
Misunderstanding Socrates

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THE NOTION OF A *Socratic* PHILOSOPHY, as distinct from what is commonly known as Platonism, has its origins in the work of Gregory Vlastos¹ and continues today through the scholars he has influenced.² The Socratic movement in Plato studies maintains that one can identify in certain Platonic dialogues a philosophical method and a collection of philosophical theses which may properly be attributed to Socrates. The enterprise of Socratic philosophy rests upon a series of subtle and, from my point of view, controversial claims, some of which I aim in this short paper to locate and challenge. This is not to say that I am opposed to placing the character Socrates at the center of our understanding of the Platonic texts; to the contrary, the alternate understanding I propose here may strike some as going too far in this direction. Rather, the target of my criticisms will be the conception of Plato's Socrates upon which current Socratic philosophy rests. I begin with the position taken by Vlastos and those who follow him.

THE VLASTOSIAN SOCRATES

The Vlastosian position can be characterized as follows.³ Plato wrote dialogues. Some of these dialogues were composed early in Plato's philosophical career, whereas others were written later. Plato crafted his earliest dialogues while he was still very much under the intellectual influence of his teacher; as such, Plato's early dialogues feature a character named Socrates which, it is safe to assume, resembles the historical Socrates. As Plato grew older, however, he developed

his own distinctive philosophical perspective. The dialogues Plato wrote in his later periods⁴ feature a Socrates, but the Socrates in these dialogues is not the same *philosopher* as the Socrates in the early dialogues; the later Socrates does not resemble the historical Socrates but rather functions as the mouthpiece for Plato's own philosophy.

Through careful analysis of the texts, one can distinguish and compare the two Socratic characters. The Socrates of the early dialogues—Socrates_E—employs a rather specific philosophical method, *elenchos*, by which he searches for moral truth through the examination of an interlocutor's definitions of moral terms. Ironically claiming to not have any knowledge himself, Socrates_E, through the *elenchos*, leaves his interlocutors in a state of *aporia*, that is, the state in which the interlocutor realizes that he knows not what he formerly believed he knew.

The Socrates of the later dialogues—Socrates_L—does not proceed by way of elenctic exchange and is not exclusively concerned with moral issues. Socrates_L delivers speeches to meek and compliant auditors on themes as diverse as art, mathematics, politics, and metaphysics. Moreover, the most pressing philosophical concern for Socrates_L is not any moral question, but the notorious Theory of Forms, a cluster of metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological doctrines. Unlike Socrates_E, Socrates_L is quite confident that he has knowledge and he is eager to share it. Accordingly, the later dialogues are not aporetic, they are doctrinal.

Vlastos extracts from this general picture "Ten Theses" he wishes to advance regarding Socrates_E (*IMP* 47–48). I will not pursue these in this paper even though I believe every one to be wrong. Moreover, I shall forego discussion of the thorny difficulties involved in the project of chronologizing the Platonic texts. The Vlastosian scheme, to be sure, relies rather heavily upon the success of such a project; I nevertheless have serious doubts about the prospects of arranging the dialogues in chronological order, and furthermore I wonder why such an order should matter to our understanding of

Plato.⁵ Instead I focus upon Vlastos's understanding of the Socratic Method, for this is fundamental to current Socratic philosophy. More specifically, I want to undermine the model of the *elenchos* which allows Vlastos to propose the following two theses:

- A. The *elenchos* is a method of discovering moral truth (SS 9).
- B. Socrates_E is *exclusively* a moral philosopher (IMP 47).

VLASTOS ON THE *ELENCHOS*

Vlastos has proposed a model of what he calls the “standard elenchus” (SS 11). In a standard elenctic encounter, Socrates' interlocutor asserts some proposition, *p*. Socrates then elicits from his interlocutor some additional beliefs, *q* and *r*. Through some further—and sometimes tacit—premises, Socrates derives a contradiction in the belief-set {*p*, *q*, *r*}, and concludes that therefore **not-*p*** is true, *p* false.⁶

The *Euthyphro* is a good dialogue in which to find such an exchange. Euthyphro asserts that,

- (*p*) Piety is what the Gods love.

Socrates elicits from Euthyphro the additional beliefs,

- (*q*) All pious things are pious “through one form,” and thus are “opposites” of impious things (6d)

and,

- (*r*) The Gods are “at enmity with each other” (7b).

