"SOCRATES' STRONGEST AND DEEPEST CONCERN"

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ABSTRACT

The Socrates of Plato's early dialogues (henceforth "Socrates") presents a problem for the interpreter. Since he claimed not to be a teacher of aretē, and neither was he able to learn virtue from anyone else, what exactly did he think he was achieving by the numerous energetic arguments he instigated? Certainly, he challenged the conventional stultification of Athenian thought and punctured puffed-up egos, but did he intend to do more? One theory is that, in spite of his denials, Socrates really was teaching people, but only by hinting at valuable moral information so that they would have an opportunity to conceive true beliefs about morality on their own, "autonomously." Gregory Vlastos referred to "moral autonomy" as Socrates' "strongest and deepest concern." Another theory is that Socrates was seeking someone who had an expert's grasp of moral issues so that he could adopt their principles and live a better life henceforth. On this model of moral edification, contra Vlastos, it is thought that the neophyte would be prudent to subordinate himself to the moral expert, rather than insisting on making up his own mind about moral issues. Richard Kraut refers to this as Socratic "moral authoritarianism." My contention is that both the autonomy and the authority theses are mistaken in detail and misguided in general. I believe that both of these interpretations place disproportionate weight on the kind of knowledge Socrates claims to have lacked, and neglect the importance of "the good judgment that he manifestly possesses." Both tend to view the Socratic model of making moral progress as acquiring a set of rules or moral definitions that would, supposedly, enable a person to solve all vexing moral problems, but they give short shrift to the fact that Socrates targeted not only propositions but also persons for moral analysis and assessment, with an eye to their improvement.

1 Brickhouse and Smith. 1994, 23.
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PREFATORY NOTE

Translations from Greek to English used in this work have been done by several translators. In each case the name of the translator has been noted.

Where there is no such notice, translations are my own.
I. INTRODUCTION

The Socrates of Plato's early dialogues (henceforth "Socrates") makes the "interpreter's job extraordinarily difficult. He is a unique person embarked on a mission which he invented,"¹ and is notoriously hard to pin down and comprehend. This dissertation examines and critiques two twentieth century theories of what Socrates was essentially doing, or trying to do, in his unique philosophical pilgrimage: that of Gregory Vlastos and that of Richard Kraut. It also offers a third way of looking at the spirit and purpose of the Socratic enterprise which, I believe, is both textually supported and has the practical advantage of providing a much needed counterpoint to the narrow and impersonal way in which Socrates' mission is nowadays often construed. The relevance of all this to contemporary moral reflection is clear: given that Plato's early dialogues provide us with a model of a moral and philosophical life, having as rich and deep an understanding of that model as possible would seem essential.

In the following chapter, Three Theories of Socrates, I provide a preliminary sketch of the three different interpretations of Socrates which constitute the subject matter of this dissertation, and discuss some of the philosophical issues that underlie these three ways of seeing Socrates.

However, before anything can be made of this debate, there is a prior problem that must be dealt with. A perennial issue in Socratic scholarship

¹ K. Seeskin. 1987, 150.
involves determining how much Plato’s dialogues reflect the views of Socrates, as opposed to his own views: the so-called Socratic problem. This issue is considered in chapter three, *Plato’s Early Socrates*, in which I briefly answer the questions: “Which of Plato’s dialogues are thought, for the purposes of this work, to be early and Socratic?” and “What claims of historical authenticity is it reasonable to make for the Socrates who appears in these dialogues?”

Chapter four, *The Autonomy Thesis*, is a discussion and critique of Gregory Vlastos’ view. Vlastos’ theory is that, in spite of the fact that Socrates frequently and ardently denied being a teacher of virtue, Socrates really was teaching people about virtue, but only by hinting at valuable moral information so that they would have an opportunity to conceive true beliefs about virtue on their own, “autonomously.” Vlastos refers to this “moral autonomy” as Socrates’ “strongest and deepest concern.” I argue that Vlastos’ autonomy thesis rests on dubious assumptions which simply do not respect the texts, and therefore cannot be accepted *holus bolus*.

Richard Kraut’s theory is presented in conscious opposition to that of Vlastos. His contention is that, far from being an enthusiastic advocate of moral

2 Actually, the Socratic problem can also include determining whether Plato’s or Xenophon’s portrait of Socrates is more authentic, and sometimes Aristotle’s occasional comments about Socrates and Aristophanes’ portrayal of Socrates in his comedy *The Clouds* are also thrown into the controversy. This wider controversy has no real place in this project, since I am arguing *ad hominem*, on the basis of Vlastos’ and Kraut’s premises about which works are taken to be genuinely Socratic, and they confine themselves to Plato’s early dialogues.

3 For the purposes of this work, words like “virtue,” “the virtues,” “morals,” and “ethics” will be used interchangeably. It is my contention that little would be accomplished by carving up, like the sophist Prodicus might, fine distinctions between such concepts here.
autonomy, Socrates actually recommended a model of moral edification according to which the moral neophyte would be well advised to subordinate himself to the moral expert, rather than insisting on making up his own mind about moral issues, as Vlastos claims is a Socratic ideal. Kraut refers to this (alleged) Socratic advocacy of the subordination of one's own powers of reason, reflection, and imagination to the directives of a moral expert as Socratic "moral authoritarianism," and believes that this technique of gathering moral knowledge would be a vast improvement over Socrates' own aporematic elenctic procedure, which was really only a fall-back position, a regrettable second-best in a world devoid of moral experts. In chapter five, The Authority Thesis, I argue that Kraut's interpretation rests on specious arguments and results in a distorted picture of Socrates and his mission.

Oddly, although Vlastos and Kraut appear to be at complete loggerheads in their interpretations of Socrates, it is my contention that, in point of fact, both have a great deal in common, and that this common ground reveals a kind of tunnel-vision in their approach to the dialogues, (a problem in addition to the specific problems found in each of their positions). In particular, both share a tendency to envision the Socratic recipe for making moral progress as chiefly a matter of acquiring the answers to Socrates' famous "What is X?" questions, where X was (usually, but not always) one of the traditional Greek virtues, such as courage, piety, justice, and so forth. I wish to emphasize from the start that I

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4 The concepts of Socratic aporia and the elenchos will be discussed anon.
am not suggesting that this sort of result of moral inquiry is unimportant. For obvious reasons, being able to define one’s moral terms accurately is important, for, as R.M. Hare simply put it, referring to the Socratic type of fundamental question, it’s hard to see how you could “decide what was a fair pay raise, for example, if you had no idea what ‘fair’ meant.” Ditto for concepts like courageous, pious, just, etc. However, I do want to argue that there are other features of the Socratic project that are just as important, and that are given short shrift by both Vlastos and Kraut due to their intense emphasis on acquiring the answers to the “What is X?” questions. The unfortunate upshot is that some of the most important ethical effects of the Socratic-style practice of virtue and philosophy get lost, while others are magnified out of proportion.

Both Vlastos and Kraut view these definitions as a small set of rules or guidelines that would enable their possessor to solve any vexing moral problem they might encounter and always know the right thing to do, even in the cruelest moral dilemma. Let us call such principles, which supposedly tell one exactly what to do in any given situation, “determining” principles. But the core beliefs

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5 B. Magee. 1978, 126.

6 It may be that the intense scholarly concentration on the importance of the “What is X?” questions is more a reflection of the cultural milieu in twentieth century philosophy departments (especially Anglo-American philosophy departments) than of Socrates’ own interests. This is not, of course, to say that Socrates wasn’t interested in these questions, but only that they may now be overplayed because they fit in with the currently accepted vision of the nature of the philosophical endeavor and what constitutes the appropriate focus of philosophical inquiry, while other aspects of his mission, which do not fit in with the aesthetic code of analytic philosophers, are underplayed or overlooked. See Nehamas (1999, xxiv) for an interesting discussion of this issue.

7 Borrowing the terminology of Iakovos Vasiliou (1999), 43.
and values which Socrates actually held, proclaimed, and lived by would be better described as “aiming” principles, that is, as principles which do not tell us exactly what to do in each instance where a moral decision is called for, but rather which tell us what sort of aim we ought to have in our deliberations about what to do. However, it is my belief that the proper application of these core Socratic beliefs and values or aiming principles does require that the individual make specific changes to himself or herself and the way s/he lives, changes which Socrates’ clever way of interacting with people known as the elenchos attempts to set in motion. In other words, the Socratic elenchos or examination has not only, or maybe even primarily, the goal of producing moral knowledge of the “What is X?” sort, but is also designed to wake up the participants to the moral transformation required of them even to engage properly in this quest for further knowledge. It promotes the ethical development of the self through self-knowledge and of the personality through a specific kind of human communication, as well as the development of the kind of knowledge Vlastos and Kraut concentrate on, and this personal dimension of what might be called Socratic therapy is not only instrumentally valuable, but is in itself an important part of what it is to live well according to the Socratic paradigm. But this important aspect of Socrates’ mission, the fact that he targeted not only propositions but also persons for moral analysis and assessment, with an eye to their improvement, gets lost in the interpretations of Vlastos and Kraut. One

8 Or “elenchus.”
example will be instructive here. Iris Murdoch called the “fat, relentless ego” the enemy of the moral life. Of course, considering Socrates’ “intellectualism,” his suggestion that aretē is epistēmē (that virtue is knowledge or wisdom), Socrates would probably say that ignorance is the enemy of the moral life. But ignorance of what exactly? Both Vlastos and Kraut interpret Socrates’ equation that virtue is knowledge as meaning that virtue is or requires knowledge of the definitions of the virtues, and so as also implying that the ignorance of these virtue-definitions would signify the lack of virtue. Their emphasis is, again, on these propositions, which would supposedly serve their possessor as a kind of magnificent formula for living aright. However, when we look into the kind of ignorance which Socrates himself described as “most reprehensible,” it was not ignorance of these definitions, but “thinking one knows what one does not know.” This is the kind of ignorance, closely related to the fat relentless ego, that troubled Socrates the most, and which seems to have been rife in ancient Athens. Kenneth Dover describes Athenian society in the time of Plato and Socrates as one “addicted to comparison and competition,” and notes how “this sensibility could have bad consequences. For one thing, issues were very readily translated into terms of ‘face.’” So saving face in an argument might well have

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10 As at Protagoras 361b. Socrates seems to have used epistēmē (usually translated as knowledge) and sophiā (wisdom) interchangeably (see Apology 19c6).
11 Apology 29b.
12 Dover. 1974, 237.
been thought a more important goal than actually learning, or unlearning, something, and appearing to win in various sorts of situations might have been thought more important than conducting oneself in accordance with more philosophical principles. But along came Socrates and introduced a completely different set of attitudes, practices, and commitments, which are an excellent, if not indispensable, way for shaping up one's moral life, then and now. In chapter six, entitled Socrates' *Real Strongest and Deepest Concerns*, I discuss what I believe to be Socrates' deepest beliefs and values and examine how these core values would manifest themselves in the context of actually living one's life. The final chapter briefly summarizes the main findings of this dissertation and concludes with some observations, some aporetic, others less so.
II. THREE THEORIES OF SOCRATES

Giambattista Vico said that Socrates was himself a whole university, but Socrates denied that he ever taught anyone anything,¹ and the Socratic dialogues² are, on the whole, much less didactic than other philosophical texts. As George Grote described the situation,

"The philosopher is [customarily] assumed to speak as one having authority; to have already made up his mind; and to be prepared to explain what his mind is. Readers require positive accounts announced, and positive evidence set before them, in a clear and straightforward manner. They are intolerant of all that is prolix, circuitous, not essential to the proof of the thesis at hand. Above all, an affirmative result is indispensable."³

But things are rather different in the Socratic dialogues. Instead of positive accounts announced, one notices and remembers a search for an answer, usually an attempt to pin down some hard-to-define moral term, which rarely comes to fruition. Rather than speaking as one having authority, Socrates claims not to know any more than his interlocutors do about the difficult moral questions under discussion, and, needless to say, his interlocutors don’t know very much either. In the end, the dialogues tend to fizzle out in a state of aporia or perplexity, with few, if any, affirmative results set forth.⁴

So what was Socrates trying to accomplish, if he wasn’t teaching and he also wasn’t learning the answers to his questions?

¹ See for example Apology 33a-b.
² Which are a subset of Plato’s dialogues, to be identified and discussed in chapter three.
⁴ The Crito, Ion and Gorgias are exceptions.
Clearly, Socrates believed that he was accomplishing *something*, indeed something of the greatest importance, since he believed that “to talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others is the greatest good to man,”5 and that *not* to do this means that one’s life is unexamined and therefore not even worth living. But what is it that’s so valuable about an inquiry which rarely uncovers any so-called affirmative results?

Grote believed that, for Socrates, “the process of search is considered as being in itself profitable and invigorating, even though what is sought be not found.”6 Perhaps it was the intense search itself that was really valuable, and the end-product really not so important? This interpretation, at the very least, has the advantage of agreeing with the peculiar way in which Plato used the word “philosophy.” As Gadamer observed,

“Plato furnished the word ‘philosophy’ with a somewhat artificial and decidedly unconventional emphasis; for him, philosophy was the sheer striving after wisdom or truth... it was not the possession of knowledge but only the striving for knowledge. This did not correspond to the customary usage of the terms ‘philosophy’ and ‘philosopher.’”7

But, is this really the best explanation of what Socrates was hoping to gain from his lifetime of philosophy: just searching for searching’s sake? This

5 *Apology* 38a (Fowler).
7 Gadamer. 1988, 15. Dyer and Seymour (1992, 3) also suggest that “In Plato’s writings, *philosophos* seldom should be translated by *philosopher*. More frequently it means a *seeker after truth*.” It is a “more modest epithet than *sophos*” which connotes that one has already found what one was seeking. Cf. Plato’s *Republic* (II, 376b): “The love of learning and philosophy are the same.”
dissertation is a study of two alternative theories: that of Gregory Vlastos and that of Richard Kraut, as well as a presentation of my own perspective on this issue. A brief introductory sketch of each follows.

(A) Vlastos' View: Gregory Vlastos devoted much of his working life in philosophy to the study of Socrates and Plato. Near the end of his career, in his book *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, he wrote that the issue of "moral autonomy" was "the deepest thing in Socrates, the strongest of his moral concerns."8 This was Vlastos' solution to what he saw as a paradox: why is it that Socrates, who seemed so very knowledgeable about moral issues, who was manifestly wiser than the others with whom he debated, did not bother to teach them what he knew? Of course, since he did not set himself up as a teacher of *aretē*, he was under no obligation to do so, but still the omission is strange, since he believed, in Vlastos' words, that there is only one way to save the human soul: by acquiring knowledge.9 Are we to think then, when we see Socrates chipping away at people’s beliefs but rarely offering positive instruction, that he did not care enough about their souls to acquaint them with the knowledge he had collected for himself?10 According to Vlastos, this is not the case at all. On the contrary, he contends, Socrates *was* caring for people’s souls in exactly the way a moral philosopher should, i.e. by provoking them to think about moral issues,

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8 Vlastos. SIMP, 44.
9 Vlastos. PS, 7.
10 Ibid., 13.
and by hinting at great moral truths, but not by actually telling them what to do or think. According to Vlastos, this procedure was an expression of Socrates' "vision of man as a mature, responsible being"\(^{11}\) capable of thinking and deciding for himself, a vision he promoted in conscious opposition to the "childish morality of blameless conformity"\(^{12}\) which was encouraged by the existing Athenian system of moral education known as *paideia*. In an age of strict moral conventions, where moral education took the form of "This is right and that is wrong, this honorable and that disgraceful, this holy, and that impious; do this, don't do that,"\(^{13}\) Vlastos believes that Socrates had an unspoken moral imperative that individuals must make their "own personal judgments on morality,"\(^{14}\) must decide about these important matters "by themselves, for themselves."\(^{15}\) The contrast could not have been more extreme. But, by its very nature, Socrates' mission to advance the cause of autonomy would have to be a furtive one and he would have to make heavy use of irony to achieve his objective without giving away the game; hence the title of Vlastos' book, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, as if those two roles were of comparable importance. On Vlastos' interpretation, Socrates knew much more than he would admit to, but kept his knowledge to himself, like a carefully-guarded secret or intellectual

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{12}\) In Cornford's phrase (1932), 53.

