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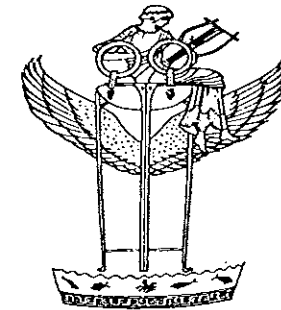
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SOCRATIC IGNORANCE AND SKEPTICISM

At least one aspect of Socratic philosophy might seem to show that he¹ is a skeptic—certainly the later skeptics thought of him as their intellectual predecessor;² he claims, on the authority of the notorious Delphic oracle to Chairephon, that he is the wisest of men, and yet he also confesses that he is wise in no way great or small. This profession of ignorance is, perhaps, the most frequently stated of all of the positions we have come to identify as Socrates'.³ And yet, as his trust in the oracle shows, Socrates does not think his own ignorance is unique, for he is, despite his ignorance, the wisest of men. Others, then, are not only as ignorant as Socrates; unlike Socrates, they are unaware of their ignorance – they are doubly ignorant (*Ap.* 20c6-23b4). If Socrates thinks that the best the wisest of men can achieve, cognitively, is an awareness of the completeness of one's own ignorance – single ignorance – then one might well suppose that surely Socrates was a skeptic.

In this paper, we will argue that the skeptical appearance of Socrates is itself deceiving – Socrates, on our view, was no

1. By Socrates in this paper, we mean only the character by that name in Plato's early dialogues.

2 For discussion, see Julia ANNAS, "Plato the Skeptic": in J. C. KLAGGE and N. D. SMITH (eds.), *Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues*, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy Supplement*, 1992.

3. For other examples of the profession of ignorance, see *Ap.* 21c1-3, 21d2-7, 23b2-4, *Charm.* 165b4-c2, 166c7-d6; *Euthphr.* 5a7-c5, 15c12, 15e5-16a4; *La.* 186b8-c5, 186d8-e3, 200e2-5; *Lysis* 212a4-7, 223b4-8; *Hip. Ma.* 286c8-e2, 304d4-e5; *Grg.* 509a4-6; *Meno* 71a1-7, 80d1-4; *Rep.* I.337e4-5.

skeptic. In the first part of this paper, we will attempt to establish this much clearly by enumerating various examples where Socrates either claims to have knowledge himself, or seems willing to grant others knowledge claims. If he were a skeptic, he could do neither of these things. In the second part of the paper, we will return to the evidence of Socrates' profession of ignorance, and attempt to sketch a position according to which he can make or grant the knowledge-claims that he does, and still profess his own ignorance.

Part 1: What Socrates Does Know

If Socrates were a skeptic, he should make no claims of knowledge, and he should grant or concede none. In fact, he rarely does concede or make claims of knowledge, but it is enough – to show that he is no skeptic – that he makes and concedes some such claims.

One claim in particular has received considerable recent attention from scholars: at *Apology* 29a4-b7, Socrates refuses to be intimidated by the threat of death he faces. He says no one knows what death will be like, and contrasts this ignorance with his *knowledge* (οἶδα) that it is evil and disgraceful to do wrong and disobey my superior, whether he be god or man (29b6-7). For good measure, he adds the strong suggestion that there are other things he knows: "So I will never fear or flee from those things which I do not know whether they are good or bad rather than evils which I know (οἶδα) are evils" (29b7-9). Later, when called upon to offer a counter-penalty, it is clear that he knows that some of the options to which the jurors vote might be attracted are evil:

Since, then, I am convinced that I have wronged no one, I certainly do not need to wrong myself, and to say of myself that I deserve anything evil, and to propose any penalty of that sort for myself. Why should I? So that I

not suffer the penalty that Meletus proposes, about which I say that I do not know whether it is a good thing or an evil? Shall I choose instead of that something which I know well (εὖ οἶδα) to be an evil? (*Ap.* 37b2-8)

These are not the only knowledge claims Socrates makes in the early dialogues, moreover. At *Euthydemus* 293b7-8, Socrates admits, under questioning by Euthydemus, that he does not lack knowledge:

Very well, he said, just answer. Do you know (ἐπίστασαι) anything?

