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NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge

Socrates steadfastly disavowed knowledge, or so say Plato, Aristotle, Aeschines, and Diogenes Laertius. In the eyes of the later sceptics, Socrates' refusal to claim knowledge represented a signal contribution to philosophy. Yet Socrates has often not been taken at his word; some (e.g., Norman Gulley) have viewed Socratic claims to ignorance as mere pretence, while others (e.g., W. K. C. Guthrie) have cautioned that there were limits to the ignorance Socrates claimed. More recently, Gregory Vlastos has called for a radical re-interpretation of Socrates' disavowals on the grounds that a straightforward reading would conflict with several texts in which Socrates either affirms or implies that he does know *some* things.¹ I begin by considering the merits of Vlastos' proposal and then attempt to separate what Socrates claimed he knew from what he denied he knew. In the process we may hope to illuminate some basic assumptions of his epistemology and theory of virtue.

1.

Vlastos begins by rejecting two recent interpretations of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge: (1) Socrates does not mean what he says (quoting Norman Gulley), "Socrates' profession of ignorance is merely an expedient to encourage his interlocutors to seek out the truth"²; and (2) Socrates means what he says (paraphrasing Terry Irwin), "Socrates has renounced knowledge and is content to claim no more than true belief."³ Against the first view Vlastos

I am indebted to L. Jost, M. M. Mackenzie, Raymond Martin, and Gregory Vlastos for their criticisms of an earlier draft. On this as on so many other aspects of Socratic philosophy, we are indebted to Gregory Vlastos for having brought into such sharp focus these fundamental questions about the meaning of Socrates' teaching.

¹ Gregory Vlastos, "Socrates' Disavowal of knowledge," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35, No. 138 (January 1985): 1–31. A similar thesis had been presented, but not defended at length, in Vlastos' earlier study, "The Paradox of Socrates," in *The Philosophy of Socrates* (New York, 1971).

² *The Philosophy of Socrates* (1968), 69.

³ Terence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (1974), 39–40.

argues that such pretence would be at odds with the "first rule in elenctic dialogue. . . 'say what you believe'" (4), that professions of ignorance often come too late in the debate to serve as encouragement, and that the soliloquy of the *Apology* (with no interlocutor to encourage) repeats the same refrain, ". . . he having no knowledge, thinks he knows something, while I, having none, don't think I have any" (21D).

Against the second, Vlastos argues that a Socratic willingness to settle for true belief would make his persistent search for knowledge "a charade" and, in view of Socrates' linking of knowledge and virtue, undermine his claims to possess virtue and happiness (*Gorgias* 522D, *Apology* 37B, *Phaedo* 117B, C). Moreover, Socrates *does* sometime claim to have knowledge: "But to do injustice and disobey my superior, god or man, this I know [*oida*] to be evil and base" (*Apology* 29B 6), and he occasionally attributes knowledge to others. How could Socrates have held that others knew without taking himself to have known the things he credits them with knowing?

The disavowal of knowledge must be devoid of pretence, yet the claims to knowledge must be sincere. Having fully boxed Socrates into an inconsistency, Vlastos offers a path out: the sense of "know" in "I know nothing" is *not* the same sense as the sense of "know" in "I know that disobedience to a superior is evil and base" (or any of Socrates' other specific claims to knowledge). Socrates, in other words, makes "a dual use of his words for knowing": "When declaring that he knows absolutely nothing he is referring to that very strong sense in which philosophers had used them before and would go on using them long after—where one says one knows only where one is claiming certainty. This would leave him free to admit that he does have moral knowledge in a radically weaker sense—the one required by his own maverick method of philosophical inquiry, the elenchus" (12). So, where knowledge_C = infallible or certain knowledge, and knowledge_E = knowledge achieved as the result of elenchus, Socrates may consistently claim both "I know_C nothing" and "I know_E that disobedience to a superior is evil" (and any other truths that elenctic inquiry might reveal). This way out of the inconsistency would serve also to explain Socrates' perplexing practice of saying that he didn't *know* (i.e., know_C) even after he had proved some particular thesis to be true, the prevailing view (of knowledge as infallible) requiring him to mark as falling short what had merely been put through some tests by some persons on some occasion.⁴ Thus the little hu-