Since the Gods are at enmity with each other, they maintain incompatible loves such that some action, *x*, may be loved by one God and hated by another. This would imply that *x* is at

once pious and impious. But if the same action is both pious and impious, it is not pious “through one form.” Therefore, Euthyphro’s belief-set, $\{p, q, r\}$, is inconsistent. From this inconsistency, Socrates draws the conclusion that Euthyphro’s definition of piety is false (i.e., **not-p**), and recommends a revised definition which he subjects to a further *elenchos*.

Of course, on the standard model, Socrates is very obviously committing a logical error. I will return to this. First note that if the *elenchos* is supposed to result—as the standard model suggests—in a *refutation* of some given moral *proposition*, then Socrates gains knowledge at the close of every successful elenctic examination. Clearly, to show that p is false *is necessarily* to demonstrate the truth of **not-p**.

But if Socrates gains knowledge of some proposition at the close of every *elenchos*, how are we to understand his notorious disavowals of knowledge? This question has generated an assortment of theories of “Socratic irony.” Although accounts of Socratic irony vary in important respects, they share the common intuition that one need not take everything Socrates says to heart since he is often speaking unseriously. Typically, these theories take Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge to be quintessential examples of his irony. The problem is resolved.

However, there are several difficulties with an appeal to irony. Perhaps the most obvious trouble lies with the fact that the Socratic movement has yet to reach consensus regarding the conditions under which Socrates may correctly be said to speak ironically. Consequently, one gets no independent argument for the claim that Socrates’ disavowals are insincere. A further trouble—one which perhaps arises out of the first—is that the Socratic movement is unclear about the purpose to which Socrates uses irony. Hence, one is left wondering why Socrates so often claims to know nothing. Is Socrates joking? If so, why does he so often repeat this joke? Is Plato joking? Is he (Plato or Socrates) employing some rhetorical strategy?

It is clear that Plato employs an array of literary devices in his dialogues; however, in the absence of a strong account of *when* and *why* Socrates is being ironic, I'm not sure we should be so quick to follow those who dismiss Socrates' disavowals of knowledge as insincere. After all, Socrates claims in the *Apology* that his recognition of the worthlessness of "human wisdom" (23a) prompted him to start philosophizing. Moreover, Socrates' self-confessed ignorance is a theme running throughout the dialogues, early, middle, and late. Socrates seems to take his ignorance—and that of his interlocutors—quite seriously. Too seriously, perhaps, to allow dismissal in the absence of a solid argument.

Richard Kraut has recently proposed the general strategy of taking Socrates to be speaking sincerely as often as possible.⁷ Kraut's variation on the principle of charity seems advisable in this case. As I intend to show, the problem does not lie with Socrates' disavowal of knowledge, but rather with the picture of the *elenchos* which requires that we take his disavowals ironically.

I return now to the *logical* problem mentioned earlier. According to the standard model, Socrates believes that by revealing an inconsistency in his interlocutor's belief-set he has proven some particular component of that set false. That is, by showing that *p*, *q*, and *r* form an inconsistent set, Socrates believes that he has refuted *p*. This is a logical error. The incompatibility of {*p*, *q*, *r*} does not necessarily entail the falsity of *p*; therefore the demonstration that the set {*p*, *q*, *r*} is inconsistent is not sufficient for a refutation of *p*. The incompatibility entails that at least one proposition in the set is false, but does not indicate which one. An interlocutor may always choose to respond to the inconsistency by rejecting *q* or *r* (or both), thereby maintaining the initial claim, *p*.

Vlastos refers to this mistake as the "*elenchos* problem" (SS 21). Although others have been content to conclude that Plato was incompetent as a logician, Vlastos recognizes that neither Plato nor Socrates could have committed so basic an error. In response to the *elenchos* problem Vlastos proposes

the curious solution that Socrates *knows in advance* of the *elenchos* that his interlocutor's initial proposition, *p*, is false (SS 22). This suggestion fits well with the claim that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is ironic, but, again, there are problems lurking.

Vlastos's solution of the *elenchos* problem takes for granted our willingness to interpret Socrates' disavowals of knowledge ironically. Recall that our motivation for taking the disavowal ironically was that the model of the *elenchos* required it. On the standard model, Socrates gains knowledge with every *elenchos*; therefore, his claim to ignorance must be insincere. But now we are being asked to justify the model of the *elenchos* through an appeal to the irony of Socrates' disavowal. On the one hand, we take the disavowal ironically because we have accepted the model; on the other hand, we solve the *elenchos* problem and preserve the model by appealing to the irony of the disavowal. Though perhaps not exactly circular, the standard view rests upon dubious claims which rely upon each other for justification; what is required—but never provided—is an independent argument. This is philosophically unhappy, and we should try to do better.