Yes, I said, many things, but only little things (καὶ πολλὰ, μικρὰ γέ).

Later, Socrates claims to have known “long ago” that good people are not unjust (296e8-297a1).

Moreover, Socrates is not the only one with knowledge. In the *Gorgias*, he imagines a ship’s pilot contemplating the real value of his success in bringing his passengers safely home. Socrates says that the pilot *knows* (οἶδεν) that if any of his passengers is sick with serious and incurable diseases, the pilot’s good work has provided no benefit – indeed, such a passenger would be wretched for not having died at sea (512b1-2)! In the *Apology*, Socrates allows that craftsmen, though ignorant of what Socrates calls the greatest things (presumably, the moral virtues), actually know “many fine things” (πολλὰ καὶ καλὰ ἐπισταμένους) (22c9-d4). Even the most modest of skills is routinely credited as the product of some knowledge—for example, he counts the ability to swim as knowledge (ἐπιστήμη; *Gorgias* 511c4-5). The fact is that knowledge of “little things” is entirely common, according to Socrates – there are things that *anyone* could know (παντὸς ἀνδρὸς γινῶναι) in his opinion (see *Ion* 532d8-e3).

To these texts, we may add many others, in which Socrates does not explicitly claim knowledge, but does state positions in

ways that betray not the least epistemic qualification. He shows no trace of hesitation, for example, in insisting upon his innocence of the charges against him, for example.⁴ As Gregory Vlastos has commented, “[Socrates’] avowals of epistemic inadequacy, frequent in the early dialogues, are never paralleled by admission of moral failure; the asymmetry is striking”.⁵ For all Socrates says he doesn’t know, he certainly shows himself to be magnificently confident in his convictions – so confident, indeed, that he was plainly willing to die for them. If Socrates were committed to a skeptical view of human cognitive potential, we should expect his opinions to be presented without such extraordinary conviction, and he certainly should not make and grant to others explicit claims of knowledge.

Part 2: What Socrates Does Not Know

Of course, it is still possible that Socrates holds inconsistent views. Indeed, it might be thought that a skeptical Socrates would be less embarrassed by this than a dogmatic version: at least a skeptic doesn’t claim to *know* what he’s talking about. In fact, various aspects of Socrates way of life might lead us to expect him to be inconsistent sometimes. He says that “the unexamined life is not worth living for human beings” (*Apology* 38a5-6), and yet it seems clear that the most obvious product of Socratic examination is the exposure of one’s ignorance by the discovery of some inconsistency in one’s views.⁶ If Socrates

4. For discussion of the epistemological significance of Socrates’ confidence at his trial, see T. C. BRICKHOUSE and N. D. SMITH, *Socrates on Trial* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 100-108.

5. Gregory VLASTOS, “Socrates Disavowal of Knowledge”, *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985), p. 6 n. 14.

6. For discussions, see Hugh BENSON, “The Problem of the Elenchus Reconsidered”, *Ancient Philosophy* 7 (1987), 67-85, and “A

continues to think that the "examined life" is worth living for himself, it seems entirely likely that it is (at least) because he suspects the existence of inconsistencies within his views.⁷ And this is not just a theoretical possibility; Socrates actually sometimes describes himself as confused (see, for example, *Hip. Mi.* 376b8-c6).

But for all of his characteristic epistemological modesty, and for all that he may sometimes find himself confused, Socrates is none the less plainly troubled by any inconsistency in his philosophical positions. In fact, he contrasts the value of his own views with what he finds in others precisely on the ground that his love for philosophy makes him better than others at maintaining consistency in his views (see *Gorgias* 481d1-482c3). So before we characterize him as holding inconsistent views, perhaps we should look more closely at the views that appear to us to generate the inconsistency.