\(^{13}\) *Protagoras* 325d (Guthrie in Cairns and Hamilton).

\(^{14}\) Vlastos. PS, 21.

\(^{15}\) Vlastos. SIMP, 44. Cf. PS, 12.
property. For example, Vlastos believes that Socrates did possess (at least some of) the definitions of the virtues\textsuperscript{16} he frequently requested from others, though he ironically denied knowing such things.\textsuperscript{17} He was a kind of moral expert incognito, who could have imparted important truths to others, but who chose not to. Why would Socrates do such a thing, a little like telling someone "I could teach you to be a marine pilot... but I won't"? Vlastos puts his explanation into Socrates' mouth: "I wanted him to find it out for himself."\textsuperscript{18}

This "finding out for oneself" about moral issues is a critical component of what Vlastos calls the "moral autonomy" that was Socrates' "strongest and deepest concern." In the philosophy of education, there is perennial conflict over which of two things teachers can teach is more important: the results of inquiry, or various techniques and methods by which to get at results on one's own, "autonomously," in Vlastos' sense of the word. According to Vlastos, Socrates came down squarely on one side in this contention, attaching "far more importance to his method of moral inquiry than to any of its results." He is so convinced of this he writes:

\textsuperscript{16} Vlastos. PLS, 230 n.24: "The allegation one meets frequently in the scholarly literature that no acceptable definition of a virtue is ever reached in the Socratic dialogues is false." See also Vlastos in Smith and Woodruff (2000), 64.

\textsuperscript{17} Although, to be more precise, Vlastos speaks of Socrates' irony as "complex" rather than simple irony. In simple irony, what it said is the opposite of what is meant; in complex irony, there is a deliberate use of ambiguity: one both means and does not mean what one says. Hence Socratic irony is, in Jowett's phrase, like "the oracles of the Delphian god: they half conceal, half reveal, his meaning" (1902, 78). More on this later (in chapter four).

\textsuperscript{18} Vlastos. PS, 13.
"If we could get past the palaver of his mock-humility and make him say in simple honesty what he thought was his greatest achievement, Socrates would certainly have put his method far above anything else. . . Why rank that method among the great achievements of humanity? Because it makes moral inquiry a common human enterprise, open to every man. . . And this is how it should be, for how man should live is every man’s business, and the role of the specialist and the expert should only be to offer guidance and criticism, to inform and clarify the judgment of the layman, leaving the final decision up to him."  

In sum, what Vlastos is proposing is a very strong version of the thesis that, as John Stuart Mill put it, Socrates’ whole “profession and practice was to make others think, not to think for them.”  

Because autonomy was so important to him, Vlastos believes that Socrates was unwilling to engage in positive moral instruction, for fear that his teachings might be accepted on his authority rather than on the learner’s own, which would be a self-defeating practice in the battle against moral heteronomy. To ensure against this, Vlastos conjectures that Socrates craftily devised and employed a methodology – his unique way of interacting with people known as the elenchos – that was cleverly designed to make it possible for him not to have to teach anything in the conventional sense, where to teach means “simply to transfer knowledge from a teacher’s to a learner’s mind,” but did enable him to teach in the sense that he might “trigger

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19 This and quotation immediately preceding from Vlastos (PS), 19.
21 I leave open for now the question of what exactly the elenchos is, for, as G.A. Scott (2002, 2) notes, there is little agreement about it. Is it ‘Socrates’ entire way of philosophizing, his whole approach to testing, cross-examining, and refuting the people he meets, or is meant only to capture some one narrow form of argument’?
22 Vlastos. SIMP, 32.
an autonomous learning process” 23 in his fellow dialoguers, so that they may “discover for themselves the truth the teacher had held back.” 24 It is therefore important to appreciate that Vlastos’ autonomy thesis does not maintain that Socrates “does not care that you should know the truth,” by which Vlastos means particular Socratic doctrines, but only that he “cared more for something else: that if you are to come to the truth, it must be by yourself for yourself.” 25 I should point out that Vlastos considers this hierarchy of values as “crucial” to his “estimate of Socrates’ greatness” 26 and is one which pervades his writings about Socrates. He spoke of it in 1957, and he was still speaking of it in 1991. 27 He believes that had Socrates ranked his results above his method and autonomy, he would have been more like the “tirelessly didactic, monotonously earnest” 28 portrait of Socrates that Xenophon furnishes us with, rather than the subtle genius of Plato’s early works. In his words,

“Had Socrates valued the results of his method above the method itself, he would have just been a preacher and teacher of moral truths, not also the professed agnostic, the tireless critic, examiner and re-examiner of himself and of others; in other words, he would not have been the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues.” 29

23 Vlastos. SDK, 30.
24 Vlastos. SIMP, 32.
25 Ibid., 44.
26 Vlastos. PS, 19. Nehamas (1999, 101) also observes that this “constitutes the heart of the interpretation of Socrates to be found in this book [i.e. Vlastos’ SIMP].”
27 In an address to a meeting of the Humanities Association of Canada, reprinted in Vlastos (PS), and also in Vlastos (SIMP).
28 Vlastos. SIMP, 30.
29 Vlastos. PS, 20.
I shall henceforth refer to this little conglomeration of ideas, culminating in the contention that the issue of moral autonomy was "the deepest thing in Socrates, the strongest of his moral concerns," as Vlastos' "autonomy thesis." The autonomy thesis presents us with a popular image of Socrates, as someone who knows a lot, which is good, and who cares for the betterment of others, which is also good, but whose caring does not take the form of trying to impose his own views onto others (a practice which has been called "coercive philosophy"). Instead, Vlastos' Socrates is so careful not to compel anyone to believe anything that does not emanate from themselves that he hides his own views (or "truths" as Vlastos perhaps overconfidently calls them) behind a veil of irony and chooses only to hint at them through leading questions, or by drawing them out of what his interlocutor has already said, but not to make strongly positive didactic statements. In Vlastos' phrase, "he teaches saying he does not teach."

Is this then who Socrates was: an ironist, teacher-in-disguise, and autonomist? The views of Vlastos have been extremely influential in Socrates studies. But Richard Kraut, a former student of Vlastos, has argued that, actually, virtually the opposite is true. I turn now to sketch out his view.

(B) **Kraut's View:** In his book *Socrates and the State*, Kraut argues that, far from being a zealous proponent of moral autonomy, Socrates actually advanced

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30 Vlastos. SIMP, 44.
a form of moral authoritarianism. He takes issue with the picture, associated with Vlastos,\textsuperscript{32} that

\begin{quote}
"One way of contrasting Plato and Socrates is to portray Socrates as an upholder of autonomous choice, Plato as an oppressive authoritarian."\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

For, if the autonomy thesis is correct, then Socrates and Plato were about as different from each other as Hyperion and a satyr, with Socrates' "vision of the good life as an utterly free individual adventure" being very different from, say, the morality of Plato's Republic or Laws, which are "authoritarian, conformist, and custom-ridden."\textsuperscript{34} Arguing against this dichotomy, Kraut contends that, in fact,

\begin{quote}
"moral authoritarianism is something Plato inherited from Socrates... the great value Socrates saw in critical inquiry was combined with, and is consistent with, a highly authoritarian streak, which he passed along to Plato."\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

Kraut's basic contention is that Socrates, like Plato,\textsuperscript{36} held that "If the science of ethics were ever discovered, those few who mastered it would be entitled to take command, and all others ought to obey."\textsuperscript{37} So, in direct reply to Vlastos, who believes that Socrates "invited every man to take a place in the

\textsuperscript{32} And others, such as Karl Popper.

\textsuperscript{33} Kraut. SS, 9.

\textsuperscript{34} This and the immediately preceding quotation from Vlastos (PLS), 205.

\textsuperscript{35} Kraut. SS, 10.

\textsuperscript{36} Or, to speak more accurately, like one fairly standard interpretation of Plato.

\textsuperscript{37} Kraut. SS, 10.
supreme court which judges of morality," Kraut depicts Socrates as having had a very low opinion of the intelligence of the average person, in fact a discouraging pessimism about what Kraut calls "the permanent corruption of the many," and hence came to believe that the most salutary situation possible would be a division of intellectual labor in which "the wise shall lead and rule, and the ignorant shall follow," even, or perhaps especially, in matters pertaining to morality.

Another way of putting Kraut's thesis is to say that obtaining the correct results of moral inquiry, and not the process of searching for them and discovering them on one's own, was what really mattered to Socrates. And since for most people, the most efficient, indeed, probably the only method by which to obtain correct results would be to leave the actual thinking to someone else - to that elusive creature known as the "moral expert" - and simply follow the expert's findings, this is the truth-gathering procedure that Socrates thought best, according to Kraut.

To avoid confusion, I should clarify at the outset the nature of the "moral authoritarianism" that Kraut imputes to Socrates. An authority may be regarded as an individual or group that actually has, or is at least thought to have, valid knowledge (theoretical authority) and/or legitimate power (political authority).

38 Vlastos. PS, 21.
39 Kraut. SS, 198.
40 As at the Laws 690b.
41 Cf. S. Lukes' article on this theme in Raz (1990).
Often in Kraut’s discussion of Socrates’ alleged moral authoritarianism (which I shall henceforth refer to as his “authority thesis”), he is thinking of an authority as someone who has both knowledge and is granted a position of political power (rather than someone who is, say, deemed a trouble-maker and locked up in a jail cell). But often Kraut distinguishes the two senses, and conjectures about Socrates’ views on the notion of a moral expert as such, without tacking on the additional feature of that expert holding a position of political power. In my discussion of Kraut’s thesis, it is an authority in the latter sense (a theoretical but not a political authority) that I am speaking of. For Kraut’s picture of who would count as a moral expert or authority for Socrates, and his advice about what one’s relationship ought to be with such an expert, stand in direct opposition to the Vlastonian picture, and Vlastos was not talking about an expert who was also some kind of head of state. He was talking about Socrates.

Contra Vlastos, Kraut does not catalogue Socrates as a genuine moral expert, and, furthermore, he thinks that Socrates would “scoff” at the Vlastonian suggestion that if there ever were a genuine moral expert available to consult with, we should consider their advice but “then go off and make up our own minds.” According to Kraut, the image of Socrates as an enthusiastic proponent of moral autonomy is all based on a big misunderstanding. True,

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42 As Kraut points out in SS, 238.
43 Kraut. SS, 238.
Socrates may have “treated with contemptuous banter” those charlatans he encountered who professed to have knowledge of good and evil, but really didn’t, such as the sophists and *paideutai* (traditional moral educators), as well as the rhapsodes, politicians and anyone else whose claims to expertise Socrates was easily able to debunk, but does that mean that Socrates was averse to moral authority as such? Kraut certainly doesn’t think so. In fact, Kraut believes that Socrates was a proponent of “absolute submission” to one’s “superiors,” prepared to follow a certain kind of human being “as though he were a god.” This would be a genuine moral expert, someone who has far surpassed even Socrates in the amount and kind of moral knowledge they possess, and in particular is able to satisfactorily define the virtues, which Kraut takes to be the hallmark of the moral expert. Of course, Socrates never actually met such an expert. But he did sometimes speak of the *epieikestatoi*, “the most reasonable people,” and of the *phronimoi*, “the most thoughtful people,” and even of the *epaïön*, “the expert,” and of the benefits of heeding the recommendations of these people as opposed to taking advice from the unqualified throng. Building on this kind of talk, especially about the *epaïön*, Kraut believes that if Socrates had

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44 In Grote’s phrase (1907), Vol. VII, 87.
45 Kraut borrows this phrase from Grote.
46 Kraut. SS, 237.
47 Unlike Vlastos, Kraut takes Socrates at his word when he claims not to know the answers to his notorious “What is X?” questions, where X is (usually) one of the virtues, and hence concludes that “the failure with which so many early dialogues end reflects a real failure on the part of Socrates.” See Kraut (SS), 245.
48 *Crito* 44c, 47a, 47d.
ever located such an authority in the sphere of morality, he would have been “delighted”\textsuperscript{49} to follow his or her directives. Vlastos had acknowledged that the burden associated with being morally autonomous is that one must accept the chance of being in error as a “calculated risk... the price one must pay for being free.”\textsuperscript{50} But, as Plato said in the Republic,

“No one, if he could help it, would tolerate the presence of falsehood in the soul concerning reality. To be deceived about the truth of things and so be in ignorance and error and to harbour untruth in the soul is a thing no one would consent to.”\textsuperscript{51}

Therefore, Kraut argues, if person A is somehow able to recognize that person B is an expert,\textsuperscript{52} A should gladly follow B’s expert advice; being correct is far more important than being “autonomous” in the face of expert testimony.

It might seem slightly odd that two such adept interpreters as Vlastos and Kraut, both looking at the very same evidence, the same dialogues, could arrive at such different ideas about the role of autonomy and authority in Socrates’ philosophy. But consider the section in the Crito where Socrates has to decide the right thing to do: should he remain where he is and be executed in a matter of days, or should he try to escape from prison? His friend and neighbour Crito is able to visit him in jail before daybreak, and urges Socrates that an escape can and should be carried out this very night. Everything has been arranged and all

\textsuperscript{49} Kraut. SS, 241.
\textsuperscript{50} Vlastos. PS, 21.
\textsuperscript{51} Republic Book II, 382b (Cornford).
\textsuperscript{52} A recognition which, in my view, Kraut deals with in a very unsatisfactory way.
the necessary bribes can easily be paid. The only thing left to do now is persuade Socrates, who receives a plethora of advice about what to do from Crito:

"Look here, Socrates, it is still not too late to take my advice and escape... Take my advice and be reasonable... Take my advice and don't be unreasonable." 53

Perhaps having heard enough, Socrates then changes the subject by composing his Advice about Advice. Most moral philosophers don't say a lot about advice, though they are constantly dispensing it. Socrates, on the other hand, who tended to be relatively sparing when it came to actually supplying advice, did say quite a bit about it. In the Crito, what he says can be summarized as follows.

(C) Socrates' Advice about Advice: At Crito 46b, Socrates reminds Crito that:

"I am not only now but always the sort of person who follows nothing but the logos which on consideration seems best to me." 54

In the context, this seems a gentle way to remind Crito that, for all his friendly eagerness to help:

- Crito 46b: One should never accept advice from friends unless reflection shows that it is the best course that reason offers. Moreover,
- 47a: One should not put much stock in all the opinions that people hold; only in some, but not others. Consider the opinions that seem good, but not the ones that seem bad. Consider the advice of the wise, but not that of the foolish.

53 Crito 44b-48b (Tredennick in Cairns and Hamilton).

54 The basic meaning of logos, from the verb legein (to speak or say), is "something said." However, in philosophical usage it usually denotes a reasoned account.
• 47b: Do not pay attention to all praise and criticism and opinion indiscriminately, but only when it comes from a qualified person or an expert, not from the general public.

• 47c: If one disregards the opinions and recommendations of an expert, paying attention to the inexpert opinions of the many instead, the ensuing result may be bad.

• 47d: In trying to sort out good actions from bad, right actions from wrong, and honourable actions from dishonourable, one should follow the advice of an expert, someone with special knowledge about these things, if there is such a person, but not be guided by the advice of the many.

• 47e: There is a part of us that becomes better when we act justly and becomes worse when we act unjustly. If we yield to the advice of the many instead of following the guidance of a knowledgeable person, we may even destroy this part of us.

• 48a: We should not be concerned about what people in general say about us, but we should be very concerned about "what he who knows about right and wrong, the one man, and the truth herself" would say about us.

One can see how both Vlastos and Kraut could find support for their positions in Socrates' Advice about Advice. At Crito 46b, when Socrates describes himself as "not only now but always the sort of person who follows nothing but the logos which on consideration seems best to me," that sounds like an autonomous person speaking.

But what about when he tells Crito that "one should follow the advice of an expert," if there is one, in questions of right and wrong? That doesn't sound like an autonomous person speaking. There seems to be some tension here.\(^{57}\) Of

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\(^{55}\) Strong language such as the verbs phobeisthai, hepomai and timaō are used, as in "we should fear and follow and honour" the opinions of the one who knows.

