withdraws into the earth; in the early summer it becomes active again, appearing in the sky as thunder and lightning. As a result the creative forces on earth begin to stir again. (Wilhelm, 1981:7)

 The passage cited above originates from Hexagram 1 of the *I Ching*—*Ch’ien*, or *The Creative*. Among its many layers of meaning, this hexagram symbolizes the emergence of a potent spiritual force, one that reshapes the course of human affairs. As the text explains, “In relation to the human world, it denotes the creative action of the holy man or sage, of the ruler or leader of men, who through his power awakens and develops their higher nature” (Ibid., 3). The six stages mapped by this hexagram chart the arc of such transformative power: from its subtle beginnings—the "hidden dragon," when the individual of true greatness remains concealed—to its overreaching culmination—the "arrogant dragon," when the great one, having risen too high, surpasses the bounds of wise and effective action.

 These striking and evocative images offer not only a poetic lens through which to view the figure of Socrates but also a foundation for the next point of comparison with the *Tao Te Ching*. Socrates, one might argue, is a dragon straight out of the *I Ching*’s imagery—an untamed force driven by a divine mandate to awaken and transform the minds of men (*Apology* 33c). At the outset of his trial, he stands accused of heeding his personal *daimon* rather than the gods of the city—an act that, to Athenian sensibilities, must have smacked of hubris. And yet, like the dragon in the final stage of the hexagram—“the arrogant dragon will have cause to repent”—Socrates continues his upward ascent, undeterred by the fact that the moment calls not for advance, but for withdrawal.

Even before the majority of jurors cast their votes to convict, Socrates makes his defiance clear. In his initial speech, long before any offer of escape is on the table, he pointedly tells the Athenians that he would refuse it.

Suppose...you said to me, Socrates, on this occasion we shall disregard Anytus [one of the three persecutors] and acquit you, but only on one condition, that you give up spending your time on this quest and stop philosophizing...I should reply...[that] I owe a greater obedience to God than to you...I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet (Apology, 29c-d).

Socrates does more here than just make it more likely the jury will convict him—he challenges them to do otherwise. Furthermore, he ends his first speech by presuming to instruct the judges (*Apology*, 34b-36d) and informing them that he will not engage in the customary pathetic appeals. Sallis (1975) notes:

Not only does Socrates refuse to humble himself to the extent of begging for acquittal but also, at this extremely crucial juncture in the trial, he takes it upon himself to tell those who are claiming to judge him what their duty is as judges. (p. 62)

 Socrates, having delivered these provocatively defiant remarks, could hardly have been surprised when the jury answered in kind. As the *Tao Te Ching* cautions, "Open the mouth, meddle with affairs, and to the end of life there will be no salvation" (52). His stance echoes the hubris warned against in the *I Ching*: heedless of the danger signals flashing around him, Socrates forges ahead, apparently blind to the fact that whatever goodwill he once commanded has long since evaporated. Worse still, his refusal to show the slightest contrition only escalates the cycle of mutual defiance, driving tensions ever higher.

 Under such circumstances, can we truly fault the Athenian jury for their verdict? Put yourself in their sandals: for years, you’ve watched this peculiar figure roaming the city, accosting your friends and neighbors with disconcerting questions. Now he stands accused of crimes grave enough to warrant death. And yet, in his defense, he does little to reassure you. On the contrary, he insists—again and again—that he is under the special favor of Apollo, a privilege he seems to suggest you do not share. Worse still, he conducts himself with a provocative disregard for the very laws and institutions you are sworn to uphold. He scarcely acknowledges the jurors as legitimate judges, flouts the usual practices of supplication, and makes no plea for mercy. Instead, he asserts that *Athens* is lucky—*blessed*, even—to have him. And he warns that once he is gone, you will never find another like him.

 To many in the courtroom, he must have seemed to confirm their worst fears: that here was a man who cared nothing for the traditions and stability of the city. Perhaps even a man verging on madness. And when he declares, without apology, that he has no intention of changing—and dares you to do something about it—what choice, really, do you have?