⁴ The dual use hypothesis would in addition enable us to extricate Socrates from the squeeze of 'Geach's Paradox': if not knowing what the F is entails that one cannot know whether F is truly predicable of anything whatever, then it is useless to try to discover what the F is by investigating examples of it. For if the knowledge Socrates claims to have is merely knowledge_E

man wisdom Socrates believed he had been vouchsafed by the Delphic oracle is actually knowledge_E; knowledge_C on the other hand, is reserved for the gods. That Socrates characteristically denied knowledge (C) rather than claimed knowledge (E) can be explained by his conception of teaching, one that harks back to Heraclitus: not to teach or to claim assent as an authority, “but to provoke, to tease, to mock, to perplex, to taunt his listeners to ponder what it is he is hinting at by using words that do and don’t say what he means” (31).

So much by way of an outline of the inconsistency in Socrates’ remarks about knowledge and the general character of Vlastos’ solution. Should we accept this way out? The problem of inconsistency is serious and central in Socrates’ teaching, but there are serious objections to both the premisses and conclusion of Vlastos’s main argument.

That argument rests on the manifest finitude and uncertainty of the Socratic elenctic method: what had been proven to be true to the satisfaction of some individuals on some occasion on the basis of what appeared to them at the time to be true has obviously not been proved with certainty. Thus, there is a degree of “uncertainty built into his instrument of research which infects all its findings” (19). When Socrates links the exercise of the admittedly imperfect elenchus with his own fear of erroneously thinking that he might know (*Charmides* 166 C–D), Vlastos senses the presence of ‘elenctic knowledge’: “In saying that this fear fuels his elenctic searching he reveals his haunting sense of the insecurity of knowledge_E—his awareness that in respect of certainty it is the diametrical opposite of knowledge_C” (19). When therefore Socrates claims to know various things (as at *Apology* 29B), we must take him to mean “know_E” since the only justification he could offer would be that the thesis either has been or could be justified (but not *proven*) through the elenchus. The elenchus cannot produce certainty, knowledge entails certainty, Socrates employs the elenchus and yet claims knowledge, hence, the knowledge claimed by Socrates must be ‘knowledge’ in some special sense.

But Socrates need not have responded to the limitations of his elenctic route to knowledge by carving off a special, inferior, sense of “know.” It would be one thing to recognize the limitations of the method, but quite another for him to decide on how to compensate for those limitations.

Judging from what Plato says elsewhere, the particular compensation

then it is false to say that not knowing F entails not knowing that F is predicable of anything; one could know, elenctically, that a predicate either applied or did not apply to a thing even if one did not have the definition fully in view.

which Vlastos supposes Socrates to have made, multiplying senses of "know," is not one we should have expected from Socrates. In the *Euthydemus* (278) and *Charmides* (163), Socrates belittles making distinctions in the style of Prodicus, and in the *Meno* he resists Meno's attempt to pluralize the virtues (71).⁵ In several early dialogues, he defends a principle of 'semantic monism': that whenever we employ a word, there is a single quality designated by that term which, once properly identified, can serve as a distinguishing mark for all the things designated by that term (*Meno* 72C, *Euthyphro* 6E, *Laches* 192, *Hippias Major*, 288). So multiplication of senses of "know" would be thoroughly 'un-Socratic'.

In any event, the limitations of the elenchus do not necessitate such semantic proliferation. Consider as a parallel the vexing uncertainties of automobile repair. Who among us is unaware of the yawning gulf between the techniques and personnel available for repairing our car and our car's actually being repaired? Prudence recognizes the uncertainties of car repair, television service, or home improvements generally, and the fallibility of individual workers, and prepares for delay and frustration. But if the assumption underlying Vlastos' interpretation of Socrates' remarks were generalized, then my recognition of a gap (between what our method provides and what our objective is) would require me to redefine my objective. If, having recognized the uncertainty and fallibility of automobile repair, I claimed that my car had finally been repaired, you would have to understand me to mean only "my car has finally been uncertainly repaired" or "my car has finally been probably repaired." But this proliferation of inferior senses of "repaired" is uncalled for. I may readily (if sadly) accommodate the possibility of error by qualifying my claim in some way: "I think (or I believe) that my car has finally been repaired, but with these things (or these car repairmen) one never knows." So Socrates could have qualified his claim to knowledge by asserting "I think (or I believe) that I know but I would not claim to know that I know." In short, he may hedge his bet about knowing *not* by redefining what the word "know" means, but merely by claiming that