\(^{56}\) Crito 48a (Fowler).

\(^{57}\) Grote's interpretation of this passage (1888, Vol. I, 436) eases the tension by arguing that Socrates' references to heeding the advice of "the one who knows about good and evil, if there is such a one" are chiefly designed to "discredit the Vox Populi" that Crito seems to be overly
course, the distinction is not absolutely watertight. Surely, we want to say, an autonomous person can follow the advice of an expert if it turns out, by his or her own lights, to be the best logos available. A commitment to autonomy should not imply disregarding all advice from others, no matter how sensible, simply on the basis that it issues from a heteronomous source. This would certainly render autonomy an "arrogantly solipsistic approach"\textsuperscript{58} to moral deliberation, and hardly a sign of Socrates' greatness. But Vlastos' theory of Socratic moral autonomy, which emphasizes the importance of each individual relying on his or her own reason rather than on expert testimony, does have trouble reconciling Socrates' advice about heeding the advice of "the one who knows,"\textsuperscript{59} and indeed tends to sweep all such counter-evidence under the proverbial rug. On the other hand, it surely seems excessive to dub someone an "authoritarian" simply for recommending the practice of following the advice of an expert, especially if one has considered the logos proffered by the expert and found it to be the best advice available.\textsuperscript{60} But Kraut depicts a Socrates who no longer feels he has to bother

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\textsuperscript{58} In Elizabeth Telfer's phrase, as quoted in J. Benson (1983), 7.

\textsuperscript{59} In fact, according to Vlastos' view, it would be extremely difficult to heed "the one who knows," since s/he would, like Socrates, be careful not to dispense truths in such a way that might preclude autonomous discovery of them, and so, in the end, one would be left to try to figure out the right course of action largely by oneself anyway. I discuss this issue in chapter four.

\textsuperscript{60} Though it is thought that, as J.M. Finnis states (in Raz, 1990, 176): "a person treats something as authoritative if and only if he treats it as giving him sufficient reason for believing or acting in accordance with it notwithstanding that he himself cannot otherwise see good reason for so
checking on the reasonableness of a logos for himself; a Socrates who, once he has (somehow\textsuperscript{61}) recognized that someone is an expert, would give them a virtual carte blanche to make up his mind for him. But this does not fit well with Socrates’ apparent declaration of autonomy at Crito 46b, nor does it seem to cohere with (if it is not question-begging to say) Socrates’ overall personal étos. The word étos, from which our word “ethics” comes, “may have originally signified the lair or haunt of an animal; in later Greek, it develops into the meaning of personal behavior-patterns or even personal character.”\textsuperscript{62} Surely one of the most salient and celebrated features of Socrates’ étos was his refusal to accept what other people told him without first carefully interpreting, examining and testing it for himself, to see if it was worthy of belief. Socrates was unremitting about this, like a shark that must always be moving to be able to breathe, even, or perhaps especially, when dealing with someone who was reputed to be very wise. As Socrates told the polymath Hippias:

> “Do you see, Hippias, how true it is to say that I’m persistent in questioning the wise?

\textsuperscript{61} Again, I believe that Kraut’s treatment of the problem of how one is supposed to be able to recognize a moral expert without being such an expert oneself – which Hugh Benson (in G.A. Scott, 2002, 101) calls the Charmides problem – is perfunctory and inadequate.

\textsuperscript{62} E.A. Havelock. 1963, 63.
Very likely it's the only good thing about me and everything else is quite worthless.”

Socrates' Advice about Advice is just one example of the two, mutually-antagonistic tendencies in Socrates' practices to which Vlastos and Kraut point. Grote wrote, and Vlastos would surely concur, that: “It is one peculiarity in the Sokratic dialogues, that the sentiment of authority, instead of being invoked and worked up, as is generally done in philosophy, is formally disavowed and practically set aside.” And yet in his most momentous conversation with Crito, Socrates does invoke “the sentiment of authority.” Although he begins by saying that “I am the kind of person who follows nothing but the reasoning which seems best to me,” he quickly changes tack and impresses upon Crito the importance of heeding the advice of the expert, “the one who knows, if there is such a one” in matters of right and wrong. Could it be that Socrates values moral autonomy for himself, but not necessarily for others, such as his well-meaning but basically dull-as-a-beetle friend Crito? Even so, Socrates' advice to Crito to heed the guidance of “the one who knows” about right and wrong would still be cryptic, since Socrates claims never to have met such an expert, nor does he claim to be one himself. In fact, he is most emphatic, contra Vlastos,

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63 Hippias Minor 372b (Allen).
65 Apology 23b.
66 Socrates' disavowals of knowledge are numerous and will be discussed in chapter four.
that he is not one himself. So then who is "the one who knows," and why bring this elusive, even non-existent, creature up at this critical moment?

As the opposing positions adopted by Vlastos and Kraut indicate, it is no easy matter to determine what stand Socrates took on these issues, but my own stand is that both Vlastos and Kraut greatly overstate their cases. Vlastos exaggerates the importance of what he calls "moral autonomy" in Socrates' mission, and there are better explanations for why Socrates did not "turn didactic" upon his interlocutors. Kraut imputes a degree and kind of moral authoritarianism to Socrates that goes far beyond what is warranted by the evidence. Moreover, I believe that both of their theses place a false emphasis on one aspect of Socrates' mission, while ignoring other, vitally important, Socratic desiderata.

(D) My View: Contrary to Vlastos' view that Socrates valued his method "far more" than any of his results, I believe there were at least a few results which were second-to-nothing in Socrates' worldview. (After all, if the Socratic method is so ingenious and operates successfully, then one would expect some excellent results to emanate from it.) Socrates was as fastidious as an actuary in trying to establish some semblance of order in the complex world of good and evil, and he seems to have thought he had proved elenctically67 a small set of

67 Gorgias 479e: "Oukoun apodeiktai hoti alēthē elegeto;" It should be noted that an elenctic proof is not a proof in an unqualified sense; it is dependent upon the interlocutor's admissions and upon prior agreements between Socrates and the interlocutor, which may or may not be true (cf. Gorgias 479b, 479c, 480a, 480b).
important life principles, upon which any moral outlook worth its salt must be anchored.68 These were the imperatives to avoid two closely related things: (1) wrong-doing and (2) wrong-thinking about moral issues. Socrates was resolutely convinced that these two things, one related to our outer conduct and the other to our inner life, were the worst things for a human being. He called wrong-doing megiston tôn kakôn, "the greatest of evils," but also claimed that ouden tosouton kakon einai anthrōpō, "there is nothing so bad for a human being" than wrong-thinking about important moral issues.69 Of this system of values, Socrates spoke with intensity, in the first-person singular ("My view," "I hold"),70 and he referred to rival value systems as "shameful" (Apology 28c3), "bad and shameful" (29b7), "unworthy of a free man" (38e3), and "worthless" (Gorgias 527e6). He also tried to persuade others to take his advice and follow his lead about this, somewhat out of keeping with his usual "I don’t know and I don’t teach" attitude. He said:

"I summon all human beings, as far as it is in my power, to this life and this struggle, which I say is more important than any other endeavor in the world."71

Given the importance Socrates attached to avoiding these "two worst evils for a human being," and the way he handled interlocutors who dissented from

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68 At least until such time as they could be refuted (something he seriously doubted would ever happen; see Gorgias 473b).
69 Gorgias 509b, 458a.
70 Gorgias 509a, 458a.
71 Gorgias 526e.
them, I think it’s misleading to call the issue of “moral autonomy” Socrates’
strongest and deepest concern. Yet, at the same time, it would be a mistake to
jump to the conclusion that if what Socrates cared most about was to avoid
wrong-doing and wrong-thinking, then what he would really have liked was to
find some more efficient means of achieving that end than his own elenctic
routine, such as an expert who could simply tell him what to do and think. Why
would this be an erroneous inference to make? Because there is more going on in
the Socratic elenchos than just trying to get at the right answers to the questions
posed; I believe the Socratic examination had not only, or maybe even primarily,
the goal of producing moral knowledge of the “What is X?” sort, but was also
designed to wake up its participants to the moral transformation required of
them even to engage properly in this quest for further moral knowledge, and
regular engagement in elenctic arguments was intended as a way to help
maintain this personal moral transformation. Like exercising each day for your
physical health, “an elenchos a day” was thought to “keep reprehensible
ignorance away,” and contribute to the health of the soul in other ways.

I believe that Kraut clearly makes the mistake of overlooking this aspect of
the Socratic mission; his thesis, (notwithstanding some backtracking), implies
that the lifelong Socratic approach to moral inquiry is essentially only a fallback
position, a regrettable necessity in the absence of a genuine moral expert who
could simply give us the correct answers to moral questions (and leave us to
figure out the “how” and “why,” if we want, as an intellectual exercise for the
curious). According to this picture, just getting at the (purportedly) correct results of moral inquiry as expediently as possible is presented as the best approach to a virtuous life. But surely this ignores an important part of Socratic virtue, since Socrates belongs to that "tradition of philosophers who concern themselves not only with advancing technically true theories,"72 but also with advancing a certain way of life and a certain kind of person, an ëthos. For instance, he wanted people to be

"the kind of man I am. And what kind of man am I? One of those who would gladly be refuted if anything I say is not true, and would gladly refute another who says what is not true. . ."73

And so, although it is a standard, indeed canonical, interpretation of Socrates' philosophy to view it as targeting only propositions, rather than some broader target, as the proper object of moral analysis and assessment, I believe we must reconsider this approach. For first of all it conflicts with Socrates' own description of his mission in the Apology, where he says he scrutinizes "people" and "lives,"74 and not just propositions and the logical relationships between propositions. Although of course he did the latter too, and with great enthusiasm and finesse, I take the former to mean that he was also interested in,

72 As Nehamas has argued; see S. Phineas Upham (2002),141.
73 Gorgias 458a (Woodhead in Cairns and Hamilton).
as he says, the people with whom he conversed, and what kinds of lives they were living. He was concerned not only with:

"the object of knowledge but with what is involved in becoming and being a knowing subject, with what kinds of moral and intellectual virtues must be appropriated and made part of one's personal value system" in order for one to engage properly in the struggle to avoid the two worst evils for a human being. Hence, as Laszlo Versényi observed, the participants in a Socratic examination do not "merely analyze ideas, remaining themselves detached and out of the focus of the inquiry," but are themselves being tested and possibly transformed. The conduct of the participants during the dialogical transaction is viewed as an index of their ethicality, sometimes revealing their operant values and concerns as opposed to the lip-service they pay to wisdom and virtue, and the intense interpersonal process of Socratic communication is believed to have certain characteristics which are effective in bringing about ethically-desirable results other than those discussed by Vlastos and Kraut.

This side of the Socratic mission gets lost in Kraut's thesis. But one would think that Vlastos would not fall prey to the same objection, since, presumably, developing autonomy would require a process of self-transformation, especially in an environment where traditional beliefs were widely considered to be

75 Cf. Apology 32a where Socrates offers "great proofs" of what kind of man he is, not with words but by deeds.
77 Versényi. 1963, 125.
78 In addition to their actual responses to questions posed.
binding on all decent, educated persons. But, surprisingly, Vlastos says next to nothing about autonomy as a feature of persons; instead he tends to apply the predicate "autonomous" to the logic of discovery. For example, here's how he describes what is going on in the *Euthyphro*:

"Clearly Socrates has not been playing a cat-and-mouse game with Euthyphro in this dialogue, putting questions to him only to pounce on his answers and claw them to pieces. He has been doing his best to lead Euthyphro to the point where he could see for himself the right answer. But what he positively refuses to do is to tell Euthyphro this answer."

The idea is that if Euthyphro had cracked the code of Socrates' cryptic questions and, in a sudden surge of insight, come up with the Socratic definition of piety, that "discovery" on Euthyphro's part would have constituted an example of what Vlastos calls "autonomy." After all, according to Vlastos, what Socrates had been doing throughout the dialogue was trying his best to lead Euthyphro to the right conception of piety (short of just telling him). But is this really all that Socrates was trying to get Euthyphro to see? I am saying that it is not; that there is also an important personal dimension to the Socratic examination, while Vlastos writes of the early dialogues that

"the elenchus tests statements, not actions. A man's claim to knowledge is refuted when, having said \( p \), he then says or implies \( q \)

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79 Although he does acknowledge that there is a personal side of the elenchos, which he calls its "existential dimension" (VSS, 9). But his description of this existential or personal dimension (VSS, 10) reduces it to the fact that Socrates examines a particular person's own beliefs, rather than some disembodied arguments.

80 As G. Dworkin (1988, 6) points out, the concept of autonomy can be applied to "very different entities: to actions, to persons, to the will, to desires, to principles, to thoughts."

81 Vlastos. PS, 14.
which is shown to contradict $p$, or when he offers a definition of a term in $p$ which is shown to be faulty. This done, Socrates feels no need to inspect the speaker’s actions or to refer to them in any way ...

He doesn’t? But what about in the *Euthyphro* (for just one example among many) where, after showing that there are numerous problems with Euthyphro’s “$p$’s” and “$q$’s,” Socrates chastises Euthyphro the person, and not just his statements, for being “indolent on account of his surfeit of wisdom”?

It surely seems to me that Socrates was trying to get Euthyphro to see more here than just what piety really is; he was also trying to get Euthyphro to see who Euthyphro really is: ignorant, ignorant of his ignorance, arrogant, and indolent, someone whose way of life hitherto suggests that he has not devoted proper attention to good conduct and right thinking. Socrates provided Euthyphro, and others, with “both the opportunity and motive for the sort of introspective reflection that would allow them to deepen their self-knowledge beyond the simple recognition that they are confused.”

And so it seems to me that, for all their differences, both Vlastos and Kraut converge on one thing: both tend to treat the issue of making Socratic-style moral progress as chiefly a matter of coming to believe some set of true propositions, either “autonomously” (as Vlastos claims is necessary) or from listening to an

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82 Vlastos. PLS, 207.
83 *Euthyphro* 12a.
84 If Socrates was even doing that; if, that is, he thought he knew the answer himself, as Vlastos claims. I postpone discussion of this issue until chapter four.
85 Brickhouse and Smith. 1994, 78.
expert (as Kraut claims would be sufficient). Hence their analyses of the elenchos tend to focus primarily on its potential (in Vlastos' view) or failure (in Kraut’s view) to produce true conclusions, chiefly of the definitional sort, and both thereby flatten out the depth of the elenctic experience by ignoring its valuable personal dimension. For example, here’s how Kraut describes what unfolds in a typical Socratic dialogue:

"Socrates raises a question of the form ‘What is X?’ (e.g. ‘What is courage?’ ‘What is piety?’), and claims that he does not know the answer; he asks his interlocutor if he can do better, and it turns out that he cannot; several definitions are proposed, all are found inadequate in some way or another, and the dialogue ends in failure."

Vlastos, on the other hand, takes a much more positive approach to the Socratic elenchos, but even he essentially reduces it from all that it is to basically an elaborate game of hide-and-seek, where the “teacher” (Socrates, who adamantly denies being one) hides the truth and the frustrated would-be learner has to try to find it “by himself.” The underlying premises here are that (1) Socrates had the answer, indeed “the right answer,” to (for example) the question “What is piety?” and that he was (2) trying to get Euthyphro to see this answer too. But what if these don’t hold true? That is, what if Socrates did not view himself as having a secret stash of correct moral answers to confer upon others? Would Vlastos then conclude, like Kraut, that the aporetic dialogues “end in

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86 Kraut. SS, 245.