THE *ELENCHOS* REVISED

I begin by reconstructing the standard model of the *elenchos*. The first step towards revision is the recognition that the *elenchos* is not a method of refuting moral propositions at all (or at least not primarily so). Rather, the *elenchos* is a method of challenging an interlocutor's *claim to know*. What the standard model fails to appreciate is that in the Platonic texts, Socrates' elenctic exchanges begin always with an interlocutor claiming to *know* something, *p*. Once someone makes a knowledge-claim, Socrates elicits further beliefs, *q* and *r*, and proceeds to show that {*p*, *q*, *r*} is inconsistent. The result of Socrates' demonstration, however, is *not* knowledge, but *aporia*. That is, Socrates does not conclude at the end of an elenctic exchange that **not-p**, but rather he con-

cludes that “S does not *know* that **p**.” Thus, at the end of his initial *elenchos* with Euthyphro, Socrates does *not* gain knowledge of the negation of Euthyphro’s definition of piety. Socrates’ demonstration that Euthyphro maintains an inconsistent belief-set instead shows that Euthyphro *has not proved that he has knowledge*. Clearly, the truth of the proposition “Euthyphro has failed to demonstrate his knowledge that **p**” is consistent with the truth of **p**, and does not constitute a refutation of **p**.

This revision may seem slight on its face, but its implications for our understanding of Socrates are far-reaching. Most obviously, the revised model avoids the difficulties raised by the Vlastosian model. According to the revised model, we need not develop speculative theories of “Socratic Irony” to explain away Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge. Furthermore, the revised model does not generate an “*elenchos* problem.” More importantly, the revised model does more than simply correct the Vlastosian picture; it undermines the whole of current Socratic philosophy. To show this, allow me to enumerate—in the manner of Vlastos—my own set of Socratic “theses.” I’ll confine myself to three.

UNDERSTANDING SOCRATES

Thesis 1: Socrates examines *lives*, not propositions.

On the revised model of the *elenchos*, Socrates is no longer examining propositions, he is—as he used to say—examining *lives*. That is, Socrates is not working at the level of propositional knowledge, he is not searching for some true moral proposition (as Vlastos insists), he is searching for someone who *knows*. Accordingly, he works at a *psychological* level, examining the *psyche* of his interlocutor. For if his interlocutor does in fact have the knowledge he professes, then Socrates will at long last have the resources to unravel the riddle of the Delphic Oracle. However, if his interlocutor is ignorant of his own ignorance (as is more likely), then Socrates must carry out his divine mission of exposing the

“worthlessness of human wisdom”; to be sure, this is a benefit to the interlocutors. In either case, Socrates fulfills his philosophical duty to the God.

Thesis 2: Socrates is not “exclusively” a moral philosopher.

Vlastos maintains that the Socrates of the early period is “exclusively a moral philosopher” (*IMP* 47), and consequently that the Socrates who articulates and defends the Theory of Forms is an invention of Plato’s later periods. I have proposed a model according to which the *elenchos* rests upon the specific epistemological and metaphysical theses expressed in the so-called “later” dialogues.

On the revised model, the *elenchos* relies upon the metaphysical theses that there are Forms and that objects “participate” in them. That is, if we attend to the texts, we find that the “early” Socrates’ “search for definitions” *presumes* some “late” Platonic principle like “All F-things are F through partaking in a single, common Form, F-ness.” This is why, for example, Meno fails in showing that he has knowledge of what virtue is—he cannot formulate an account of virtue by which all virtues have some one thing in common which is the source of their property of being virtuous. Far from a “Platonic” contrivance, the Forms, along with the participation thesis, are essential to the “early” Socrates’ philosophical method.

Additionally, the elenctic method presupposes a particular thesis regarding what it is to *know* something. Socrates’ method presumes that to *know* that *p* is to be able to give a complete *logos* of *p*. What it is to be able to provide a “complete” *logos* of *p*? At the very least, one who *knows* that *p* should be able to answer all of Socrates’ questions without contradicting himself. But this implies, of course, the “later” Platonic doctrine of the unity of knowledge: to know anything at all is, ultimately, to know all things. A complete *logos* of *p* would entail all true propositions.