To resolve the paradox of Socrates' profession of ignorance, we must either find that his profession of ignorance is not what it appears to be, or else we must find that the claims of knowledge he makes and grants are not what they appear to be. Scholars have tried both of these approaches. One traditional resolution has been to reject the profession of ignorance as insincere. The advantage of this solution is obvious: the profession of ignorance will no longer conflict with Socrates' recognition of various examples of human knowledge (especially his own).

Note on Eristic and the Socratic Elenchus", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27 (1989), 591-600.

7. This is one of many reasons to be suspicious of the account of the Socratic *ἐλεγχος* given by Gregory VLASTOS in "The Socratic Elenchus", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983), 27-58, in which we are told that Socrates regarded all of his beliefs as consistent. For more detailed criticisms of Vlastos's account, see T. C. BRICKHOUSE and N. D. SMITH, "Vlastos on the Elenchus", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 2 (1984), 185-95.

But recent scholarship rejects this solution,⁸ and we think rightly. Precisely because the profession of ignorance is so frequently repeated by Socrates, if *this* turns out not to be something Socrates is sincere about, it is difficult to see what *else* we might be able to attribute to Socrates from what he says about his views in Plato. If Socrates can dissemble about this, why should we not suppose that he does not dissemble about anything else—or, for that matter, *everything* else?

An example of the other sort of resolution that has often been offered is to characterize Socrates' epistemological confidence as only strongly held (even true) beliefs.⁹ But the fact is that he also makes and grants too many explicit claims of knowledge to make such an interpretation plausible. The fact is, Socrates thinks he has knowledge of "many things", even if only "little ones". And he is entirely prepared to recognize others as having knowledge of various kinds, as well. This way out of the paradox, then, works only by ignoring the texts where Socrates specifically identifies his own and others' cognitions as *knowledge*. So, either of the more popular ways out of the paradox requires us either to disbelieve or discount explicit claims Socrates makes.

8. See, e.g. Scott AUSTIN "The Paradox of Socratic Ignorance (How to Know That You Don't Know)," *Philosophical Topics* 15 (1987), 23-34; T. BRICKHOUSE and N. SMITH, *Plato's Socrates* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 30-45; T. IRWIN, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 39-40; J. LESHER, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987), 275-88; G. VLASTOS, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge," *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985), 1-31; P. WOODRUFF, "Plato's Early Theory of Knowledge," in S. EVERSON (ed.), *Companions to Ancient Thought I: Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 60-84.

9. See, for examples, T. IRWIN, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 40-41; M. BURNYEAT, "Examples in Epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus, and G. E. Moore", *Philosophy* 52 (1977), 381-398; G. SANTAS, *Socrates: Philosophy in Plato's Early Dialogues* (London and Boston: Routledge, 1979), 120 and 311 n. 26.

But more sophisticated solutions have also been offered, in which scholars have proposed to take all such texts into account, but to understand them in novel ways. Vlastos, for example, has proposed that we distinguish two senses of knowledge for Socrates, elenctic knowledge (which he identifies as knowledge[e]) and certain knowledge (which he identifies as knowledge[c]). Knowledge[e] is fallible and incomplete, but it is the best one can get from the best of human cognitive instruments – the Socratic ἔλεγχος. Knowledge[c] is infallible and certain; it is the knowledge had by gods. But it is not a kind of knowledge had by Socrates, and since Socrates is the “wisest of men”, it is nothing any mere human has. When Socrates disclaims knowledge and professes ignorance, he disclaims knowledge[c]; when Socrates claims to have knowledge or grants it to others, he claims or grants only knowledge[e].