⁵ Vlastos relegates the *Meno* to the middle group of the Platonic dialogues where "both method and doctrine are Plato's" (p.2). This is, I think, controversial and potentially significant, since the *Meno* contains an explicit discussion of the nature of knowledge. While some aspects of the *Meno* are almost certainly Platonic (e.g., the doctrine of recollection, the fascination with geometrical proof and analysis), it is an exaggeration to say that there is nothing characteristically Socratic in the *Meno*. Meno's error of definition by enumeration is paralleled in early dialogues (e.g., *Euthyphro* 5D) as is the principle of semantic monism (e.g., at *Euthyphro* 6E). While the *Meno's* distinction between knowledge and true opinion is not stated in any early dialogue, it is at least implicitly accepted in the *Euthyphro*, where Euthyphro's wandering opinions (again likened to the works of Daedalus) undercut his claim to expert knowledge.

he merely thinks or believes that he knows. Since Plato's Socrates had it well within his capacity to distinguish between knowing and merely thinking that he knew, as well as between knowing and knowing that he knew (both distinctions are already articulated in the *Charmides*⁶), he had it well within his capacity to respond to the possibility of error without embracing, or even hinting at, a second, radically weaker sense of "know." Once this is recognized, Vlastos' main reason for reading Socrates' "I know" as I know_E is vitiated: the limitations of the elenchus do not *necessitate* a redefinition of "know."

Moreover, Socrates does not speak of knowing (even his own knowing) in the tentative, fallibilistic way that elenctic knowledge would require. On two occasions when he unabashedly claims to know (*Meno* 98b, *Apology* 29) he shows no sign of thinking that this *knowledge* might be overturned on further reflection, or is in any way 'infected with uncertainty': "it is not, I am sure, a mere guess to say that right opinion and knowledge are different. There are few things that I should claim to know, but that at least is among them, whatever else is" (Guthrie trans.). Not only is his claim to know made with some emphasis (*ou panu eikadzein*) but the very feature of knowledge that allows Socrates to distinguish here between knowledge and true opinion is that knowledge is stable (*monimos*), tied down by reasoning, whereas opinion, even true opinion, can slip away. Had Socrates been tempted to countenance an unstable 'elenctic knowledge' subject to revision and to renunciation in the light of further argument, he would have lost the one distinctive trait of knowledge that allowed him to distinguish knowledge from mere true opinion. While the *Meno* may in some ways reflect a distinctively Platonic view of knowledge (one that aspires to the deductive certainty of the geometers) even the Socrates of the *Apology* speaks of his knowledge as a secure possession: (a) "I shall never (*oudepote*) feel more fear or aversion for something which, for all I know, may really be a blessing, than for evils which I know to be evils" (29 B7-9). (b) Should I propose something I very well know (*eu oida*) to be bad? (37 B7-8).

Far from flirting with "fallibilist, corrigible knowledge," Socrates speaks here of his knowledge of evils as sure and reliable over the long run, moral Archimedean fixed points from which other actions follow, and other issues derive their resolution. Vlastos' conclusion must therefore also be jettisoned; Socrates appears to think of his knowledge, limited though it may be, as

⁶ 167 A4-5: *oietai men eidenai, oiden d'ou*; 170D 1-3: *eidenai hoti oiden kai hoti ouk oiden*. When Socrates explains his own stake in the practice of elenchus, he puts it in just these terms, fearing that without noticing it, *oiomenos men ti eidenai. eidōs de mē* (166 D 1-2)

fixed and secure. The hypothesis of a Socratic 'elenctic knowledge' should therefore be rejected.

2.

Yet the problem remains: Socrates claims to have some knowledge and yet denies that he has it. Within the *Apology* alone, Socrates claims knowledge (on both moral and non-moral matters) no less than nine times:

- (1) "It is impossible to know (*eidenai*) the names of my accusers except when one of them happens to be a writer of comedies" (18D).
- (2) "You know (*iste*) the kind of man Meletus was—impetuous" (20E).
- (3) "I know of myself (*sunoida*) that I am wise in neither much nor little" (21B).
- (4) "I knew of myself (*xunēidē*) that I was skilled (*epistamenōi*) in nothing" (22D).
- (5) "I know (*oida*) pretty well I am making myself hated" (24A).
- (6) "To do injustice and disobey . . . this I know (*oida*) to be evil and base" (29B).
- (7) [I will never prefer] "things which I know (*oida*) are evils" (29B).
- (8) "Should I propose something I know very well (*eu oida*) to be bad?" (37 B7–8).
- (9) "Well I know (*eu oida*) that wherever I go, the young will listen to my talk" (37D).