87 An interpretation which, as Nehamas (1999, 102) politely observes, “identifies [the Socratic method] closely with what passes for the ‘Socratic method’ in the practice of many of our law schools today.”
failure”? Kraut believes (for example) that a successful conclusion to the
Euthyphro would have ended either in the mutual discovery of what piety really
is, or, if Socrates already had an answer in mind, (as Vlastos believes he did),
with Socrates categorically telling Euthyphro the pious course of action to take in
his situation, rather than “just”, engaging him in one of the most brilliant, albeit
aporetic, philosophical grillings of all time. But notice that Vlastos is not entirely
comfortable either with the fact that the majority of Socrates’ discussions end in
aporia or perplexity; in fact he doesn’t even believe the perplexity, at least on
Socrates’ part, is really real. In the case of the Euthyphro, Vlastos describes
Socrates as either “trying to lead Euthyphro to the right answer” or as playing a
nasty little “cat-and-mouse game” with him. But surely this is a false dichotomy,
and funnels one into thinking that, unless the right answer be found, or is at least
there lurking in the dialogue to be found by the autonomous interlocutor or
savvy reader, the dialogues are a “failure” (in Kraut’s word), or an eristic “cat-
and-mouse game,” (in Vlastos’ phrase). On the other hand, if the right answer
had been found, then wondrous results would ensue: Kraut believes the
definitions would enable a person to determine “precisely what to do, even in
difficult situations,” while Vlastos describes them as “a wonderful thing, a
criterion for settling all those vexing disputes over controversial cases, like the

88 With a few exceptions where Vlastos sees Socrates’ displays of perplexity as heartfelt.
89 Kraut. SS, 234.
one which sets the stage for Socrates’ encounter with Euthyphro.”

But I believe that nothing very wonderful would transpire without the kind of personal transformation that can be effected by regular engagement in elenctic conversations, which are, if not indispensable for shaping up one’s moral life, nevertheless an excellent way to try to, having one’s rationalizations and self-serving assumptions punctured by immediate challenge by others, and doing the same for others.

Having sketched out the three competing views of Socrates which comprise the subject matter of this dissertation, and gestured at the main points of contention between them (i.e. the sincerity of Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge; the proper role of autonomous reflection versus expert testimony in making moral decisions; the extent to which the rightful object of ethics is, as one great twentieth century philosopher put it,91 only to “discover true propositions about virtuous and vicious conduct. . . the aim is not practice, but propositions about practice. . .” or whether Socrates might be of a different opinion about that; and so forth), I turn now to delineate more precisely who is meant by “Socrates” throughout this debate.

90 Vlastos. VSS, 77.
III. PLATO’S EARLY SOCRATES

Before anything more can be made of this debate, there is a prior issue that must be dealt with, and that is to sort out who is meant by “Socrates” here, since notoriously this question admits of a swarm of possible answers. As Christopher Rowe put it, “Socratic studies evidently continue to flourish, despite continuing disagreement about what the actual subject of such studies is, or ought to be.”1 The trouble is that the historical Socrates wrote nothing,2 and what has been written about him gives rise to the most divergent impressions, as one can see from the controversy in chapter one. A few more examples:

- Aristophanes depicts Socrates engaging in the same pursuits as the sophists, ranging from the trivial (analyzing the gender of nouns) to the venal (making the unjust argument appear just). Plato, on the other hand, depicts Socrates as locking horns with the sophists, thoroughly unimpressed with their methods, qualifications and objectives.

- Xenophon’s account of Socrates makes it difficult to imagine how he could ever have been indicted on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth. But reading Plato, one can easily see how Socrates could have aroused the enmity of many stiff-necked Athenians, and why they might construe his behavior as offensive not only to themselves personally, but to the status quo in the city-state at large.

- Antisthenes interpreted the core of Socrates’ philosophy to be self-sufficiency (autarkeia), thought to be achieved by a life of virtue, having disdain for conventional mores, a preference for poverty, and indifference towards pleasure. Aristippus, on the other hand, interpreted Socrates’ message as the hedonistic doctrine that pleasure is the only good desirable for its own sake (and preferably intense, immediate, physical pleasure).

- In the Hellenistic age, Socrates was considered by many to be The Philosopher, the mentor of a number of philosophical movements, such as the Stoics and Skeptics, each claiming that they, and only they,

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1 C. Rowe. 1999, 72.

2 “That is, nothing philosophical. If the Phaedo is to be believed, he wrote a hymn to Apollo and versified the fables of Aesop in his last days in prison,” as W.K.C. Guthrie notes (1971), 6.
“expounded the authentic version of Socrates’ thought.” Others have suggested that “the historical Socrates was primarily a politician rather than a philosopher,” with pro-Spartan tendencies.

Due to “the variety and inconsistency of the images offered us by the literary tradition, matched by the serious shortage of historical data,” not to mention the subtlety and complexity of some of the ideas attributed to Socrates, different interpretations of who Socrates was and what he stood for keep taking shape, and “in our own century, he has been treated as an existentialist, a political liberal, and a Hindu guru,” among other things. Indeed, “Interpretation is the only game in town” for someone trying to learn about Socrates, and any interpretation is bound to be pounced upon by dissenters.

Consider an extreme example: one of the best documented items of information about Socrates is that he was tried, condemned to death and executed in the jail of the Eleven in the spring of the year 399, at about the age of 70. Positing a kind of Archimedean point in the turbulent field of Socratic studies, A.E. Taylor wrote of Socrates’ conviction and execution that “to deny it is to forfeit one’s claim to be

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4 This is A.H. Chroust’s view, in his book Socrates, Man and Myth. 1957, 193.
5 This is Mario Montuori’s view, in his book Socrates, Physiology of a Myth. 1981, 27.
6 M. Montuori. 1988, 27.
7 R.S. Brumbaugh. 1981, 125.
8 In Stanley Fish’s phrase.
9 According to A.E. Taylor (1933), the manuscripts vary on this: some say “seventy,” others say “over seventy.”
counted among the sane.” But even this has been denied: in the 1920s, Eugene Dupréel questioned the very existence of Socrates.

In light of all this endless wrangling, a satisfactory treatment of the Socratic problem is well beyond the scope of this dissertation. Instead, throughout this work, I shall be relying on the “solution” to the problem as supplied by Vlastos and Kraut. So, following Vlastos and Kraut, throughout this work I mean by “Socrates” the character who goes by that name in Plato’s dialogues, but only in some of them, because, as Vlastos points out, there seem to be two distinct philosophers who bear the name “Socrates” in Plato’s works, who “pursue philosophies so different that they could not have been depicted as cohabiting the same brain throughout unless it had been the brain of a schizophrenic.” Aristotle confirms that some such dichotomy exists by telling us that Socrates did not postulate a realm of separately-existing Forms, as Plato did. And yet, in several of Plato’s dialogues, we see “Socrates” advancing

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10 A.E. Taylor. 1933, 11.

11 There is even dispute over what the name “Socrates” means: John Sallis (author of Being and Logos) thinks it means “Ruler of Life,” while Leon Craig (author of The War Lover) thinks it means “Sure Strength.”

12 As in Vlastos’ SIMP and VSS, and Kraut’s SS.

13 Vlastos. SIMP, 46.

14 Aristotle’s Metaphysics 1078b-1079a. It should be noted, however, that Aristotle’s evidence is interpretive; it is not a historical report. Aristotle did not have the luxury of actually knowing Socrates, arriving as he did in Athens more than thirty years after Socrates’ death. And so whatever Aristotle says about Socrates can only be an interpretation of an interpretation. Because of this, the attempt to neatly dichotomize Socrates and Plato on the basis of Aristotle’s testimony has been questioned by much recent (and some not-so-recent) scholarship. In fact, the entire paradigm of the rigid developmental picture has come under attack. But those who stand by it (such as Vlastos and Kraut) point out that the distinction they make between the early Socratic and the later Platonic dialogues by no means relies solely on Aristotle’s testimony, and that the
Plato's theory of Forms. And so, with Aristotle's help, many commentators such as Vlastos and Kraut have felt justified in drawing a line in the sand between two sets of dialogues: those in which Socrates is not used as a mouthpiece for Plato's theory of separately-existing Forms, and those in which he is. Dialogues in the former group are thought to have been written earlier in Plato's life, and to represent more accurately the historical Socrates. Those in the latter group are thought to have been written later in Plato's life, and though these retain features of the supposedly historical Socrates they also make him espouse positions which are incompatible with those put forth in the earlier dialogues. Features that are prominent in the early group of dialogues, but which are not at the fore in the later ones, include the following.\(^{15}\) In the early group of dialogues:

- (1) The concerns of Socrates are almost exclusively moral;\(^{16}\) he is "concerned with individual ethics and individual education - care for the soul, both for oneself and for the young; other dialogues are interested in many other topics besides ethics."\(^{17}\)
- (2) Socrates makes frequent disavowals of knowledge, although there are a few things he seems deeply convinced are true;
- (3) Socrates typically looks for definitions of the virtues but does not find them, and his conversations often end in *aporia*, perplexity or an impasse;\(^{18}\)

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\(^{15}\) This summary of distinguishing features is based on T. Irwin's concise list (1995), 10.

\(^{16}\) That Socrates confined his investigations to moral issues is confirmed by Aristotle (*Metaphysics* A. 987b1-4).

\(^{17}\) T. Penner in Kraut (1992), 125.

\(^{18}\) Clear exceptions are the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Gorgias*. 
• (4) Socrates advances some highly unusual views about the relationship between virtue and knowledge,\textsuperscript{19} some of which are reconsidered, and to some extent repudiated,\textsuperscript{20} in the later dialogues.

Moreover, on the whole, the early dialogues tend to be shorter\textsuperscript{21} than the later dialogues, more negative and aporetic, and more intense in terms of "dramatic character, presentation of Socrates as a person and an embodiment of his philosophy rather than a mere spokesman for theories, dialectical interchange and real opposition between interlocutors."\textsuperscript{22}

It is the early group of dialogues that I am concerned with for the purposes of this work. Throughout this work then, I shall mean by "Socrates" the protagonist of the ten dialogues considered by Vlastos and Kraut\textsuperscript{23} to be Plato's earliest works. These are (in alphabetical order): the 

\textit{Apology, Charmides, Crito, Euthyphro, Gorgias, Hippias Minor, Ion, Laches, Protagoras, and Republic I.}

As well as having been defended elsewhere, and largely concurring with stylometric considerations,\textsuperscript{24} the categorization of this group of ten dialogues as "Socratic" has the additional advantage of having been agreed upon by Vlastos and Kraut,

\textsuperscript{19} In Aristotle's view, Socrates exaggerated the importance of knowledge in virtue, a criticism he does not make against Plato. See Irwin (1995), 9.

\textsuperscript{20} As Irwin (1995, 224) notes, it is difficult to tell how far Plato rejects Socratic doctrine.

\textsuperscript{21} Exceptions: the \textit{Protagoras} and \textit{Gorgias}.

\textsuperscript{22} L. Versényi. 1963, 178.

\textsuperscript{23} Kraut also includes the \textit{Euthydemus, Hippias Major} and \textit{Lysis} in this group. Vlastos places these after the \textit{Gorgias}. But on the ten dialogues mentioned, they converge, and Kraut's "authoritarian" argument is predominantly based on the \textit{Apology} and \textit{Crito} anyway.

\textsuperscript{24} See Dodds (1959), 18; Vlastos (SIMP), 46; Irwin (1995), 12.
who have otherwise clashing things to say about Socrates. Their disagreement is all the more curious because it is based on the very same evidence.\textsuperscript{25}

I note in advance, however, that the \textit{Gorgias} weighs quite heavily in my own interpretation and that treating the \textit{Gorgias} as an early Socratic dialogue is a somewhat controversial move, (even though Vlastos and Kraut, as well as many other interpreters, do too). The \textit{Gorgias} is undeniably different from the rest of the dialogues in the so-called early group. It is longer and, perhaps, stylistically more intricate than the typical Socratic dialogue. In it, Socrates occasionally speaks at greater length than usual, despite his customary condemnation of \textit{makrologia}, and he also occasionally speaks with what Dodds calls “a new confidence”\textsuperscript{26} about his own doctrines. Dodds also points out that some Pythagorean themes and images have crept into the \textit{Gorgias},\textsuperscript{27} and Pythagoreanism is thought to have been a Platonic, but not a Socratic, preoccupation. As well, in the \textit{Gorgias} the issue of punishment for wrong-doing looms large, which is also not one of Socrates’ usual themes. And perhaps most strikingly, the \textit{Gorgias} culminates in a story concerning the judgment of the dead, about which Socrates says, in Dodds’ translation:

\textsuperscript{25} Looking at the very same dialogues, Vlastos comes to the conclusion that Socrates’ primary concern was the issue of moral autonomy, whereas Kraut concludes that Socrates’ philosophy had an unmistakably anti-autonomy, authoritarian streak. Yet, in the midst of their disagreement, there is agreement as to which dialogues are genuinely Socratic. Indeed, they agree on more than just which dialogues are Socratic: they also agree that the \textit{Apology} belongs early in the Socratic sequence of dialogues, and that the \textit{Gorgias} appears late in that group.

\textsuperscript{26} Dodds. 1959, 16.

\textsuperscript{27} Dodds. 1959, 26.
“Give ear, then, as story-tellers say, to a very good story, which you will consider a myth (muthos) I suppose, but to me it’s a logos, for I relate it to you as being true.”

What is striking about this? As Dodds contends, “the Socrates who presents his myth as a logos in the Gorgias is not the agnostic of Apology 29b and 40c.”

Such discrepancies have led many commentators, such as Dodds and Irwin, as well as Vlastos and Kraut, to conjecture that the Gorgias was written late in Plato’s early Socratic period. Vlastos even ventures to guess that it was probably the very last of Plato’s early works. However, both Vlastos and Kraut trust that the Gorgias is, in Kraut’s words, “unquestionably early, and therefore especially reliable as a source for the philosophy of Socrates.” Many other commentators tend to be more tentative about that. For my part, I am uneasy about how safely the Gorgias can be construed as authentic, unadulterated Socratic portraiture. Like a painting in which one can see the brushstrokes of the artist, one seems to be able to “catch sight of Plato himself” in the Gorgias. It has been suggested that this is so because Plato is doing more in this dialogue than just trying to re-create a scene of Socrates’ intelligence in action. Terence Irwin, for example, calls the Gorgias “Plato’s defense of Socrates, his life, his

28 “Logos” here could mean an argument, a true account, or even a promise.
29 Dodds. 1959, 21.
31 Kraut. SS, 4 n.1.
32 Exception: the works of Charles Kahn.
33 Dodds. 1959, 31.
methods and his doctrines, against various challenges."\textsuperscript{34} I would say, as far as I can pretend to guess at Plato's intentions, that there is some such shielding of Socrates' ways in the \textit{Gorgias}. And it may be that to create a defense of Socrates - a defense that would be at all convincing to those who thought he needed defending - required that a few alterations be made to his usual ways. Most noticeably, the other so-called early dialogues tend to be dialogues of "search and questions, not of answers,"\textsuperscript{35} whereas the \textit{Gorgias} is decidedly a dialogue of answers. Far from "holding back the truth" from his interlocutors,\textsuperscript{36} Socrates is very intense about getting his point across, chief among which is a defense of truth and virtue against three advocates of rhetoric and vice. So in a way, the \textit{Gorgias} could be regarded as Plato's effort to answer the question "Who was Socrates?" so as to shore up the memory of him as primarily a formidable defender of virtue, rather than as primarily an iconoclastic critic of conventional moral beliefs, as he sometimes appears in the other early works. Nevertheless, while this shoring up may well amount to a picture of Socrates more a product of Plato's literary imagination than is the case in the more typical early dialogues, this would seem to be a pointless tribute if it did not, at least to some extent, accurately attempt to convey the general character of the man - who Socrates

\textsuperscript{34} Irwin. 1979, 4. See also Nehamas (1999), 90.

\textsuperscript{35} Nehamas. 1999, 91.

\textsuperscript{36} If Socrates ever really did that, as Vlastos claims he did.
was—and any such portrait can be expected to bring to light bedrock Socratic moral principles and practices, which I believe the *Gorgias* does.

But, even if I am mistaken about this, I want to stress that my choice of which dialogues are "Socratic" throughout this work is very much governed by the fact that Vlastos and Kraut treat these same dialogues as Socratic: I am arguing *ad hominem*, on the basis of their own premises. However, I have one small proviso to lodge, and that concerns the issue of the historical authenticity of the Socrates I shall be discussing. In the preceding discussion, I have said that by Socrates I mean "the character" who appears in Plato's *Apology, Charmides, Crito, Euthyphro, Gorgias, Hippias Minor, Ion, Laches, Protagoras, and Republic I*. This suggests that I am talking about a literary creation. But I have also said that these dialogues are thought to "better represent the historical Socrates" than Plato's other dialogues. This suggests that I am talking about the man. Which is it?