 According to the *Tao Te Ching*, the key to harnessing the mind lies in restraint. “For the mind to employ the vital force without restraint means violence” (55). In the Taoist view, an overactive mind doesn’t just exhaust itself—it can spill over into physical aggression. The fate of Socrates offers a striking example: a brilliant intellect pushed to its limits, ultimately provoking the forces that would destroy him.

One might object, however, that Socrates, with his fiercely original intellect, had little choice but to act as he did. Without his uncompromising stance, who would have been persuaded of the truth he sought to uphold? The objection might go something like this: *How, exactly, would wu wei have served him here? What alternative do you propose? Should Socrates have conceded defeat, rolled over like a chastened dog, and meekly accepted the judgment of the Athenian court?*

Such an objection misfires by mistakenly equating *wu wei* with doctrines like the Christian injunction to "turn the other cheek"—that is, the deliberate restraint of action in deference to a higher ethical mandate. As Welch (1957) astutely clarifies, this is a fundamental misunderstanding.

A Christian returns good for evil in a spirit of self-abnegation, as a holy duty, and as an expression of his love for God and fellow man. Ostensibly, Lao Tzu would have us return good for evil…because *that is the most effective technique of getting people to do what we want*." (p. 21)

 At this point, the *Tao Te Ching* reveals a strikingly different character. It is no longer a mere abstract philosophical treatise but emerges as a practical guide for survival in the realm of dialectic, modeled on the rhythms and principles of nature itself. Like the Taoist image of the newborn—its sinews soft, yet its grip unyieldingly strong—what appears weak often conceals a deeper, more enduring power. Nature teaches that excessive force begets an equal or even greater counterforce. In the same way, cleverness and rhetorical cunning (of which Socrates, for all his denials, is arguably guilty) tend to provoke further deception. By contrast, the simple act of speaking the truth—or more radically, embodying the truth in silence—proves to be the ostensibly fragile strategy that ultimately overcomes the ostentatious strength of verbal manipulation.

 This insight carries profound implications for the study of persuasion. It suggests that genuine influence lies not in rhetorical skill or verbal dexterity, but in authenticity, restraint, and alignment with a deeper, natural order. To persuade, it may be less a matter of saying the right words than of living the right life.

A Taoist might be imagined offering this counsel to Socrates: "Your troubles stem from your words. You regard them as the medium of wisdom, yet true wisdom lies in perceiving the essence of human affairs without the artifice of language. Only the unwise fail to recognize that there are times when speech must be restrained—that linguistic play is not an unfailing path to truth. If you understand this, why not temper yourself, aligning with the rhythms of nature and allowing events to unfold as they will? When speech is necessary, let it be measured, nothing more than what is required. In doing so, your own words will not rise against you, becoming a force beyond your control."

 The true power of this form of *wu wei*—the ability to hold one’s tongue in the face of attack—rests not in clever words but in the moral fiber of the speaker. For the sage to speak only what is necessary, their character must be unwavering: upright, disciplined, and above the petty and the trivial. It is the speaker’s integrity, not their rhetoric, that delivers the message. This brings us to a crucial third point in examining the Socratic defense through the lens of the *Tao Te Ching*: what happens when someone claims to prioritize the message, but is in fact preoccupied with projecting their own persona as a speaker?

*Speaker versus message: A source of conflict*. As previously observed, the speeches in Plato’s *Apology* are masterfully crafted. Yet this very polish generates a striking tension between Socrates and his audience: he repeatedly disclaims any knowledge of rhetoric, even as he delivers a speech that is undeniably persuasive. This paradox lies at the heart of Socrates’ performance. In his compelling comparison of Plato’s *Apology* with Gorgias’ *Apology of Palamedes*, Seeskin (1982) observes:

In cross-examining Meletus [one of the prosecutors], Socrates reminded the jurors of why he was considered a verbal wizard and thereby reinforced the prejudices against him. He insulted the politicians, poets, and artisans in the jury by claiming that when it came to justice and piety, none of them knew what he was talking about. Worse, he realized that in one respect he was a clever speaker and said so without hesitation. He used Gorgias' techniques but did so not to establish the probability of his innocence but the truth about his life. (p. 99)

That is an admirable aim—except for one inconvenient fact: Gorgias was a Sophist. And sophistry, the art of "making the weaker argument appear the stronger" (as described at *Gorgias* 23d), was precisely the sort of charge leveled against Socrates himself. In fact, Socrates must have seemed to confirm his accusers’ worst fears when they warned the jury that he would deploy rhetorical sleight of hand to sway them (*Apology* 17a-b)—despite his protestations to the contrary.