It would be tedious to list the many similar passages from other early dialogues; it is abundantly clear that Socrates commonly claims knowledge for himself and attributes it to others (e.g., *Crito* 47B, the expert knowledge of the trainers; *Apology*, 22D, the expert knowledge of the craftsmen) on moral as well as non-moral matters.⁷ Whatever Aeschines and Aristotle might have believed about Socrates, if we think that the Platonic Socrates claimed never to have known anything, we reduce Plato's depiction, and Socratic philosophy, to an inconsistent hash of ideas.

First, we need to set aside the idea that Socrates ever declared that he knew absolutely nothing. Socrates' claims to ignorance are almost always restricted to the particular topic at hand ("knowing nothing at all about

⁷ I do not share Vlastos' assumption that since Socrates imputed knowledge to others then he must have been convinced that he himself knew. Suppose that Susan, a colleague I know to be an expert on Spanish history, is asked to name all the former kings of Spain. When Susan smiles, claps her hands, and prepares to answer, I might well believe that she knows the names of all the kings of Spain, even though I do not know them, and do not believe that I do either. Our beliefs about the state of others' knowledge might be based less on our own information about the matter in question and more on the person's general intelligence, competence, and reliability. Even when (as in Vlastos' example from *Protagoras* 357D–E) what one imputes to another is knowing that p (e.g., that wrong action done without knowledge is done because of ignorance), it still does not follow that Socrates must have thought he knew what he credited another with knowing. If, for example, Socrates held that knowing required "being able to give and receive a *logos*," he might well have believed that someone else could do this (and hence know) even if he could not (and hence did not know). In short, Socratic imputations of knowledge to others do not logically require corresponding Socratic claims to Socratic knowledge.

virtue" [*Meno* 71 D]; "not knowing what beauty itself is" [*Hippias Major* 304 B]; "no longer acting through ignorance about divine matters [*Euthyphro* 16 A], etc.). In only two cases might his remarks be taken as implying an unrestricted scepticism, and even in those, small loopholes remain. In the first case ("It seems neither of us knows anything of moral excellence" [lit.: knows the fine and the good, *ouden kalon kagathon eidenai*], but he thinks he knows something while he actually doesn't, whereas, as I don't actually know, neither do I think I do [*hōsper oun ouk oida, oude oiomai*, *Apology* 21 D] Vlastos translates "I having none, don't think I have any," which is misleading, unless we remember the moral context. Socrates clearly disavows knowledge about the *kalos* and *agathos*, but nothing more.

In the second case (*Apology* 22 D), Socrates contrasts himself with the artisans he is about to examine for possession of *sophia*, crediting them with knowing (or perhaps "being skilled in") many fine things: "For I knew about myself [*xunēidē*] that I knew hardly anything at all (*ouden epistamenōi, hōs epos eipein*), but I knew [*ēide*] that I would find that they knew many fine things [*polla kai kala epistamenous*]." The *epistēmē* at stake here may not count strictly speaking as knowledge ("skilled," "artistic abilities" are equally legitimate options), but even if it does Socrates leaves the door slightly ajar: hardly any knowledge (*hōs epos eipein* serves the same limiting function at 17A 3 where Socrates claims "They have said hardly anything at all true" (*kaitoi alēthes ge, epos eipein ouden eirēkasin*). In short, any suggestion that the Platonic Socrates embraced a total scepticism, claimed that he knew absolutely nothing, can be set aside.

Did Socrates then claim an "absolute moral ignorance"? It seems clear that this is how Vlastos reads several key passages,⁸ and there is other evidence that points in this direction. In the *Meno*, Socrates admits: "I confess to my shame that I have no knowledge at all about virtue" (*ouk eidōs peri aretēs to parapan*, 71 D).