Although we are inclined to agree that there are two sorts of knowledge in Socrates’ claims and disclaimers, and, hence, agree to this much of Vlastos’s account, we believe his characterizations of the relevant sorts of knowledge are deeply flawed. For one thing, not *once* in the early dialogues does Socrates plainly identify something he knows as a product of his ἔλεγχος.¹⁰ In fact, we never so much as see an elenctic argument about any of the specific knowledge claims we have found Socrates making. So there is no particular reason to think that any of the knowledge claims he makes is actually a product of the ἔλεγχος. Moreover, it is particularly doubtful that the ἔλεγχος is responsible for the knowledge claims he grants to the ship’s pilot in the *Gorgias*, the craftsmen in the *Gorgias* and *Apology*, or to anyone at all, in the *Ion*. In the case of the crafts men, presumably their crafts are responsible for the craft-knowledge

10. We owe this point to Shigeru YONEZAWA, who pointed this out to us, as a criticism of our own initial inclination to accept Vlastos’s account of Socrates’ knowledge claim at *Ap.* 29b6-7 in *Socrates on Trial* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 131.

they possess. In other cases, Socrates seems to be relying on something like a notion of common knowledge – surely knowledge that *anyone* might have is of this sort. Many scholars have argued that the ἔλεγχος could produce knowledge, and we do not wish to deny this.¹¹ On the other hand, we are disinclined to think that the ἔλεγχος can be responsible for all of the knowledge Socrates has or grants to others.

Moreover, Vlastos’s knowledge[e] comes with the qualification that its possessor cannot be certain about what he or she knows. We find no trace of this qualification in Socrates’ own claims of knowledge, nor can we find it when he grants knowledge to others. Socrates is so certain about the most famous of his own knowledge claims (the one at *Apology* 29b6-7) that he is plainly willing to die for it, and to set himself against what he imagines is the collective will of the jurors. We suggest that a closer look at what Socrates disclaims will disclose not that he professes always to lack *certainly*, but that he professes only to lack the kind of knowledge that would make him able to claim wisdom. In brief, we find Socrates disclaiming not all knowledge, but only the sort that is constitutive of wisdom. What knowledge he has may be as certain as knowledge can be—but it does not make him wise.

If we look at Socrates’ actual disclaimers, we will often find that, in fact, it is explicitly wisdom that he disclaims. In some of the most famous of these disclaimers, for example the one at *Apology* 21b4-5, where he claims to be “wise in no way great or small,” he soon enough does begin to use words for “knowledge” interchangeably with the word for “wisdom,” namely σοφία. In context, however, it is plain that what he means by “knowledge” is the same as what he means by “wisdom.” But sometimes wisdom is not explicitly at issue, for example, in the famous passage in the *Gorgias* in which Socrates claims to have

11. Indeed, we are among those who have argued for this – see our *Plato’s Socrates* (*op. cit.*), 16-27, 41-42.

reasons of iron and adamant for his position, but then none the less goes on immediately to profess ignorance. The precise way he makes his profession is interesting, though:

These things which have been made apparent to us in our earlier arguments, as I say, are held down and fastened, if I may put it in a somewhat boorish way, by reasons of iron and adamant; so at least it seems so far. And if you, or someone more vigorous than you, doesn't release them, no one who speaks in a way other than I now speak can speak well. What I say is always the same, that I do not know how it is (οὐκ οἶδα ὅπως ἔχει), but of those I happen to meet, just as now, no one has been able to speak otherwise without being ridiculous. (*Grg.* 508e6-509a7)

Vlastos understand this passage as disclaiming certain knowledge (knowledge{c}) of the truth of the proposition he has been disputing with Callicles—that is it better to suffer than to do evil. Vlastos does not consider the possibility that Socrates might be disavowing something other than *that* what has been established in the argument with Callicles is true, though he translates the passage well enough. Paul Woodruff, however, who also sees a special kind of knowledge at work in Socrates' disclaimer (what Woodruff calls "expert knowledge"), translates Socrates' disclaimer simply as Socrates claiming, "I do not know that these things are so."¹² But in disclaiming to know ὅπως ἔχει, which we have translated as "how it is," is Socrates disclaiming knowledge that it is, or something different?