 Taoists would likely regard this dissonance as inherently self-defeating. Time and again, the *Tao Te Ching* emphasizes that those who follow the *tao* must embody it, not merely talk about it. From the Taoist perspective, genuine harmony with the *tao* renders rhetorical flourishes unnecessary; when a leader is truly aligned with the Way, people will follow naturally and without coercion. Deliberate attempts at persuasive speech only draw attention to the speaker, disrupting the harmony and ensuring that true conviction among listeners remains elusive.

…the sage places himself in the background but finds himself in the foreground.

He puts himself away, and yet he always remains.

Is it not because he has no personal interests?

This is the reason why his personal interests are fulfilled. (Chapter 7)

Disturbingly, Socrates' defense is filled to overflowing with "personal interests": his value to the city (31a-b); his spiritual mission (28a); his service to Apollo (21a); and so forth. Clearly, on Plato's account, Socrates ignores *tao* in favor of his egocentrism.

 The *Tao Te Ching* illuminates a striking paradox at the heart of Socrates' method: the power of persuasion often lies not in polished performance, but in its apparent absence. Conventional wisdom insists that to persuade, one must speak with eloquence and clarity. Yet Laozi suggests the reverse: “Great skill appears clumsy; great eloquence seems to stammer” (*Tao Te Ching*, 45). Reading Socrates through this lens yields a provocative insight—one that might unsettle the sensibilities of philosophers from ages past. It suggests that Socrates is less preoccupied with the truth of his arguments than with the impression he makes on his audience. In other words, his seeming awkwardness is not a flaw but a deliberate rhetorical strategy.

The familiar claim that Plato’s Socrates was motivated purely by a desire to uncover the truth—rather than to persuade his interlocutors—has been repeated so often that it now stands as one of the most enduring clichés of Western intellectual tradition. Yet this comforting narrative obscures a crucial point: an indifference to the audience’s reception often betrays a deeper disregard for the very substance of one’s message. If a truth is worth proclaiming, it is surely worth the effort required to set aside personal vanity and persuade others of its significance.

The *Tao Te Ching* frames this as a failure of focus. When the sage becomes disconnected from the people—blind to their struggles, deaf to their concerns—it is often because attention has turned inward, toward the self, rather than outward, where it belongs. A Taoist might offer Socrates this counsel: *"If you wish to bring wisdom to the citizens of Athens, you must first set aside the mask of the wise man—a burden your life has unwittingly imposed. Integrity need not be sacrificed. On the contrary, to recognize that the judgments of your fellow citizens carry as much weight as your own is the highest expression of humanity."*

This, it seems, was beyond Socrates. In the *Apology*, one cannot help but sense that he is doubling down on his persona as the unyielding, fearless pursuer of truth—playing the part with characteristic tenacity before the largest audience he would ever face. It is this flaw in Socrates’ character that draws sharp criticism in a searing passage from Santas (1979):

It is plain that Socrates, besides being an original and powerful mind, was also something of an intellectual clown, a reveler in circus debate, a diabolical needler of his contemporaries. He is constantly on stage, in the agora, gymnasia and wrestling schools, festivals, dinner parties, the courtyards of great houses. He chooses his antagonists, fixes the subject, makes sure he has the attention of the audience, invites his opponent to speak his mind freely and without fear, elicits from him an opinion, a speech, a dogma, and then proceeds to counterpunch the poor man and his opinion to death, mixing in his blows not only philosophical points and arguments but also sarcasm, irony that borders on insincerity, and personal insults; and he does not rest until he has extracted from his victim a public confession of utter helplessness. At the end, when it is painfully obvious that his opponent will never recover, he proposes that they all go home and start all over again another time. (p. 6)

 This breakdown in trust between speaker and audience is damaging enough on its own, but the consequences for the message itself are even more severe. The moment an audience senses insincerity, their doubt extends beyond the speaker to the substance of the speech. A cavalier attitude toward one’s own message can fatally undermine the perception of sincerity—no matter how loudly the speaker insists he is telling “the truth.”