How then, in the face of such pervasive moral scepticism are we to explain *Apology* 29: "I know (*oida*) injustice and disobedience to a superior, god or man is wrong (*kakon*) and shameful (*aischron*)" and those somewhat more oblique reference to the evils he knows to be evils (*tōn kakōn hōn oida hoti kaka estin* (29B), *hōn eu oida hoti kakōn* (37B 7–8). We have several options. First, it is tempting to wonder whether Socrates sensed a distinction between knowing and claiming to know. Armed with it, he could have neatly danced between the horns of his dilemma. He could insist that no one ought to be credited with knowledge until he possessed the essential definition, but without being committed to holding that one ought ever to *claim to know* while lacking an

⁸ Vlastos' texts T6–T8 (*Gorgias* 509 A, *Apology* 21 B 2–5, 21 D 2–6).

essential definition. For this additional thesis one would need the additional premise that one is permitted to *claim to know* only where one actually *knows*, a thesis Socrates never states. He could have denied that he (or anyone else) knew anything about morality, and still legitimately *claim* to have known something about morality, on the grounds that sometimes one has to make a claim even if one is not in a position to authenticate, corroborate, or accept it.⁹ But this first gambit is unconvincing. There is nothing in Plato's text on which to pin any of it; distinctions between the logic of first and third person knowledge ascriptions and the logic of claims are alien to Plato's text.

Second, we must at least consider the possibility of Platonic misrepresentation. Perhaps the portrait in the *Apology* was intended to correct what Plato regarded as an overly sceptical but widely accepted "know-nothing" version of Socratic philosophy. In stark contrast with the image of a Socrates who never takes a stand, the *Apology* contains not just one but several dozen passages in which Socrates unhesitatingly states his deepest moral convictions. Plato's attribution of claims to moral knowledge to Socrates could be seen as part of the larger effort to counteract the suggestion that Socrates was as nihilistic about moral values as were some sophists. Less flatteringly, the inconsistency might reflect Platonic inattention to the principles of Socratic philosophy, a careless attribution of knowledge when strictly speaking only true belief ought to have been ascribed. Vlastos himself argued (in the debate over the civic absolutism of the *Crito*) that Plato's rhetoric must occasionally be discounted and so, for different reasons did George Grote a century earlier. But this 'solution' would resolve a Socratic inconsistency at the cost of creating a Platonic one.

3.

There is, I think, a better way out: Socrates' denials of moral knowledge are denials of knowledge concerning the truth of certain basic theses *about virtue, the good, and the noble*, and are therefore compatible with claims to knowledge *about the moral character of specific actions*. To see how one negative claim can be compatible with another positive one, we should look first at the denials of *sophia* that characterize 'Socratic ignorance' in the *Apology*.¹⁰

⁹ See A. R. White's "On Claiming to Know," *The Philosophical Review* 66 (1957): 180-92.

¹⁰ Vlastos' unwillingness to countenance a distinction between *sophia* and various verbs for knowing seems to be based on his belief that *epistēmē* and *sophia* can be used interchangeably (as at *Apology* 19C6: "I mean no disrespect for such knowledge (*epistēmē*), if anyone really is versed (*sophos*) in it" (Tredennick). *Sophia* however had a long standing connotation of special skill, expertise, a high degree of competence in a field, and the fact that someone could be *sophos* in a particular *epistēmē* could hardly prove interchangeability *salva veritate*. Expertise may imply knowledge, but not every piece of knowledge makes one an expert.

- (1) "I certainly [*dē egōge*] do not know [*epistamai*] this [sc. the wisdom others claim to have], and anyone who says that I do is a liar and slanderer" (20E).
- (2) "For I know about myself [*sunoida*] that I am wise [*sophos*] about neither much nor little" (21B).
- (3) "So that many slanders have arisen from these animosities, including this way of describing me as being wise [*sophos*]" (23A).
- (4) "Socrates knows [*egnōken*] that with respect to wisdom [*sophia*] he is really worth nothing" (23B).

Socrates bristles at the suggestion that he is *sophos*, has *sophia*, or is a *sophistēs*. So he had been called years earlier by Aristophanes (compare 18B6–7; *hōs estin tis Sōkratēs sophos anēr*). Explaining that the practice of questioning others about their claims to expertise, and moreover routinely refuting them, would naturally give rise to the belief that he had the wisdom they lacked (*sophon ha an allon exelenchō*, 23A4–5), Socrates attempts to divorce himself from wisdom and from its eponymous practitioners. Proceeding through *sophia* of various kinds, he rejects each in turn: the *sophia* of Ionian science (*tēn toiautēn epistēmēn, ei tis peri tōn toioutōn sophos estin*, 19C6), the perfection of human and social qualities claimed by Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, and Paros as their special *technē* and *sophia* (19e–20c), the *sophia* of the politician (21C) and others renowned for their *sophia* (21E), the supposed interpretive *sophia* of the poets (*hoti ou sophiai poioien ha poioien*, 22C), and finally the *sophia* of the artists and craftsmen (*tēn ekeinōn sophian*, 22E). In the terms of any of the varieties of *sophia* recognized in late fifth century Athens, Socrates' position is constant and logically consistent: he claims *sophia* in none of them.

