Why does conversation matter so much to Socrates?

“Why does conversation matter so much to Socrates?”
William Stewart
PLS, class of 2012

“Why does Socrates keep discussing philosophy right up to the moment of his execution? Maybe we could answer that he ends his life surrounded by the thing most important to him—the dialogue. But this answer overlooks the terrible sadness of the situation. Where are the people he loves? Where is his wife? Where are his children? Not even that famous and wise woman of Mantinea, the one who taught him everything about the mysteries of love, not even Diotima enters his mind. Instead he chooses his arguing-buddies, thick-skulls who can only press him for one last explanation and from whom no insight, no consolation, nothing but tears come forth.”

“Truth is a process involving the whole person that ultimately points to the soul’s existence beyond the boundary of life. In this process nothing can replace the face-to-face conversation between human beings. Thus Socrates keeps engaging in a discussion about immortality right up to the moment of his execution.”

Gretchen Reydams-Schils
Professor and Chair, Program of Liberal Studies

“Socrates keeps discussing because it is the most important thing he can do with his time. If you only have an hour to live, you should spend it in the most worthwhile pursuit of all—trying to figure out the meaning of life, not playing cards (as Pascal says).”

Conor Rogers
PLS, class of 2011

Recommended Readings
Plato - Phaedo
Louis Malle (director) - My Dinner With Andre, 1981
Pierre Hadot - Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises From Socrates to Foucault, 1995
Josef Pieper - Leisure: The Basis of Culture, 1952

“Socrates’ death sentence creates a tension in the mind of the Athenian people: the tension between living the easy, blissfully ignorant life and the more difficult, questioning life, a life that is freed from the bondage of half truths and that is marching towards the light. By continuing to discuss up until the moment of his death, Socrates teaches that the questioning life is the good life. Thus, Socrates’ death is an argument aimed at Athenian law. Athens executes laws and citizens. Socrates is interested in the former.”

Lauren Rasch
PLS, class of 2012