Plato's early works are thought by many to be a faithful portrait of the historical Socrates. Kraut wrote that "it is important to bear in mind that it is only the early works of Plato that should be read as an accurate depiction of the historical Socrates."\(^{37}\) Vlastos wrote that "through a 'Socrates' in Plato we can come to know the thought of the Socrates of history."\(^{38}\) But others take a more skeptical approach to the elusive Socrates of history, such as the position of


\(^{38}\) Vlastos. SIMP, 81.
Michael Stokes: "You are warned that when talking about Socrates I normally mean Plato's Socrates [in the early dialogues]. I commit myself to nothing about the real Socrates of history unless I expressly take on such a commitment." 39 I personally believe a reasonably skeptical attitude is the appropriate one to take on this issue, and look on Vlastos’ and Kraut’s high degree of confidence in Plato’s early portrait of Socrates cum grano. The following section illustrates why, with just one minor example.

(A) THE CRAFTSMAN WHO KNEW NO CRAFT

The _Apology_ is widely believed to be the most historically accurate portrait of Socrates in all of Plato’s dialogues. 40 Burnet has argued that the _Apology_ provides us with "the most secure foundation for our reconstruction of the historical Socrates." 41 Kraut argues that the _Crito_ must be interpreted in such a way that its moral-political philosophy is consistent with that expressed in the _Apology_, 42 implying that the _Apology_ holds a special significance for understanding Socratic philosophy. R.E. Allen argues that "the _Apology_ should be accepted as essentially accurate to historical fact." 43 That's not to say of course that it's an exact transcript, _ipsissimis verba_, of the trial proceedings, but the


40 For example: Burnet, Grote, Hegel, Maier, Schleiermacher, Zeller take this position, as do many more modern authorities, for similar kinds of reasons as these men provide.

41 J. Burnet, as quoted in Montuori (1981), 43.

42 Kraut. SS, 12, 24, _et passim_.

43 R.E. Allen. 1984, 76.
scholarly consensus is that it captures the sum and substance of what Socrates said in court. After all, its format conforms with actual legal procedure, "and no peculiarly Platonic doctrine is suggested." Moreover, Plato lets the reader know that he was present at the trial, the only instance in all of his dialogues where he bothers to point out that he was actually there to witness a Socratic conversation. If he was there, and saw and heard what transpired, and if there's no good reason to doubt his version of events (as many contend there isn't), what reason do we have to doubt the overall historical credibility of the Apology? As Gomperz put it:

"To invent the deposition of a witness at a recent trial and expect by this fabrication to make contemporaries and posterity believe in an event of the utmost importance: who would wish to attribute to Plato such a purpose which is as stupid as it is dishonest?"

And so it is often thought that Plato's early dialogues best portray the real Socrates, and that the Apology does this best of all. However, when, in the Apology, Socrates describes his philosophical pilgrimage, investigating Athenians to see who are truly wise and who are not, he tells how

"last of all I turned to the skilled craftsmen. I knew quite well that I had practically no technical qualifications myself, and I was sure that I should find them full of impressive knowledge. In this I was not disappointed. They understood things which I did not, and to this extent they were wiser than I."

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45 T. Gomperz, as quoted in Montuori (1981), 59.

46 Apology 22d (Tredennick in Cairns and Hamilton). I should point out that the original here, if one were to translate verbatim, would be more like: "I was aware of knowing next to nothing, but I was confident that I should find that they [the skilled craftsmen] knew many fine things."
Socrates' claim here that "I knew quite well that I had practically no technical qualifications myself," seems to rule out the story that Socrates had followed in his father's footsteps as a *lithourgos*, a stone-mason or sculptor. The view that Socrates was a sculptor and the son of a sculptor is alluded to in one of Plato's own dialogues. As Fowler notes, "This is doubtless the reason for Socrates' reference to Daedalus as his ancestor" at *Euthyphro* 11c. And so, if this story is to be believed, then it's as if Plato left his fingerprints behind at the crime scene when he puts into Socrates' mouth statements in which he disavows knowledge of any *technē* (craft) whatsoever. Was he a craftsman or wasn't he?

If there are little discrepancies like this one that exist within Plato's own dialogues, such as the *Apology* and the *Euthyphro*, that are considered to be "unquestionably early and therefore especially reliable" as Socratic documentation, one wonders just how historically trustworthy the early dialogues really are, and whether Vlastos' and Kraut's high degree of confidence in them is warranted. The example I have provided is only one of many that could be raised, and only a very minor one at that. But if Plato's dialogues are

However, as Brickhouse and Smith remark, "Socrates' claim to lack *epistêmê* is contrasted directly with the craftsmen's having it" (1994, 33 n.10). So Tredennick's filled-in translation captures the sense well.

47 It has been claimed that a group of statues, The Three Graces, were carved by Socrates and stood at the entrance to the Acropolis for centuries. This is reported by Diogenes Laertius and Pausanius, both writing in the third century A.D.

48 In the *Loeb Classical Library* No.36, 41 n.1. Daedalus was a legendary sculptor, regarded as the patron hero of craftsmen.

49 But perhaps more interesting is the dearth of conversation between craftsmen and Socrates in the early dialogues, in spite of Socrates' description of his mission at *Apology* 22d.
equivocal even on a relatively simple matter, such as whether Socrates was himself a skilled craftsman or not, I think it stands to reason that on more complex issues it would be even more difficult to sort out the Platonic literary elements from the historical reporting. The term “factional” has been coined for describing works which contain fictional developments based on real people, events or situations. I think the term applies well to Plato’s dialogues, even the early ones, including the *Apology*. However, I concur with Brickhouse and Smith⁵⁰ that no matter what – whether the impressive character of Plato’s early dialogues is historic fact or Platonic fiction, or, what is surely more likely, a clever combination of both – he is well worth our attention all the same. As A.W. Levy wrote:

“The problem of the historical Socrates is, I believe, insoluble, but the quest to find the meaning of Socrates for ourselves is perennial. One can as legitimately ask a philosopher what stand he takes on the meaning of Socrates’ life as one can ask what is his theory of the nature of sense-data or his belief about the objectivity of moral values.”⁵¹

I turn now to examine what stand Vlastos takes on this matter, his thesis being that the concept of moral autonomy was “the deepest thing in Socrates, the strongest of his moral concerns.”⁵²

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⁵⁰ Brickhouse and Smith. 2000, 49.
⁵¹ As quoted in Montuori (1981), 31.
⁵² Vlastos. SIMP, 44.


IV. THE AUTONOMY THESIS

When sixth century Greeks met with Egyptians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, Persians, and other neighbouring peoples, they learned that they had different traditions, different gods, different intuitions and insights. Since some of the beliefs were in conflict, they couldn’t all be true. Yet groups of people maintained conflicting beliefs, as did many individuals. For example, when Hecataeus traveled to Egypt and met with Egyptian priests, he told them his own genealogy was recorded for sixteen generations and that his line was founded by a god. The Egyptian priests were surprised, or amused, because they traced their kings back three-hundred and forty-one generations, without evidence of any gods! Perhaps this embarrassing little encounter prompted a change in Hecataeus, who wrote: ‘I write what seems to me to be true; for the Greeks have many tales which, as it appears to me, are absurd.’

Some individuals around this time began to realize that relying on such tales or traditions was, to use an Aristotle phrase, “not very up to date.” A new way of thinking was developed, in which doubting, scrutinizing, and speculative reasoning took the place of accepting, largely uncritically, ancestral wisdom. This way of thinking,

"it must be repeated, was something quite new. For the first time, a conscious and deliberate attempt had been made to set up a standard of what was and was not ‘reasonable’ or ‘fitting’... Everything was to be judged according to this standard alone, and

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1 As quoted in Hornblower and Spawforth (1996), 671.
the authority of tradition, or of a general consensus, or of a great teacher, was to count for nothing.”

But this shift from traditional muthoi to logoi did not catch on among the general public, and was confined mostly to the small group of individuals who spearheaded the change, known today as the pre-Socratic philosophers. One of the central issues debated by the pre-Socratic philosophers was the “one-and-the-many” problem: whether all things are one, sharing an underlying unity, or many, as it appears to the senses. A second one-and-the-many problem seems to have concerned Socrates, who applied similarly rigorous standards to a moral and social, rather than a metaphysical, problem: the relationship between “the one,” the individual, the self, and the many other people with whom one must associate and live. To what extent should an individual human being “go along to get along” with the ways and standards of the social group of which s/he is a part? This is the gist of Socrates’ question to Callicles in the Gorgias:

“It is necessary to inquire in addition how one should pass his life so that he may live best. Is he to become like the constitution of the city in which he dwells? Must you now therefore become most like the Athenian demos, if you are to be loved by it and have great power in the city?”

Athenians living in the time of Socrates seem to have generally favored people who were fully integrated into the group, who loved and hated what others loved and hated, and who adhered to the same basic set of beliefs as the rest of

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2 E. Hussey. 1972, 14.
3 “From stories and myths to logic and arguments” is a convenient over-simplification for this massive development in intellectual history.
4 Gorgias 513a (Allen).
the community: \textit{ta endoxa}, the generally accepted, "reputable" beliefs of the majority.\(^5\) Indeed, from the Greek term for "one's own" (\textit{idios}), referring to the peculiar ideas and customs of those individuals who deviated from \textit{ta endoxa}, comes our word "idiot," still no term of endearment. So someone who was unusual or introduced new ideas, like Socrates, could have been labeled an \textit{idiôtês}. Consider how Polus describes Socrates' set of beliefs:

"Don't you think you've been refuted already, Socrates, when you're saying things the likes of which no human being would maintain?"\(^6\)

But this kind of criticism didn't seem to faze Socrates in the slightest. I very much doubt if "reputable" was a favorite word of his, or if "\textit{idios}" would automatically have had negative connotations for him. Socrates conceived of himself as the sort of person who followed nothing but the reasoning which, upon consideration, seemed best to him (\textit{Crito} 46b), even when this meant deviating dramatically from \textit{ta endoxa}. The fact that an idea might be highly contra-endoxic did not detract from its merit, if reasoned argument seemed to sustain it, nor did the popularity of an idea add to its credibility if it seemed

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\(^5\) Cf. Vlastos (SIMP), 94.

\(^6\) \textit{Gorgias} 473e (Zeyl in Cooper). Compare Creon's question to Antigone (in Sophocles' \textit{Antigone}, line 510 as translated by Elizabeth Wychoff): "Are you not ashamed to think alone?" Interestingly, the first instance of an individual being called "\textit{autonomos}" in recorded history was Sophocles' brave heroine Antigone (Ostwald, 1982, 10). The play was performed in 442 or 441 B.C, when Socrates would have been in his late twenties. Prior to this, as far as we can know from what is extant, the word \textit{autonomía} was always predicated of groups of people or the entire \textit{polis}, and referred to the right of a people to live by their own laws and established traditions (\textit{ta patria}). This was a value, it is said, which "received an almost fanatical devotion from the early Greeks. The loss of autonomy was as keenly felt as the loss of personal freedom and was indeed called by the name enslavement" (Sinclair, 1967, 4).
rationally unsustainable. As Vlastos writes: “Evident throughout Plato’s Socratic dialogues is Socrates’ commitment to reasoned argument as the final arbiter of claims to truth in the moral domain,”\textsuperscript{7} and one might underscore that this reasoned argument that is the final arbiter for person A must be an argument that A actually participated in. The result(s) of an argument which was conducted by persons B and C is not binding on person A, or anyone else, who did not participate, though the result could be information that one might consider.

Socrates also tried to animate a touch of this rational, independent spirit in others, as in his suggestion to a man trapped in a glass bubble of traditional orthodoxy and badly in need of such advice:

“Then should we examine this again, Euthyphro, to see if it is correct? Or should we let it go, and accept our own statements and those of others, agreeing that something is so, simply because someone says it is? Or should we investigate?”\textsuperscript{8}

But what exactly, in Vlastos’ view, was Socrates hoping to achieve by encouraging this kind of questioning, critical, epistemically-conscientious attitude in his interlocutors? We know that Vlastos believes that advancing the cause of moral autonomy was Socrates’ ultimate concern, even though, as Vlastos acknowledges, the word \textit{autonomia} never actually surfaces in any of Plato’s dialogues, nor, for that matter, in any of the primary sources of

\textsuperscript{7} Vlastos in Smith and Woodruff (2000), 55.

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Euthyphro} 9e.
information about Socrates. In addition, Vlastos himself never provides a systematic exposition of exactly what he means by the "moral autonomy" he boldly proclaims to have been Socrates' strongest and deepest concern. Our task in this section, then, is to try to say more precisely what Vlastos means when he speaks of "moral autonomy," and the kind of thing he thinks supports his view that Socrates was deeply concerned with it.

This discussion must be prefaced with a warning that, since there is a "spectacular amount of disagreement both about what autonomy is and about its moral significance," I do not pretend to do any more here than capture Vlastos' conception of it, as it plays out in Socrates' philosophy.

The concept of autonomy, as Gerald Dworkin cautions, is riddled with certain "tensions and paradoxes." One of the problems involves determining whether autonomy is more appropriately construed as "an inherent feature of all human beings, or as something which the more worldly or successful or independent have developed to a greater degree than the rest of us." Another has to do with the connection between autonomy as a kind of intellectual procedure and notions of correctness and objectivity. If autonomy is valuable, is

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9 Vlastos. SIMP, 44. And neither do any of its cognate adjectives or adverbs.
10 This in itself is not too unusual; as Dworkin (1988, 7) points out, "Autonomy is a term of art introduced to make sense of a tangled web of intuitions, conceptual and empirical issues, and normative claims."
11 O'Neill in Milligan and Miller (1992), 203.
12 Dworkin. 1988, 12.
it valuable because it is thought to be an efficient route to reach true moral beliefs, or is it a valuable end in itself? Assuming, as Socrates believed, that there is such a thing as truth about right and wrong, honourable and dishonourable, and so forth, would it be a nobler thing to be autonomous and mistaken, or heteronomous and correct in one’s moral beliefs? Keeping these distinctions in mind may help to clarify Vlastos’ theory.

À propos of the first of these problems, consider the position of F.M. Cornford, for example. Like Vlastos, Cornford perceived in Socrates’ philosophy something which he called “moral autonomy.” At times, he characterized this something as “possessing your own soul,” a choice phrase from Matthew Arnold’s poem “A Southern Night”:

“... And see all sights from pole to pole
And glance, and nod, and bustle by,
And never once possess our soul
Before we die.”

But, Cornford also writes that being morally autonomous is “a responsibility that no individual can escape.”14 This sentiment might be compared to Sartre’s idea that man is condemned to be free. The idea is that, try as one might, one cannot wash one’s hands of one’s “autonomy” by shifting the blame for one’s moral decisions to some external source; though a person may not feel, or like to feel, that they and only they are ultimately in charge of their moral life, they are. As Cornford explains,

14 Cornford. 1932, 46.
"an individual can indeed, once for all, accept some external authority, and thenceforward treat that authority as responsible for what it tells him to do. But he remains responsible for his original choice of an authority to be obeyed."\textsuperscript{15}

And this seems reasonable; after all, the claim that "I was only following orders" hasn’t been held in high esteem of late. But the problem is that Cornford, perhaps speaking loosely, seems to be conflating "moral autonomy" with "responsibility" here, when the two concepts are best kept separate. After all, if many of us do spend our lives "glancing, and nodding, and bustling by, and never once possess our souls before we die," then it appears that the task of becoming morally autonomous is easily escaped, contrary to Cornford’s position. Perhaps the majority of us escape it. As Emerson, who rarely wrote anything without first re-reading some pages of Plato, said: “Nothing is more rare in any man than an act of his own.”\textsuperscript{16} But responsibility, on the other hand, is rather more difficult to shake (one often has to hire a lawyer for that). Cornford’s equivocation is common enough – flitting back and forth between considering autonomy as a kind of basic human feature, like having a face, or as an achievement that requires hard work – and exemplifies the first of the problems associated with the concept of autonomy that Dworkin spoke of.