Chaerephon's report of the oracle's attribution of *sophia* is therefore an embarrassment to Socrates which he attempts to defuse by claiming that it is hardly a proper wisdom at all (*tēs gar emēs, ei dē tis esti sophia kai hoia*, 20E7), for it consists simply in not thinking that he knows things he doesn't know (*ha mē oida oude oiomai eidenai*, 21D7). It is not the *sophia* of the *Charmides* (169D) that required knowing (*eidenai*) which things one knows and which one does not; nor is it even thinking that one knows when one does and thinking that one does not know when one does not; it is rather merely *not* thinking that one knows things one does not know. Socratic *sophia* is not an expertise in thought or knowledge, but merely an expertise in *not* thinking. When therefore the oracle proclaimed so modest a thinker (= a non-thinker) to be the wisest of all men, he could be taken to be disparaging human intelligence generally, and so Socrates explains it (23A–B). We need only add that in claiming to know that some things (e.g., disobedience to a

better) were evils, Socrates need not have regarded this as constituting *sophia* about the good and the noble, and hence not view these as in any way calling for the retraction of this important thesis of the *Apology*.

In a parallel way, Socrates can consistently claim to know nothing about virtue, or the good and noble, because he cannot say what the essence of each is, even if he does think he knows that some actions are evil, or good, or noble. Further, lacking knowledge of the essence of virtue, he would reasonably claim not to know the truth of various propositions *about virtue* (how to acquire it, whether it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it, whether virtue guarantees happiness) matters about which he holds firm convictions, but not *knowledge* (*Gorgias*, 509: *tauta ouk oida hopos echei*).¹¹

But in taking this path out of the inconsistency we face the objection that Socratic essentialism precluded just such a division of knowledge, for, it is often claimed, Socrates espoused the following thesis: "If one does not know what the F is, one cannot know if F is truly predicable of anything whatever."¹²

But the grounds for attributing this thesis to Socrates are insecure. In the *Euthyphro*, we can infer only that knowledge of essences is *sufficient* for knowing particulars, not that it is *necessary* for knowing them (*Euthyphro* 6E: "Tell me what the essential aspect of holiness is so that I may employ it as a model . . . and say if an act is holy or not holy"). In the *Laches*, ignorance of the essence of virtue is said to prevent us from knowing how best to attain virtue (189E5–190B1), and this is only one instance of the more general problem (mentioned at *Charmides* 176A6–8, *Meno* 71 and elsewhere) that

¹¹ The one thing he cannot do is claim (as Richard Kraut believes he claims) that "he knows some truths about virtue and the good" (*Socrates and the State* [Princeton, 1984]). If one takes Socrates' assertions in the *Apology* about disobedience not as assertions about evil actions, but as assertions about virtue (or vice), then the inconsistency is all but impossible to avoid. Kraut manages to make the *Apology* self-consistent by reading "neither of us knows the good and noble" as "what we know is nothing grand" (surely a generous interpretation of *ouden kalon kagathon eidenai*) but when confronted with the abject denials of knowledge about virtue in other early dialogues, he must conclude "The early dialogues, taken as a group, do contain a contradiction, for the epistemic principle laid down in the *Meno* and followed by both the *Gorgias* and *Republic* I is violated in the *Apology*." (277). But, again, it is violated only when we read the *Apology* claims to knowledge as claims to "knowledge about virtue and the good," rather than as knowledge about particular actions.

¹² Mentioned earlier in the discussion of Geach's paradox. I follow Vlastos' formulation (23). Vlastos uses this doctrine to test his "dual use of know" hypothesis, but his discussion goes a long way toward showing why the principle should never have been attributed to Socrates in the first place. Irwin (*PMT*, 293–94) thinks that Socrates would allow only true belief about examples of X in the absence of knowledge of what X is, but he assumes without warrant that knowing that an action is F is knowing something about what F is. The most extended attack on the principle (as an accurate reflection of Socratic thinking) is Gerasimos Santas' "The Socratic Fallacy", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 10 (1972): 127–41.

ignorance of a thing's essential nature prevents us from knowing what other attributes it may possess or lack. None of these texts however amounts to the essentialist thesis at hand: that not knowing the essence of F, neither can one know whether a particular thing is F or not.