 In sum, placing Plato’s *Apology* alongside passages from the *Tao Te Ching* reveals three provocative insights—ones that (a Taoist might say) offer an alternative explanation for why Socrates failed to persuade the Athenian jury of his innocence. First, Socrates relied almost exclusively on the elenchus, a relentless form of cross-examination that, rather than clarifying his position, alienated his audience. In Taoist terms, this was a breach of *wu wei* in the realm of the speaker—an overexertion that undermined his intent. Second, he pressed on with unwavering conviction, seemingly indifferent to the mounting danger. His refusal to adapt or show humility further distanced him from those who might have offered support—another violation of *wu wei*, this time in relation to his audience. Third, though Socrates claimed to focus on truth rather than persuasion, his message-centered approach was so rigidly speaker-driven that it risked appearing insincere or manipulative—a final lapse in *wu wei*, within the realm of the message itself. From the Taoist perspective, then, it wasn’t a lack of rhetorical skill that sealed Socrates’ fate, but an excess—too much argument, too much certainty, too much control.

*Conclusion*

 This essay has proposed an alternative lens for grappling with some of the enduring puzzles surrounding Plato’s portrayal of Socrates. By juxtaposing Socrates’ communicative style with the more arhetorical philosophy of Taoism, I have suggested that a fresh, cross-cultural perspective can unsettle familiar assumptions. I began by taking Plato’s account at face value—as a legitimate, if stylized, record of a historical encounter—and closely analyzed the rhetorical conduct of Plato’s Socrates as a public speaker. From there, I explored key contrasts between Western and Eastern modes of thought, focusing on divergent understandings of logic, perception, and cosmology. These fundamental differences, I argued, shape opposing conceptions of causality, with profound implications for how communication itself is understood.

 To widen the interpretive frame, I brought in the Taoist principle of wu wei, as articulated in the *Tao Te Ching*. This perspective casts Socratic dialogue in an unflattering new light. Examining Socrates through the lens of wu wei compels us to rethink three long-held beliefs: that the Socratic elenchus is a reliably effective method of inquiry; that Socrates’ stubbornness reflects the depth of his convictions; and that his apparent self-effacement signals a sincere focus on his message rather than on himself. Under the unforgiving scrutiny of wu wei, these claims look far less secure.

 In fact, the *Tao Te Ching* suggests that Socrates faltered not from rhetorical deficiency, but from rhetorical excess. In each of Aristotle’s three modes of persuasion—ethos, pathos, and logos—Socrates overreaches. He overplays his personal credibility (ethos); he stirs emotional resistance rather than harmony (pathos); and he privileges his message in a way that centers the speaker over the speech (logos), opening himself to charges of insincerity. From a Taoist standpoint, Socrates’ downfall lies precisely in his failure to embody the effortless action and self-effacing restraint of wu wei.

 Plato’s Socrates occupies a central place in the Western imagination, shaping not only philosophical inquiry but also deeply influencing the Western approach to communication itself. Argumentation, precise definitions, categorization, courage, and an unyielding pursuit of truth—these have come to be celebrated as hallmarks of the ideal communicator in the Western tradition. Yet, when these narratives are viewed through the lens of philosophical Taoism, their limitations—and even their potential for harm—are thrown into sharp relief. Embracing a Taoist perspective does not require us to dismiss Socrates’ defense in the *Apology* as misguided or obsolete. However, it does invite a more critical, reflective stance—one that questions the need to revere Socrates as an unassailable model. Taoist principles vividly expose the arbitrariness in such narratives, opening space for alternative ways of understanding communication and truth.

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