As far as Vlastos is concerned, moral autonomy is taken to be an achievement of sorts; it is, for him, a term of praise, and, far from being a basic human feature, it required hard work on Socrates’ part to try to instill it in others.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 46.

\textsuperscript{16} As quoted in Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde.
Vlastos' autonomy thesis helps explain one of the most salient features of Socratic practice: the peculiar fact that, in so many of the early dialogues, instead of the conversation coming to any sort of solid conclusion in the end, with Socrates supplying his interlocutors with the answers to the question(s) under discussion, Socrates usually left people in an aporetic vortex, their thoughts, presumably, going round and round, the argument unsettled and unsettling. The hope, presumably, was that since these people (interlocutors) were unable to get the right answer during the discussion, at least they might be sufficiently provoked to carry on the debate internally after it is over, to go on thinking about the issue, or discuss it further with others, until some sort of resolution was reached. In this sense their resolution, the working-out of their opinion on the issue, would be an achievement, and could be called an "autonomous" discovery, provided they did not just run off and ask someone else for the answer, perhaps an elder or a sophist, and simply accept their answer. It seems to me abundantly reasonable to assume that, after a run-in with Socrates, anyone who was not hopelessly dogmatic should have new doubts. These unresolved problems would likely resurface in other conversations later, or when one is alone, and continue to bother members of the Socratic commune of debaters until some resolution occurs:
“Where once we held debate
A band of useful friends,
Our minds now recreate
Try again to comprehend.”

Of course, Socrates was not so naive as to think that after people underwent one elenctic conversation with him, that they would necessarily change their ways and become enthusiastic seekers after the truth. He knew full well that many would lapse back into their old belief-patterns, as Alcibiades confesses: “the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways…”

But, perhaps the hope was that people would catch some of Socrates’ contagious ebullience and take up his advice to “talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others,” and, by doing so in the questioning, critical, independent spirit of Socratic inquiry, thereby become “morally autonomous.” By investigating the merit of moral beliefs in such a way that “what the wise men of the past have or have not said about them becomes of little consequence,” and refusing to take, as Heraclitus said, “the crowd for their teacher,” such converts to the Socratic lifestyle might achieve that state of being which Vlastos describes as having been Socrates’ strongest and deepest concern.

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17 Inspired by some lines from Tennyson.
18 Symposium 216b (Nehamas and Woodruff in Cooper).
19 Apology 38a (Fowler).
20 Vlastos. VSS, 7.
Or would they? Is this what Vlastos means? It seems to me that there is a tension in Vlastos' vision of Socratic moral autonomy, which is perhaps the upshot of that somewhat uneasy relationship between autonomy and objectivity which Dworkin spoke of. The tension is that, on the one hand, Vlastos speaks of such things as the “Socratic vision of the good life” as an “utterly free individual adventure,” and writes that he gives:

"whole-hearted assent to Socrates’ vision of man as a mature, responsible being, claiming to the fullest extent his freedom to make his own choice between right and wrong, not only in action, but in judgment. I do not see how man can reach the full stature of his manhood unless he claims the right to make his own personal judgments on morality.”

This kind of talk gives the impression that Vlastos' Socrates was chiefly interested in waking people up to the potential to be like this, by introducing them to independent, rational belief-forming habits so that they may be able to judge for themselves about moral issues in a responsible way. It gives the impression that he was not interested in producing a flock of Socrates-clones, in converting people to believe the same things he does. This has, as Alvin Goldman put it, “a nice liberal-sounding air to it.” However, the case is actually more complicated than that. For, on the one hand, Vlastos holds that promoting “moral autonomy” was Socrates’ chief concern, more important to

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21 Vlastos. PLS, 205.
22 Vlastos. PS, 21. George Grote, whose writings on Socrates greatly influenced Vlastos, believes that the sentiment of the Academic sect, descending from Socrates through Arcesilaus and Carneades, “illustrates a similar elimination of the idea of authority: ‘Why are you so curious to know what I myself have determined on the point? Judge for yourself’” (1888, Vol. I., 369 n.3).
him than even the end-results, the actual moral doctrines, which a lifetime of autonomous intellection might bring about. That is why, Vlastos contends, Socrates was so generous with his method, exposing so many people to it, but so frugal with imparting his own moral doctrine to others: because while his method required that a person think on their own two feet, spouting doctrine might actually be an autonomy-thwarting process. But, Vlastos also claims that, to return to the example of the *Euthyphro*, what Socrates was doing there was trying

". . . his best to lead Euthyphro to the point where he could see for himself the right answer. But what he positively refuses to do is to tell Euthyphro this answer."\(^{24}\)

And so the picture significantly morphs, from a Socrates whose fundamental project was basically to get people thinking for themselves about moral issues, to a Socrates who was *really* trying to get others to believe the same things he did, "the right answers," albeit by circuitous means. The difference between these two interpretations is significant, and though Vlastos' writings seem to waver between the two, he ultimately endorses the latter position. So, while Vlastos' emphasis on the importance of "judging for yourself," and his bold conjecture that "certainly Socrates himself would have attached far more importance to his method of moral inquiry than to any of its results,"\(^{25}\) seem to portray Socrates in one light, one must not lose sight of Vlastos' other Socrates

\(^{24}\) Vlastos. PS, 14.

\(^{25}\) Vlastos. PS, 19.
lurking beneath – the one who thinks he knows the truth and is coyly trying to get others to believe the same things he does. This Socrates is, as Nehamas points out, “in the ancient sense of the word, a dogmatist; he knows the truth,” or thinks he does, and, furthermore, tries to get others to see it too, though he has some peculiar scruples about how he goes about doing so.

Vlastos draws much of his corroboration for the autonomy thesis from what he would call Socrates’ “teaching techniques.” Alfred North Whitehead said that the safest general characterization of Western thought is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. But Plato’s works themselves contain “a series of footnotes to Homer.” Many of these footnotes to Homer are part of a Platonic polemic against the cultural authority of the poets, who were widely regarded as the most important ethical teachers in the fifth and early fourth centuries. According to Vlastos, Socrates rejected not only much of the content of the moral credo found in the poetic tradition, but also the process by which the poetic tradition was taught, which was largely mnemonic and mimetic. So far, so reasonable. There can hardly be any doubt that Socrates was not very impressed with the conventional system of moral education, and that he advocated a more “autonomous” approach to thinking about moral issues, in the sense that he wanted people to do more independent thinking and rely less on prefabricated

26 Nehamas. 1999, 103.
27 As Samuel Johnson characterized European literature.
28 That said, Kraut’s view (in SS) would leave one with the strong impression that it was only the content of the Homeric tradition that Socrates found objectionable, not the authoritarian teaching methods it employed.
cant. But Vlastos goes much further than this, arguing that Socrates set himself up as a kind of one-man rival school to the existing system of moral education, with his own “curriculum,” his own moral knowledge to impart. All this in spite of Socrates’ insistence that he was not a knower or a teacher. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to an examination and critique of this aspect of Vlastos’ interpretation.

(A) SOCRATIC EDUCATION

Consider again Socrates’ self-portrait at Crito 46b:

"I am not only now but always the sort of person who follows nothing but the logos which on consideration seems best to me."

What this describes is “a consciousness which is self-governing and which discovers the reason for action in itself,” a recommendation which must have seemed much more extraordinary as seen from the ancient Athenian eye than as seen from our own. That’s because it would be seen as usurping the time-honoured authority of the “poetic tradition,” the moral and social pandect contained in the works of wise men like Homer and Hesiod, which comprised the core of the existing Athenian educational system known as paideia. In so doing, Socrates was openly challenging an authority which had hitherto, except by a handful of iconoclastic intellectuals like Xenophanes and Heraclitus, been widely regarded as the undisputed champion of ethical thinking. The paideia system aimed to instill in young people solid lessons in morals using highly

mnemonic and mimetic methods, such as by teaching young Athenians to memorize and model themselves after the appropriate characters in passages of poetry which were composed centuries earlier, especially those of Homer. These poems were "continually performed, extensively memorized, and endlessly quoted," and, it is important to note, were not valued only, or even chiefly, for their entertainment value, but were prized above all for their didactic function, the transmission of important social, moral, and historical information from one generation of Greeks to the next.

From these poems young Athenians in Socrates' day learned "what is dikaios or not, themis or not, kalon or not, kata kosmon or not, who were the agathoi and who were the kakoi of society." In this way, the youth were trained to go along with tradition. A child's schooling usually began at about the age of seven, and typically ended three or four years later for lower-income students, while wealthier students would continue on until they were seventeen or eighteen. After that, there were no official centers of higher learning where the

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30 As Plato put it, many of his contemporaries honored and revered Homer as "the educator of Hellas and believe that on questions of human conduct and culture he deserves to be constantly studied as a guide by whom to regulate your whole life" Republic 606 (Cornford).
32 Robb. 1994, 174. Dikaion means just; themis means what's right, lawful, customary; kalon means beautiful and admirable; kata kosmon means orderly and proper; the agathoi are the good people and the kakoi are the bad, base, and contemptible.
33 Havelock. 1963, 199.
34 These figures are based on the male experience; girls received less formal education than boys.
traditions were critically discussed, assessed, or possibly unlearned.\(^{35}\) As Kagan writes:

"The most important part of the traditional education involved learning the epic poems by heart, for Homer was the fountain of wisdom and the model of Greek behavior. In the early part of the fifth century, this was as much education as a young aristocrat received."\(^{36}\)

In the *Apology*, Socrates observed how it is easiest to influence people and secure their assent if you get hold of them as children or young adults.\(^{37}\) Perhaps partly for this reason, and also due to its intense teaching techniques, the *paideia* system seems to have had a strong and lasting impression on people. Here's how Protagoras describes a child's education to Socrates:

"As soon as a child can understand what is said to him, nurse and mother and tutor and the father himself vie to make him as good as possible, instructing him through everything he does or says, pointing out, 'This is right and that is wrong, this honorable and that disgraceful, this holy, and that is impious; do this, don't do that.' If he is obedient, well and good. If not, they straighten him out with threats and beatings, like one would a warped and twisted plank. Later on when the children go to school [they] lay more emphasis on good behavior than on letters or music. The teachers take good care of this, and when boys have learned their letters and are ready to understand the written word as formerly the spoken, they set the works of good poets before them on their desks and make them learn them by heart, poems containing much admonition and many stories, eulogies, and panegyrics of the good men of old, so that the child may be inspired to imitate them and

\(^{35}\) Although if one had the wealth and the inclination one could go to a sophist. But it is controversial whether or to what extent the sophists really challenged the old *paideia* mentality.

\(^{36}\) As quoted in Havelock (1963), 185.

\(^{37}\) *Apology* 17c.
long to be like them. [Even] the music masters by analogous methods instill self-control and deter the young from evil-doing.”

In this way, children were taught, willingly (and sometimes not so willingly, as Protagoras observes) absorbing the same stories as did their ancestors, and modeling themselves after the characters found in these tales. And though they were, presumably, only “stories, characters, tales,” this fiction became reality to the children indoctrinated in it. Strange as it may seem to us, Homer’s works were presented as truthful, or at least realistic, and have been called, in a memorable phrase of Havelock’s, “the tribal encyclopedia” of the Greeks in matters moral, social, and historical. Practically all aspects of life were covered by the epical stories, and in some detail, such as whom to admire, and why; whom to marry; whom to shun; the proprieties one should observe with a suppliant stranger, a guest, a brother’s wife, an orphan, an aged father, and so on; the way to conduct oneself generally, and in specific social gatherings, such as who should speak first at sumposia (by custom the oldest man present, the one most knowledgeable about the oldest things, the palaia); and even a certain amount of useful information about such things as carpentry,

38 Protagoras, 325d-326 (Guthrie in Cairns and Hamilton).

39 The title of Ch. IV in Havelock (1963).

40 Homer’s influence has also been compared to that of the Bible (and similarly, the Bible is sometimes said, by Frye for example, to be epic literature). For this reason Robb (1994, 141) refers to those zealous adherents who swallowed the traditional tales about the gods hook, line and sinker, such as Euthyphro, as “Homeric fundamentalists.”

41 Cf. Ion 540b: from his excellent memory of Homer’s works, Ion believed he knew what is proper and socially approved for a man to say; for a woman to say; for a free man to say; for a slave to say; for a ruler to say; for one who is ruled to say, and so on.
sailing, medicine, and other practical skills as are occasionally detailed in the epics. There was also trusted information about the physical arrangement of the cosmos to be found in the works of poets, and much lore about the divine powers thought to influence events, along with cautionary tales about the penalties, the *nemesis*\(^42\) called forth by those who do what mustn’t be done, or fail to do what must be done.

Having learned all these lessons, a person would be considered well-educated and knowledgeable, especially if he had a thorough mastery of all minutiae involved. For example, Ion the rhapsode-man claimed that rhapsodes were superior to all other men at judging “everything, any topic,”\(^43\) due to their close familiarity with the works of Homer. Hippias, a popular lecturer on Homer,\(^44\) boasts that he has never “met anyone better than me at anything,”\(^45\) and Euthyphro calls himself “very far advanced in wisdom indeed,” and points out that “I should be of no use, Socrates, and Euthyphro would be in no way different from other men, if I did not have exact knowledge about all such things.”\(^46\) Conversely, those who failed to “learn virtue” (i.e. who did not adhere

\(^42\) *Nemesis* covers both what were thought to be divine penalties for misdeeds, such as plagues and insanity, and the penalties imposed upon the transgressor by the community.

\(^43\) Ion 539d.

\(^44\) Who (in the *Hippias Major*, 282e) boasts of having made more money than any two other sophists combined, a “stupifying” amount.

\(^45\) *Hippias Minor* 364a (Allen).

\(^46\) *Euthyphro* 5a (Fowler). Although, as I discuss below, Euthyphro is a curious exception, since his “exact knowledge” of the mythopoetic traditions did not seem to impress anyone but himself.
to the lessons of their *paideia*) faced the *nemesis* of their community.\(^{47}\) Some transgressions, of a relatively minor sort, might only arouse a sense of disapproval or contempt from the community,\(^{48}\) while serious transgressions, such as the improper treatment of one’s parents, a suppliant stranger, a brother’s wife, or an orphan, were considered so heinous that any Athenian who feared the retribution of his community would never commit them. In addition to human disapprobation, some wrong-doings were thought to result in a “pollution,” a punishment inflicted upon the whole city, not just the culprit, by the indignant gods. In these cases, the condemnation of the community would likely be particularly harsh, since they also stood to reap the consequences.

Having such a predictable set of reactions and sanctions was probably useful in preserving communal values and restraining undesired behavior, and having such a rich code of venerated do’s and don’ts simplified the procedure for determining the expected or “right” thing to do in any given situation. But that’s not to say that the right thing to do was always an easy determination to make, since the complexities of any real-life moral situation notoriously tend to complicate the business of applying rules or following precedents, and sometimes two or more rules, which both seem germane to the case, come into conflict with each other. Case in point: consider Euthyphro’s moral situation.

Euthyphro believes he is totally justified, obliged even, to prosecute his father for

\(^{47}\) Cf. Williams (1993), chapter IV.