There are two passages that come close to fitting the bill: "we think (*oiometha*) that we are one another's friends . . . but we have not been able to discover (*exeurein*) what friendship is" (*hoti estin ho philos*, *Lysis* 223 G 7); "How do you know (*eisēi*) whose speech is beautiful or not, or any other action whatsoever, when you are ignorant of beauty?" (*to kalon agnoōn*, *Hippias Major* 304 D8–E2). The context indicates that being in such a state makes one ridiculous (*katagelastoi*), contemptible (*kakos*), and better dead than alive.

But these texts will not suffice either. If I ask someone "how do you know X when you don't know Y?" I might be attempting to discredit his claim to know X, but I needn't be. Alternatively, leaving undecided the question of whether he knows X or not, I might ask him how he knows X when *one* way sufficient for knowing X (i.e., knowing Y) is unavailable to him. In these cases, lacking knowledge of the essence of beauty and friendship, Socrates cannot explain how he knows by appealing to the knowledge of their essence (though that would indeed explain it), but his inability to provide *this* explanation does not imply that he cannot have knowledge, or that he could have no other basis on which to support his claim to know. An inability to explain *how* one knows subjects one to ridicule and contempt, but it does not exclude the possibility that one knows after all. The essentialist epistemic thesis is therefore stronger than any Platonic text can justify; nothing so far said prevents Socrates from knowing that a is F even when he does not know what the F is, and he seems not to have been bothered by any such restriction.¹³ The upshot is that the Socrates of the *Apology* may consistently claim to know that disobedience to his betters is an evil and hence not a good, even while disavowing knowledge of the good and noble themselves.

4.

But why, it must be asked, would Socrates have embraced so deep a scepticism about virtue, and 'the good and the noble' if he thought he knew which actions were good and noble and which were not? And, conversely, how could he have thought he knew the moral qualities of specific actions while

¹³ As Vlastos noted, "in the *Crito* Socrates has no trouble ascertaining that escape would be unjust without invoking any definition of 'justice' or 'injustice'" (23). The semi-serious *Euthydemus* has Socrates claiming more generally "I know many things, but not anything of much importance" (293 B).

remaining ignorant of their essential natures? The answers to these questions do not lie on the surface in any Platonic dialogue, but we can piece together a preliminary explanation by reminding ourselves of some of the assumptions that underlay Socratic philosophy.

First, we should remember how little generally, on the Socratic model, virtue has to do with the performance of actions. Virtue is an excellence of the soul, a quality detected not through the inspection of personal biographies, but through examination of what a person thinks, and how he reasons. Like other 'non-evident' matters, virtue or wickedness in a person is known not through simple perception, but through elenchus, "that testing of the soul for good or evil" (*Gorgias*, 487). 'Non-evident' also are the answers to those deep questions that motivated Socrates' searches: whether virtue will be sufficient for happiness, whether suffering harm will be superior to inflicting it, whether, having committed evil acts, a man will be better off being caught and punished. As Socrates insisted, *tauta ouk oida hopōs echei* (*Gorgias*, 509).

Socrates concludes his *apologia* on the same agnostic note: "which of us has the happier prospect is not evident to any except God" (*adēlon panti plēn ē tōi theōi*, 42a3). So also the *Phaedo*. After praising the life of philosophizing as the truly moral life, Socrates concludes: "Whether I was right in this ambition [to philosophize], and whether we have achieved anything, we shall know for certain (*ta saphes eisometha*) if God wishes it, when we reach the other world" (69 D 4–6).

