The title of Stephen Salkever's lecture confines itself to a single, familiar problem in Republic I. But before he is finished, Salkever goes far beyond that one issue to explore the nature of Socratic inquiry, the depth of Plato's metaphysical commitments, and at least by implication the proper character of our own philosophical activities. The crucial question for Salkever is, Why does Socrates employ the τέχνη analogy so pervasively in the dialogues? Not just in Republic I or in the so-called Socratic dialogues, but in works from all phases of Plato's career—in the Meno, Gorgias, Phaedrus, Sophist, Statesman, Parmenides, Philebus—Salkever shows us how frequently Plato compares artistic or productive practices with Socrates' own philosophical activity. Salkever's answer is that Socrates uses the craft analogy to introduce a new kind of authority—the authority of the τέχνη—into Athenian political discourse, one that counters the standard authority of the poets and of political heroes like Pericles and Themistocles. Further, Socrates exhibits the τέχνη of philosophy through his own activities, and in doing so practices the true political τέχνη. But, Salkever contends, the craft analogy is not Socrates' final teaching about the good life. It is a starting point rather than a fully adequate answer, the beginning of the description of the mixed life of the philosopher, who must also be a citizen.¹

¹ Though I shall not pursue it here, I think Salkever distinguishes too sharply between Socratic philosophizing and other Socratic activities. Nor do I not agree with Salkever's description of the profitable life as the practice of some τέχνη accompanied by "a reasonable amount" of philosophizing. Republic X, 618b-
Now in any interpretation as ambitious as Salkever’s there will always remain more to be said. My purpose in these comments is not to fault Salkever for this—he has given us much to think about—but to point out some of what remains and to suggest how the remainder might be filled in. But a larger part of my intention is to find in those details an interpretation of the τέχνη analogy quite different from that defended by Salkever. If philosophy is a τέχνη, I would say it is one essentially unlike any of the many practices to which it is compared.²

An analogy is a type of argument comparing two things essentially different in character, often using something familiar to help us understand something unfamiliar: atoms are like billiard balls, and my love is like a red, red rose. In every analogy, certain features of the objects of comparison (and maybe only a single feature) are actively highlighted, others are ignored. In saying that a man is a wolf we probably draw attention to a certain rapacious attitude toward his neighbors or to his solitary condition; we imply nothing about his diet or how he smells.

What feature of comparison is highlighted in the τέχνη analogy? The analogy’s purpose has been subject to many conflicting interpretations, ranging from those who see it as a model for a conception of moral knowledge to those who imply it is intended to reject the possibility of such a model.³ For Salkever, the analogy depends on a simple commonality between skills and practices familiar to every Greek and the Socratic, very idiosyncratic practice of dialogic philosophizing. Every τέχνη is governed by its own set of authoritative rules and methods; Socrates’ analogy shifts the focus of the interlocutor from the external constraints of law to the internal constraints of a τέχνη. If Athens is willing to accept the authority of familiar τέχνα in 619b (quoted by Salkever) implies to me that philosophy should be an exclusive and not just a leading concern.

² Though I shall speak of a “Socratic τέχνη” in what follows, I do not thereby commit myself to the position that Socratic philosophizing was a τέχνη in any ordinary sense. In using the phrase, I refer to nothing more than Socrates’ special skills at refutation and exhortation.

³ Interpretations ranging, that is, from Irwin 1977 to Roochnik 1986. See also their exchange in Griswold 1988.