\(^{48}\) Even Aristotle remarked that it is “unseemly” to gainsay the gods, or one’s father, or one’s teachers, so one can imagine the reactions of more ordinary thinkers to unconventional behavior.
murmur, even though to do so breaks faith with a sentiment that was practically axiomatic in ancient Athens: the veneration of one’s parents.\textsuperscript{49} A transgression against one’s aged parents such as Euthyphro was prepared to commit was considered one of the very worst violations of traditional propriety, compared by Demosthenes to treason, even denounced by Lysias as meriting execution.\textsuperscript{50} Also, by prosecuting his own flesh and blood for the sake of someone unrelated and unimportant to him, Euthyphro would surely be seen as violating one of the most fundamental concepts of ancient Greek moralizing, the idea that it is meet and just, indeed mandatory, to help your friends and harm your enemies.\textsuperscript{51} In addition, the facts of the case surely do not seem to justify a murder charge, though Euthyphro is sure they do. Given all this, it’s no wonder that everyone around him was saying that Euthyphro must be “insane”\textsuperscript{52} to go through with this prosecution. However, in Euthyphro’s mind, what he was about to do is the “established, and therefore correct”\textsuperscript{53} course of action, in accordance with another tenet of the traditional morality, which warns that murderers must not go unpunished,\textsuperscript{54} (which Euthyphro interprets as trumping the loyalty owed to one’s parents). He also cites a precedent for his parent-punishing act in the epic tradition. He explains to Socrates that the god Ouranos was gelded by his son

\textsuperscript{49} Dover. 1974, 273.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 274.
\textsuperscript{51} Cf. Dover (1974); Vlastos (SIMP); Plato’s \textit{Meno} 71e, \textit{Republic} I 334b.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Euthyphro} 4a-b (Fowler).
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Euthyphro} 5e.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Euthyphro} 4c.
Cronus, and Cronus was shackled by his son Zeus, reputedly the most excellent and just of all gods, for swallowing his own children unjustly. Since Zeus is the most excellent of gods, nothing he does could be unjust or unholy. So if Zeus shackled his father, then surely Euthyphro could indict his. Q.E.D. Based on these Hesiodic precedents, Euthyphro felt comfortable charging his own father with murder, in a very unclear case full of guilt-mitigating twists and turns. He thinks his premises are “exact” (akribēs) and his reasoning rock solid (“tekmērion,” a positive proof) and can’t understand why his kinfolk are bitter. Indeed, he is so confident that he is in the right, he believes he will be able to win his jurors over, once they hear his impeccable reasoning based on established principles and precedents.

Euthyphro’s case illustrates nicely that even in an environment where moral education takes the form of ‘This is right and that is wrong, this honorable and that disgraceful, this holy, and that is impious; do this, don’t do that,’” and moral deliberation consists of trying to adhere to these rules, people can, of course, still come to very different conclusions about what is right or wrong. There is always what Vlastos calls the burden of interpretation in interpreting and applying what has been handed down as moral law, and this interpretive step can lead to big differences of opinion. Hence, starting from ta endoxa, Euthyphro ends up at a highly contra-endoxic decision, which provokes much righteous indignation from his kinfolk, who presumably also believe that they are in the

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55 Vlastos. SIMP, 44.
right, both in terms of the facts of the case and in terms of Athenian traditions. And so my point is that, although Euthyphrō is clearly an unusual character, capable of enduring much public scorn without wavering from his position\(^{56}\) — indeed, he is clearly proud of being “different from the general run of men”\(^{57}\) — nonetheless he is far from being a counterexample to the idea that Athenian popular morality in the time of Socrates consisted of a set of handed-down, highly ingrained do’s and don’ts based largely on the poetic tradition. On the contrary, he is just another good example from Plato’s dialogues of the immense cultural authority that the poets held over the beliefs and attitudes of Socrates’ contemporaries.

Time and again in Plato’s dialogues we meet characters like Euthyphro, Hippias, and Ion, and even to some extent the great chieftain of the sophists Protagoras, all of whom, although considered to be wise men, tend to rely on the authority of poets at the expense of (as Socrates puts it) “using their own voices.”\(^{58}\) Even in high-brow circles, such as the gathering of sophists described by Plato with such euphrosunē in the Protagoras, much of the conversation is parasitical on a poem (by Simonides). The subject matter of the poem is virtue, goodness and badness, the effects of catastrophe on a person’s worth, and who truly merits praise or blame. But after a while, Socrates breaks off the discussion thus:

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\(^{56}\) Even before his decision to accuse his own father of murder, as Euthyphro tells Socrates, he was often “laughed at as if he were a madman” (3c).

\(^{57}\) Cf. Euthyphro 5a (Cooper).

\(^{58}\) Protagoras 347d.
"I leave it up to Protagoras, but if it's all right with him, why don't we say good-bye to odes and poetry and get back to what I first asked him, a question, Protagoras, which I would be glad to settle in a joint investigation with you. Discussing poetry strikes me as no different from the second-rate drinking parties of the agora crowd. These people, largely uneducated and unable to entertain themselves over their wine by using their own voices to generate conversation, pay premium prices for flute-girls and rely on the extraneous voices of the reed flute as background music for their parties. But when well-educated gentlemen drink together, you will not see girls playing the flute or the lyre or dancing, but a group who knows how to get together without these childish frivolities, conversing civilly no matter how heavily they are drinking. Ours is such a group, if indeed it consists of men such as most of us claim to be, and it should require no extraneous voices, not even of poets, who cannot be questioned on what they say. When a poet is brought up in a discussion, almost everyone has a different opinion about what he means, and they wind up arguing about something they can never finally decide. The best people avoid such discussions and rely on their own powers of speech to entertain themselves and test each other. These people should be our models. We should put the poets aside and converse directly with each other, testing the truth and our own ideas." 

When Socrates asked people to "put the poets aside," opining that "the best people" "use their own voices" and "test the truth and their own ideas," he was clearly recommending something very different from the memorizing and mimetic techniques of paideia. So different, in fact, that Meletus called it "Corrupting the youth," and charged Socrates with a capital offense "on behalf of the poets."  

Vlastos, on the other hand, finds support for his autonomy thesis in the fact that Socrates wanted people to investigate the merit of moral beliefs in such a way that "what the wise men of the past have or have not said

59 Protagoras 347c-348b (Lombardo and Bell in Cooper).
60 Apology 23e.
about them becomes of little consequence.”

And certainly, against the backdrop of the *paideia* system of moral education, Vlastos’ emphasis on Socratic “autonomy” gains *prima facie* support. Socrates was an ace at questioning people in such a way that barred them from relying on prefabricated traditional answers and compelling them instead to “think alone,” and he spent much of his time in this activity. Let us look at three of Socrates’ techniques for doing so, which are beautiful in their simplicity. He would regularly:

(1) Veto “second-hand” responses to his questions, either explicitly, as when he requested that Protagoras “put aside the poets and test his own ideas,” or more indirectly, as when he would.

(2) Ask questions which simply could not be answered by repeating some conventional wisdom from the accumulated storehouse of one’s cultural heritage, because no such answer existed there. Perhaps the paradigm case of this kind of question was Socrates’ patented request for a definition of one of the virtues, a definition which must satisfy logical rather than poetical standards (i.e. a definition which is explanatory, neither too broad nor too narrow, neither circular nor obscure, etc.).

(3) Urge people to answer his questions in their own words, a technique which Havelock calls the “Socratic interrupting question.” These questions interrupt the speaker when he is in the “recitation mode,” and force him to repeat himself, “with the underlying assumption that there was something unsatisfactory about the original statement, and it had better be rephrased.”

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61 Vlastos. VSS, 7.
63 Ibid., 209.
So, for example, by putting Euthyphro through these three steps, Socrates was able, at the very least, to cause a little unrest in his over-confident soul. Corresponding to the first step, Socrates discourages Euthyphro's practice of relying on the say-so of others with his fully loaded question:

"Then should we examine this again, Euthyphro, to see if it is correct, or should we let it go, and accept our own statements and those of others, agreeing that something is so, simply because someone says it is? Or should we investigate?"

Then he further obstructs passive reliance on authorities by asking questions which go far beyond what Euthyphro could have learned in his paideia and from his advanced study of the epics. So for example, when Socrates asks Euthyphro "What is holiness?" Euthyphro is able to answer "What I am now doing, that is holy," since that answer seems to be warranted by epic precedent. But when Socrates asks him if what is holy is holy because the gods approve of it, or if the gods approve of it because it is holy, or when Socrates asks him if he thinks all that is just is holy, or if all that is holy is just, or what, Euthyphro cannot answer or even understand the questions. Thoroughly stumped, he replies: "I do not follow Socrates." These are not the kinds of questions that can be handled by appealing to poetic precedent. Rather, as Havelock put it, they "abruptly disturbed the pleasurable complacency felt in the poetic formula or the

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64 I focus here on the *Euthyphro*, though almost any of the other early dialogues would do. Socrates' treatment of Polemarchus in *Republic* I is another excellent example.
65 *Euthyphro* 9e: A Socratic sentiment which would seem to cast doubt on Kraut's authority thesis.
66 *Euthyphro* 5d.
image [that served as justification], and some unpleasant calculative reflection
was substituted."\(^{67}\) For this kind of unpleasant calculative reflection, Euthyphro
could not call upon the works of the poets for help. It is something he must think
about for himself. The same effect was produced by Socrates' frequent insistence
that people use their own words to say what they mean. For example, when
Euthyphro says that holiness is that part of justice which has to do with our
"attending to the gods" (*therapeia theôn*),\(^{68}\) a phrase from Homer's *Odyssey*, he
seems quite satisfied with that answer. But when Socrates presses further,
saying "There is however one little point on which I need more information, for I
do not quite understand what you mean by *attending*,"\(^{69}\) it turns out that
Euthyphro himself didn't really understand what he meant either. As Socrates
points out, when a horseman "attends to" his horses, or a huntsman "attends to"
his dogs, the horses and dogs are thereby improved; is Euthyphro therefore
suggesting that the gods are also improved by their being attended to by us
mortals? This is certainly not an implication that Euthyphro is comfortable with;
a human being does not stand in the same relation to a god as an oxherd to his
oxen! Similarly, when Euthyphro tries again and suggests that, actually, piety is
"*hyperetikê theôn*," the kind of service that slaves provide for their masters, again
he runs into problems trying to explain what he means. Exactly what kind of

\(^{67}\) Havelock. 1963, 209.

\(^{68}\) *Euthyphro* 12e (Versényi).

\(^{69}\) *Euthyphro* 13a (Versényi).
service do the gods require of us? The best Euthyphro can come up with is the very vague, circular, and already discredited answer, "that which is gratifying to the gods." In the end, when Socrates suggests that he "begin all over again" and try to define piety, Euthyphro has had enough and rushes off, claiming to be in a hurry. Whether he is rushing off to proceed with the indictment against his father, or whether he just wants to get away from Socrates and his intense "No ceasefires!" style of questioning, we'll never know. Plato leaves us with an eternal cliffhanger. So then what should we say transpired between Socrates and Euthyphro? Socrates certainly has not learned what piety is from Euthyphro, and neither has Euthyphro from Socrates. Recall that Richard Kraut concludes that such dialogues therefore "end in failure," and Vlastos too admits to having

"come to the end of the Euthyphro with a sense of disappointment that after all this winding and unwinding of argument, no positive result seems to be reached."\(^{70}\)

My own impression is that these sorts of reactions reveal an almost immature expectation of what such a conversation should accomplish, and a lack of appreciation for what it actually does accomplish. In my view, what Socrates has done for Euthyphro is of colossal importance: he has provided Euthyphro with an opportunity to re-think a specific, extremely grave, choice he was about to execute, and has, more generally, given him the opportunity to see himself in a more realistic light, i.e. as nowhere near the intellectual giant he thought he was. This in turn may motivate him to change some of his ways, and to re-invest some

\(^{70}\) Vlastos. PS, 12.
mental energy into thinking about moral issues, perhaps especially the nature of piety, for at the moment he is in the uncomfortable position of being a theologian who cannot say what holiness is. Socrates has also introduced Euthyphro to a few simple "cant-clearing" types of question to ask himself when scrutinizing such subjects, questions of a kind which, I think it's easy to forget, were completely antithetical to the prevailing processes of moral deliberation encouraged by the paideia system. For example, it's not unusual to come across statements in a book like this one:

"The [ancient] Greeks took their stand in the realm of thought, and dared to wonder. They attempted to conceive of the universe in the light of reason. It is a natural instinct to acquiesce in the order of things presented in experience. It is easy to accept the physical world, and the world of man's institutions, as alike inevitable, and to raise no question about the significance either of man's relations to nature, or of the relations of the individual to institutions like the family or State. If any such questionings arise, they can readily be stifled by the answer out of the whirlwind: 'Shall he that cavilleth contend with the Almighty?' But such acquiescence, natural in all ages to the religious mind, was impossible to the Greek."  

Or this one:

"It is an adequate description of science to say that it is thinking about the world in the Greek way."  

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71 Socratic questioning can help to "Clear the mind of cant," a maxim of Samuel Johnson's which Harold Bloom thought was a necessary step towards developing what he called autonomy. Richard Rorty (2000, 2) writes: "Cant, in this sense, means something like 'what people usually say without thinking, the standard thing to say, what one normally says.' Cant can be anything from the untutored common sense (the so-called 'folk wisdom') of a peasant village, through the unthinking reiteration of quotations from sacred scripture, to the equally unthinking reiteration of the best-known sentences in the works of Heidegger or of Bloom himself. What makes cant cant is not necessarily its content but its easy accessibility – its ready-made character."

72 Sir Ernest Barker. 1947, 1.

73 J. Burnet, as quoted by Erwin Schrödinger in his essay "Nature and the Greeks."
The purpose of the preceding discussion about the paideia system was to emphasize that, contrary to these inspiring images of "the Greeks," the typical ancient Athenian way of thinking about moral and social matters was dominated by traditional orthodoxy. Compared to these kinds of thought-processes, the thesis that Socrates was a champion of "moral autonomy," of thinking for yourself about moral issues, seems extremely credible, and even perhaps a little hackneyed, though I believe it is always useful to be reminded of the importance of being on guard for mindlessness and moral passivity, complacency and careless conformity. But this is not all that Vlastos is suggesting. In Vlastos' view, Socrates was much more than just an iconoclastic critic who challenged both the content (at least some of the traditional moral tenets), methods (heavy didacticism aimed at the uncritical adoption of these tenets), and results (a population plagued by the false conceit of wisdom) of the traditional moral education. Simonides said that "The city teaches the man," to which Socrates might well have added "And does it poorly." But according to Vlastos, in the case of Socrates we see the man teaching the city, a man who set himself up as a kind of one-man alternative school to the paideia system, with his own doctrines to teach and his own curious techniques for doing so. It is in the way he did so that Vlastos believes Socrates' deep concern for autonomy manifests itself most clearly.

74 Though Kraut might not agree.
Recall that Vlastos says he felt "disappointment" at the aporetic conclusion of the *Euthyphro*. In this, he is not unlike "a disgruntled student named Clitophon"\(^{75}\) in a dialogue which may have been written by Plato, or may be spurious.\(^{76}\) But whether spurious or not, some of the arguments of the *Clitophon* seem to pose a challenge to the understanding of Socrates similar to that posed by Vlastos' interpretation. Clitophon's objection to Socrates was that, though he was a superlative protreptician,\(^{77}\) meaning that he was singularly skilled at arousing and exhorting people to join with him and try to become more virtuous, still, Clitophon was suspicious. His worry was that there may be no substance behind all the giddy clamor for virtue, since nothing much seemed to come from all the exhorting and searching, except more exhorting and searching. Take the *Laches*, for example. There Socrates admitted that he could not teach virtue or say what courage is, despite the enthusiasm that suffused the room over Socrates' participation in the conversation, and the combined effort of the participants was not able to determine what courage is either. And even if the participants met again the next morning to continue the discussion, as planned, is it likely to have ended any other way? After all, even after a lifetime of searching, apparently Socrates did not have the answers, though he kept

\(^{75}\) Gonzalez in G.A. Scott (2002), 161.  
\(^{76}\) There is much scholarly debate on this point.  
\(^{77}\) The word "protreptic" in antiquity meant arousing and exhorting people to follow the philosophical way of life.
searching, and kept exhorting others to search. All this searching without results made Clitophon grow (in Grote’s words):

“sick of. . . negation and stimulus. He demands doctrines and explanations, which will hold good against the negative elenchus of Sokrates himself.”

Similarly, Vlastos does not seem satisfied with a rousing protreptic, but, as he explains, his disappointment with the *Euthyphro* disappeared when he realized that “if you go back and re-read [the dialogue] more carefully” you will find that, in fact, Socrates did “try to show Euthyphro what piety is.” He didn’t just come right out and say what it is, because he “wanted Euthyphro to find it out for himself,” but Vlastos believes that “the right answer” is there, after all, for the alert interlocutor or discerning reader to pick up on. Here’s the account of holiness or piety that Vlastos believes Socrates was hinting at:

“Piety is doing the god’s work to benefit human beings – work such as Socrates’ kind of god would wish done on his behalf, in service to him.”