Of course, it is possible that Socrates does not think he knows *that* his own position is true—he does leave it open that Callicles or someone more vigorous than Callicles might "release" his iron and adamant reasons. Of course, it doesn't necessarily follow from this that Socrates' cognitive state would

12. See WOODRUFF (*op. cit.*), 5.

change as a result—not, that is, unless we can show that Socrates accepts an epistemology in which knowledge is conditioned on one having something like sufficient reasons as justifications for one's beliefs. This sort of theory has been assumed within scholars' interpretations of Socratic epistemology, but never directly argued for, as far as we know.

But whether or not Socrates does or does not think he knows *that* his position is correct, it is not explicitly this knowledge that Socrates disclaims here. He explicitly disclaims knowing *how* it is. A moment's consideration of what this might imply will open the possibility that Socrates might be disclaiming something like understanding – where one may or may not know *that* something is the case, but will not really be in a position to explain *why* it is, *how* it is, or account for its being the way it is. Our suggestion – and given the time limitations for today's presentation, it must remain only a suggestion—is that when Socrates disclaims knowing ὅπως ἔχει, he is disclaiming the sort of knowledge that would constitute wisdom. We believe that a careful review of the texts will show that when Socrates makes his famous disclaimers of knowledge, he can always be understood as disclaiming wisdom, either directly, as we find in the *Apology*, or indirectly (but none the less obviously enough), by disclaiming a kind of knowledge that would plainly give its possessor wisdom. That kind of knowledge does not simply provide information, or even provide it and secure it with reasons "or iron and adamant." It also provides its possessor with the means to *understand* and hence *explain* how it is that this information could be so. Socrates' interest in this sort of knowledge is plain enough from his search for definitions and explanations from his interlocutors. It is also plain that the sorts of knowledge he claims to have and grants to others does not provide understanding and wisdom to those who possess such knowledge – it is precisely Socrates' point, in the *Ion* passage in which he recognizes that anyone might know the things he knows, that such knowledge is undistinguished. In the *Euthydemus* passage we cited earlier (293b7-8), Socrates is careful to

say that what he knows is trivial and small, relative to the knowledge he wishes he could have.

According to the position we have sketched here, Socrates claims to know a few things, and shows no reluctance in attributing knowledge to others. But he regards his own and others' knowledge as trifling and insignificant, for none of it amounts to wisdom (and, hence, the knowledge that is constitutive of wisdom). The remains no paradox, if we are right, since anyone can know something but still lack wisdom. But one who makes such claims can nevertheless not count as a skeptic.

Socrates' disclaimer of wisdom has made him seem to ancient and modern skeptics alike as a precursor. If we are right, the similarity is only apparent, for the knowledge he disclaims is not the knowledge skeptical doubts assail – it is a kind of knowledge even dogmatists have often doubted mere mortals can have.

Thomas C. BRICKHOUSE
Department of Philosophy, Lynchburg College

Nicholas D. SMITH
Department of Philosophy, Michigan State University

WAS SOCRATES A SKEPTIC ?

Socrates is well known for his low opinion of human cognitive capacities. In the *Apology* for instance he says that human wisdom is worth little or nothing¹. He interprets the Delphic oracle's statement that he is the wisest of men to mean, "He among you is the wisest who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is really worth nothing at all"². If Socrates is wiser than others, it is only because they, although having no knowledge, think they do, but he having no knowledge, does not think that he does.³ Such talk naturally gives rise to the question, "Was Socrates a skeptic?"

This question can be understood in a number of ways. First, it can be understood in what we might term "the personal sense". In this sense, a statement refers only to the speaker. Often it is not very interesting. I don't know a thing about elementary particles is informative about the limitations of my experience with the world, but it is uninformative about the world itself, and equally uninformative about the human capacity to grasp the world. So if Socrates were to say "I know nothing except that I know nothing" and to mean by this only that he knows nothing, there would be little reason to pay attention to the claim except perhaps to note that one of the most influential thinkers of all time had a quite dismal view of his conceptual holdings.

1. 23A7.

2. *Ap.* 23B2-4.,

3. *Ap.* 2; D2-6. BRICKHOUSE and SMITH list nineteen passages in which Socrates professes ignorance. *Socrates on Trial* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1989), p. 100, note 85.