Such a *logos* is, as Socrates suggests throughout the dialogues, beyond human epistemic powers. However, even

though our prospects for knowledge are dim, we do get from Socrates the assurance that *there are* objects to be known (i.e., the Forms). Although we may not gain access to these objects until after death, the thesis of participation guarantees that while we are alive some opinions are preferable to others—the propositions which can be given the most complete *logoi* are to be preferred, propositions which cannot be defended in argument are to be rejected.

That is to say that the Theory of Forms is *presupposed* by the elenctic method featured in the “early” dialogues. Far from being a moral philosopher to the exclusion of all else, the elenctic Socrates employs a sophisticated metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology.

Thesis 3: Socrates is democratic.

On the model I have proposed, the *elenchos* is not primarily a method for discerning moral truth. It may be asked, then, Why does Socrates practice *elenchos*? Why does he philosophize? The short answer is that Socrates practices elenctic philosophy in order to purge his interlocutors of their false claims to knowledge. But why is he interested in doing *this*? What is so problematic about ignorance of one’s own ignorance? These questions lead to my third, final, and perhaps most contentious thesis. I submit that, in practicing *elenchos*, Socrates furthers decidedly *democratic* objectives. Let me explain.

Prior to elenctic treatment, Socrates’ interlocutors are convinced that they *know* something they in fact do not know. Moreover, they think that this supposed *knowledge* affords them some special authority, some privilege, some elevated status, and, in extreme cases, some *right to command*. This authority *follows* from their supposed knowledge.

Of course, the principle that knowledge confers authority is non-controversial. Even the stalwart democrat may acknowledge that it would be unwise to select the captain of a ship through democratic popular election. The problem lies, rather, with the conception of knowledge adopted by Socrates’ interlocutors. Recall some common cases. Euthyphro

believes his knowledge derives from a special connection to the Gods; Meno believes his knowledge comes from having had a famous teacher; Protagoras believes his knowledge derives from his reputation; and the notorious Thrasymachus equates knowledge with the power to compel obedience.

Through elenctic examination, Socrates refutes his interlocutors' claims to know, leaving them in a state of *aporia*. However, the *elenchos* accomplishes more than this. In addition to purging the interlocutor of a false knowledge-claim, the *elenchos corrects* the interlocutor's conception of knowledge. It *replaces* a conception according to which the source of knowledge lies in something private and arbitrary with a conception according to which the sole criterion of knowledge is *logos* itself.

Thus the *elenchos* is not simply destructive. We can see this easily in the *Euthyphro*. In that dialogue, Euthyphro does not learn what piety is. But he does learn what a definition is, what an argument is, what it means to participate in an *inquiry*. He learns that one's knowledge of piety runs only as deep as one's *account* (*logos*) of piety, and that knowledge cannot be grounded in mystical, private experiences. Perhaps most importantly, Euthyphro learns that the search for knowledge is participatory, non-dogmatic, anti-authoritarian, and egalitarian. As knowledge is the sole justification for public authority, it follows that public authority too is participatory, non-dogmatic, anti-authoritarian, and egalitarian. In other words, Socrates teaches Euthyphro what democracy is. I end with this provocation.

NOTES

1. Citations to Vlastos will be parenthetical and will employ the following abbreviations:

SS = *Socratic Studies* (Cambridge 1994)

IMP = *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cornell 1991).

2. Vlastos, ed. *The Philosophy of Socrates: a Collection of Critical Essays* (UNDP 1971) contains the classic articles in the area. See also Benson, ed.

Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates (Oxford 1992) for a recent survey of the field of Socratic philosophy. Also of import are Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford 1977); Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (Oxford 1994); Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton 1984); and Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology* (Hackett 1989).

3. The account that follows is based upon Vlastos's "Socrates *contra* Socrates in Plato" (*IMP* 45–80).

4. I am grouping what are called "middle" and "later" dialogues together here.

5. After all, Plato goes to great lengths to indicate a *dramatic* order in most dialogues. If one feels the need to read the dialogues in a particular order, I suppose the *dramatic* chronology is best (i.e., *Parmenides* first and *Phaedo* last).

6. The account here follows Vlastos's "The Socratic Elenchus: Method is All" (*SS* 11).

7. See Kraut, "Reply to Clifford Orwin" in Griswold, ed. *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* (Routledge 1988), 178, "It would be . . . accurate to say that *as a general rule* I do take Socrates at his word. I adopt this approach because I insist upon textual evidence before I come to the conclusion that Socrates should not be taken to mean what he explicitly says."