On the specific issue of our knowledge about the soul, as well as on the broader question of how much men can know, Socrates follows philosophical precedent: so deep is the *logos* of the soul, advised Heraclitus (in Fr. 45), you could not discover its limits even if you travelled every road, and to *saphes*, Xenophanes advised (in Fr. 34), "no man has known or will know—even if he should succeed in speaking of what is brought to pass, but opinion is allotted to all." Socrates' view of human knowledge can therefore be understood in the larger context of earlier Greek ideas. As early as the Homeric epics, and as concurrently as Democritus, Greek writers persistently belittled human capacities (usually in comparison with the divine) and claim a sharply delimited domain for human *nous*: men see little, says the poet, and understand even less.¹⁴ When Socrates' assertion of the inherently spiritual char-

¹⁴ e.g. *Il.* II, 486. Xenophon also held that Socrates divided the knowable into two distinct but overlapping domains: knowable by men, knowable by the gods: "For the craft of the carpenter, smith, farmer, or ruler, and the theory of such crafts, and arithmetic and economics and generalship might be learned and mastered by the application of human powers, but the deepest secrets of these matters the gods reserved to themselves; they were dark to men" (*Memorabilia*, I, 1, 7–8).

acter of virtue¹⁵ is conjoined with a traditional view of the inherent unknowability of the non-evident, a Socratic scepticism (with regard to the basic truths of morality) becomes logically inescapable.

Finally, if the truth about the virtues, like many other truths, lies in the depths, how then could Socrates so confidently identify the goods and evils of daily life? We cannot suppose that he uncritically identified right action with whatever his fellow Athenians would have wanted to do, for he repudiated part of common sense morality (e.g., in denying that harm is to be returned for harm, and that virtue requires helping one's friends and harming one's enemies). But while Socrates may have revised some aspects of the moral point of view of fifth century Athens, it is clear from Plato and Xenophon alike that, across a wide range of issues, Socrates upholds the conventional morality. That honoring one's parents, loyalty to one's *polis*, telling the truth, reverence to the gods (among other acts) are instances of the *kalos* and *agathos* neither Socrates nor his interlocutors doubt. What most perplexed Socrates was not how to identify bad things and good things, noble acts and the virtues, but what in the (agreed to be) goods, noble acts, and virtues makes them what they are and how can we accomplish them as often, as reliably, or as expertly as possible? Identifying the goods and evils of ordinary life was in short as philosophically uncontroversial as it was uninteresting. Socrates' insistence on the patent shamefulness of disobedience to his divinely ordained pursuit of philosophy is really only a specific instantiation of the conviction later generalized by Aristotle that any analysis of fundamental moral principles (or reasons why) must begin from what we commonly know. Goods, evils, virtues, and vices are more knowable to us than the first principles of moral philosophy, but they can explain little. Like the "commonplace notions" Plato alludes to in Book four of the *Republic* (442e ff.), they may be used as a means for checking our theories of virtue, but then they must be knowable independently of those theories.

I have argued that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge can be accepted as an integral feature of his philosophy, closely related to his views about virtue, the soul, and a traditional pessimism about the limits of human knowledge, and yet compatible with his claim to know the moral character of specific actions. We do not have a compelling reason to attribute to him any equivocation on the meaning of "know" (and good reason not to), we cannot reasonably avoid the inconsistency by appealing to a distinction between

¹⁵ It might be objected that the view of virtue as an attribute of the soul only indirectly related to behavior is more Platonic than Socratic, but the vision of Justice (*hē dikaiosunē*) and injustice (*adikia*) as aspects of the soul that can be harmed or benefitted by right and wrong actions (*to dikaion*, *to adikon*) is already present in the *Crito* (47 E–48 A).

knowing and claiming to know, and it is gratuitous to pawn off the inconsistency on Plato. Rather, we must view Socrates' disavowal not as a renunciation of all knowledge, not even of all moral knowledge, but rather of knowledge of the non-evident spring of virtue, that power of the soul of the good man to act nobly, as well as the means for achieving virtue, and of the ultimate advantage of the virtuous life.

But though we can avoid this inconsistency, other puzzles remain. Socrates repeatedly emphasizes the importance of knowledge (especially of knowing when we know and when we don't) and claims that the answer to that sixty-four dollar question, "How do we best reach the good?" is: by wisdom (*sophia*), knowledge of the principles by which men are and become virtuous. So much seemed evident to him, perhaps, by what Terry Irwin called "the Craft Analogy"; since shoemakers, sculptors, and other craftsmen achieve excellence through knowledge (of the good to be achieved, of their medium, and of the various principles of production) so also may we achieve the good by knowing who we are, what our end is, and how we are to hit it. That the sufficiency of knowledge for achieving human excellence should have been proclaimed by someone who steadfastly denied he had such knowledge, basing his thesis on a highly speculative extension of the notion of a craftsman's skill to human *aretē* generally, remains a striking paradox.

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