Vlastos believes that:

“Socrates evidently thought that this was not too much to hope that Euthyphro would have seen for himself on the strength of the Socratic prodding.”

That prodding consisted chiefly of Socrates’ asking Euthyphro what, if piety is a kind of “hyperetikê theôn” or service to the gods, is that “glorious result

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79 Vlastos. PS, 13.
80 Vlastos in Smith and Woodruff (2000), 64.
81 Ibid., 64.
which the gods accomplish by using us as servants?" Since Euthyphro had just conceded that the gods cannot be made better by our services, Vlastos infers that Socrates is hinting that we can be of service to the gods only by improving ourselves, our souls, in the way Socrates does. At one time, Vlastos thought that if it wasn’t for what he characterizes as Euthyphro’s unsurpassed “sluggishness of intellect,” Euthyphro might have picked up on Socrates’ clue and seen the light, but he later recognized that Euthyphro would likely have needed at least a preview of the speech Socrates gave at his trial to catch Socrates’ drift. (At trial, Socrates described his elenctic mission as “my service to the god,” and described his service to the god as “no other business than to go about persuading you all, both young and old, to care less for your bodies and your wealth and your social distinction than for the perfection of your souls, and to make that your first concern.”) In other words, Vlastos admits that it would have been extremely unlikely for Euthyphro to have been able to grasp this conception of piety so quickly, especially since it was so “radical and subversive of traditional Greek belief and practice,” and since Socrates “positively refuses to tell Euthyphro this answer.” But, despite the difficulty, Vlastos believes that

82 Euthyphro 13e (Fowler).
83 Apology 30a.
84 Apology 30a-b (in Cornford, 1932).
85 Vlastos in Smith and Woodruff (2000), 64.
86 Vlastos. PS, 14.
this was what Socrates was really shooting for: to covertly confer this belief to Euthyphro through a subtle series of clues.

I turn now to discuss this aspect of Vlastos' interpretation — the notion that Socrates saw himself as an answer-bearer, indeed a knower, and a (strange kind of) teacher — which I take to be seriously problematic. Comparing the early dialogues themselves with what Vlastos says about the early dialogues, one is struck by a number of conspicuous differences. First of all, Socrates never even so much as whispered "autonomia," but Vlastos claims it was his "strongest and deepest concern." And in many other ways, the autonomy thesis flies in the face of Socrates' own description of himself and his mission, as if his words were more to be mistrusted than believed, an approach to the dialogues Vlastos seems to have endorsed, as when he wrote:

"Socrates is not a character out of Chekhov introspecting moodily on the public stage. He is a man whose face is a mask, whose every word is deliberate, and seems calculated to conceal more than reveal. One gets so used to this artful exterior, that one is left unprepared for moments like these [moments of Socratic self-revelation], and is apt to discount them as irony. I speak for myself."87

Perhaps in part because of this approach to the dialogues, this "hermeneutics of suspicion," I believe that some absolutely central features of Socratic theory and practice get distorted in the Vlastonian interpretation. In particular, the account he gives of Socratic knowledge and ignorance, about which Socrates constantly spoke but was seldom taken seriously, is not justified by the

87 Vlastos. PS, 9.
texts. This, in turn, leads him to a second inaccuracy, namely, his contention that Socrates was a teacher, again contrary to Socrates' own self-assessment. Since Vlastos' autonomy thesis is based on these questionable premises, it cannot stand.

(B) SOCRATES: A KNOWER AND A TEACHER?

Aporia refers to that state of confusion or impasse, with no apparent bright light at the end of the tunnel, that so frequently rounded off a Socratic conversation. The majority of the early dialogues end like this. For example, the Charmides ends with no success in defining temperance. The Euthyphro is a ring-formation which ends right back where it began, with the unanswered question "What is Piety?" The dénouement of the Hippias Minor has Hippias and Socrates vacillating back and forth between an unbelievable belief that seems justified and a believable belief which seems unjustified. The Laches ends with everybody present, including the two military generals, in a mega aporia as to what exactly courage is. The Protagoras culminates in "topsy-turvy confusion." And in these dialogues which end in aporia, it is not only Socrates' interlocutors who are unable to provide the answers to the questions under discussion, but Socrates is too... or at least he says he is. One can hardly help but think that Socrates is, in Enrico Fermi's choice phrase, "confused at a higher level" than the others.

88 Protagoras 361d (Lombardo and Bell in Cooper).
present, but, unless he is dissembling, and later even lies in court, he too partakes in the perplexity. As he said at trial:

"As a result of my investigation, I acquired much unpopularity, of a kind that is hard to deal with and is a heavy burden; many slanders came from these people and a reputation for wisdom, for in each case the bystanders thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I proved my interlocutor did not have."\(^{89}\)

And in the *Laches*:

"If in the conversations we have just had I had seemed to be knowing and the other two had not, then it would be right to issue a special invitation to me to perform this task [of educating two young sons]; but, as the matter stands, we were all in the same difficulty. Why then should anybody choose one of us in preference to another? What I think is that he ought to choose none of us."\(^{90}\)

And in the *Charmides*:

"But Critias, you are talking to me as though I professed to know the answers to my own questions and as though I could agree with you if I really wished. This is not the case – rather, because of my own ignorance, I am continually investigating in your company whatever is put forward."\(^{91}\)

Socrates "frequently, explicitly, and emphatically"\(^{92}\) disavowed knowing much about the moral issues he discussed with others, and even seemed to be annoyed by the reputation he had for being a wise man. Since he felt it was not true that one could be a wise man without such knowledge, he considered it a "*diabolê*," a misrepresentation or slander. Most people would welcome a

\(^{89}\) *Apology* 22e-23a (Brickhouse and Smith in 2000, 58).

\(^{90}\) *Laches* 200e (Sprague in Cooper).

\(^{91}\) *Charmides* 165b (Sprague in Cooper).

reputation for wisdom, even if, in their secret heart of hearts, they knew they didn’t deserve it, but not Socrates; on the contrary, it was for recognizing the full extent of his ignorance that Socrates felt he was better, and better off, than most people.93

And yet Vlastos’ thesis holds that in spite of Socrates’ frequent and sometimes rather exasperated declarations of ignorance, he actually knew much more than he let on, and that his disavowal of knowledge was, although technically not an outright lie, not exactly true either. But why should we assume that he was deliberately concealing something when he claimed not to know? Why shouldn’t we take him at his word?

The standard view has been that Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge was a kind of mock modesty or irony. Hence the expression “Socratic irony” is commonly used to mean “pretended ignorance.” And it’s easy to understand why people take this position: after all, Socrates certainly does seem extremely knowledgeable, and perhaps, by repeatedly asserting that he was not so wise, he seemed to protest too much. For these kinds of reasons, borrowing a phrase from John McDowell, one might call the simple, standard view (that Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge is ironic) “the tempting argument.”94 Here’s how Thrasymachus put it, in Book I of the Republic:

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93 Apology 22e.

94 From his 1982 paper “Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge.”
"God, there goes Socrates again, pretending to be an ignoramus! I knew this would happen; I even told the others here some time ago that you wouldn't be prepared to express opinions, but would feign ignorance and do anything rather than answer a question put to you."\textsuperscript{95}

The belligerent Thrasymachus assumed that Socrates did this in order to protect his own cherished beliefs, and his ego, from criticism, while delighting in the competitive pleasure of refuting others. This is basically a charge of Socratic \textit{Schadenfreude}. That there is often a desire to win in contests and confrontations, then as now, is beyond doubt. Ruy Lopez, a 16th century Spanish priest, who developed an opening move forever named after him, advised friends that when playing chess, one should position the chess board so that the sun shines into your opponent's eyes. A Catholic priest no less! So too, some people have construed Socrates' disavowal of knowledge as an eristic device. \textit{Eristikē}, derived from the word \textit{eris}, meaning strife or contention, refers to the use of argument solely for the sake of victory. So perhaps his disavowal of knowledge was a ploy to "get the upper hand in argument"\textsuperscript{96} and score some cheap points? But no one except "annoyed interlocutors make that charge against him."\textsuperscript{97}

Nonetheless, many far more sympathetic commentators concur with Thrasymachus insofar as they also believe that Socrates did not literally mean what he said when he claimed not to know, though their premises for this conclusion are different, and, of course, they attribute his dissimulation to a

\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Republic} I 337a (Waterfield).
\textsuperscript{96} Brickhouse and Smith. 2000, 268.
\textsuperscript{97} Brickhouse and Smith. 1994, 32.
vastly less petty motivation. For one thing, some say that the famous Socratic suggestion that "areté is epistêmê"\(^98\) rules out the literal reading of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge. Why? Because if one interprets this as a strict identity thesis between virtue and knowledge, and Socrates truly lacks knowledge (as he often claims to), then he must also, by that very fact and on his own admission, lack virtue. But, in spite of referring to himself as "in respect of wisdom. . . really worthless,"\(^99\) Socrates does not consider himself to be correspondingly worthless in terms of virtue. He refers to himself as a good man,\(^100\) and even as a great public benefactor who deserves to be given free meals at the prytaneum.\(^101\) And so a curious disparity emerges: if areté is or requires epistêmê or sophiâ, but Socrates lacked that very knowledge, what entitled him to refer to himself as good, and how did he manage to be, as Xenophon put it, "so obviously virtuous himself"?\(^102\) Is Socrates a counter-example to his own intellectualist thesis? In addition, the literal reading of Socratic ignorance does not fit well with Socrates' occasional claims to know some moral proposition, or with the fact that he "even more often appears to assert opinions with the utmost confidence."\(^103\)

\(^98\) That is, the idea that virtue or the virtues are all knowledge or wisdom, as at Protagoras 361b. Again, Socrates seems to have used knowledge (epistêmê) and wisdom (sophiâ) interchangeably (see Apology 19c6).

\(^99\) Apology 23b (Tredennick in Cairns and Hamilton).

\(^100\) Apology 20d, 30c-d, 41c-d; Gorgias 521b.

\(^101\) Apology 36d.

\(^102\) Memorabilia I.ii.3.

\(^103\) Brickhouse and Smith. 2000, 103. See also their (1994), 30. There they offer a good argument for not jumping to the conclusion that Socrates was just inconsistent about his epistemic status.
So here is our dilemma: on the one hand, the literal reading does not accommodate the fact that Socrates seems knowledgeable, and certainly seems virtuous, occasionally makes knowledge-claims or bold statements of moral opinion, and, more often, acts with the kind of resolve which is suggestive of underlying moral confidence.\(^{104}\) All of this pushes one towards the other horn of the dilemma, the tempting "he was being ironic" argument, except that to simply dismiss Socrates' frequent declarations of ignorance as totally untrue, insincere, or ironic just does not respect the texts. Moreover, as Vlastos argues, it seems improbable that Socrates' disavowal can have been an outright lie, as that would not be consistent with Socrates' conviction that his philosophical mission was divinely ordained.\(^{105}\) If Socrates was commissioned by the god to perform his philosophical examinations, it would hardly seem appropriate for him to employ deception in performing that sacred duty. Could Socrates have been simply mistaken (but in earnest) when he disavowed knowledge? That is, might he have really had much valuable moral knowledge, but didn't realize it? Socrates believed that he was better off than many other people because at least he, unlike them, was aware of his ignorance when he did not know something. But perhaps he was not aware of his knowledge when he did know something? After

\(^{104}\) I would surmise that, in addition to these logical reasons, there is also a strong psychological impulse among some philosophers to view Socrates as really knowing, in spite of his protestations, or else we'd have to admit that even the best among us, after a lifetime of searching for answers, still had a long way to go.

\(^{105}\) Vlastos. SIMP, 134.
all, as Vlastos points out, Socrates was “no epistemologist,”¹⁰⁶ he was “a moralist pure and simple,” “exclusively a moral philosopher”¹⁰⁷ who maintained an “epistemological innocence”¹⁰⁸ which:

“protected him from having to address the question, ‘What is knowledge?’ whose pursuit would have been diversionary from his all-engrossing eagerness for answers to moral questions.”¹⁰⁹

And so, is it possible, given Socrates’ supposed “epistemological innocence,” that he knew without knowing or thinking he knew? But again, understanding Socrates in this way would force us to abandon one of his central (and explicitly stated) beliefs: the way he distinguished himself from hoi polloi. Socrates believed that

“*They* do not know but think they do;
I also do not know, but do not think I do”

and referred to the former as reprehensible ignorance, while the latter he called human wisdom. In addition, there is no compelling textual support for adopting such a position. Like the tempting argument, it basically assumes that Socrates possessed the wisdom he proved his interlocutors did not have, without even

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¹⁰⁶ Vlastos. VSS, 63.
¹⁰⁷ Vlastos. SIMP, 48.
¹⁰⁹ Vlastos. SIMP, 83. For myself, I find this statement to rely on questionable assumptions. For example, if Socrates equated virtue with knowledge, then wouldn’t the question “What is knowledge?” be a moral question for Socrates? Also, given that *sophia* or wisdom was counted among the traditional Greek virtues, this would again make the pursuit of the question “What is wisdom?” a moral pursuit, not a diversion.
having direct access to it\textsuperscript{110} in order to scrutinize it, and see if it is really knowledge.

In an attempt to gather up all of Socrates' curious comments about his epistemic status and compress them into a coherent system, much recent scholarship has tried to steer a middle course between the ironic interpretation and the literal reading. Several attempts have been made to solve the riddle of Socratic knowledge and ignorance in a more subtle, dualistic approach, positing \textit{two} kinds of knowledge (and accordingly, two kinds of ignorance), one of which Socrates can rightly claim to possess, and another which he can rightly claim to lack. Vlastos' is such a theory. In his view,

"to resolve the paradox we need only suppose that Socrates is making a dual use of his words for knowing.\textsuperscript{111} 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 when claiming certainty. This would leave him free to admit that he \textit{does} have moral knowledge in a radically weaker sense - the one required by his own maverick method of philosophical inquiry, the elenchus."\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{110}Since, with the exception of the \textit{Gorgias} (where Socrates provides a rather caustic "definition" of a rhetorician), Socrates did not, in any of the early dialogues, come right out and provide answers to "What is X?" moral questions. So, even if Vlastos were correct in thinking that the answers \textit{were} given in some of the other dialogues, albeit cryptically - which I think he is not and shall say why shortly - it would still be extremely presumptuous to say these constituted "knowledge." That would mean we have interpreted them correctly, know them to be true ourselves, and what's more, know more than Socrates did (since he did not recognize them as knowledge.)

\textsuperscript{111}This includes, as Vlastos points out, the verbs \textit{epistamai}, \textit{oida}, \textit{gignosko}, \textit{epaiō}, and their cognate nouns, as well as the noun \textit{sophiā} and the adjective \textit{sophos}.

\textsuperscript{112}Vlastos. VSS, 49.
In other words, Vlastos contends that when Socrates claims not to know, he isn’t shamming, he is just using the word “know” to denote that kind of knowledge which is certain and infallible, such as Descartes sought in order to refute the skeptic. This kind of knowledge of moral matters Socrates could earnestly, and for good reason, disclaim. But when Socrates does claim to know something, he means he knows it elenctically, which means that if a proposition emerged from the fiery heat of an elenchos unscorched, its integrity intact, or better yet emerged triumphant from a series of elenchoi, Socrates would consider it an item of “knowledge.” But this kind of knowledge would be of a contingent nature. Perhaps another elenchos on another day with a different interlocutor might have a different result. After all, the elenchos is a “human process, a contest, whose outcome is drastically affected by the skill and drive of the contestants,” and so Socrates could not reasonably claim to be certain of his elenctically-corroborated set of moral beliefs. But until such time as his beliefs are refuted, Socrates believes in them strongly enough to act based on them, and to occasionally speak of them as “knowledge,” much as Karl Popper or Richard Feynmann would consider a hypothesis contingently acceptable or part of the body of current scientific knowledge so long as tests corroborated it, but give it up quickly if it were once refuted. On this view, Socrates does not know any of his moral beliefs to be true with 100% certainty, because the nature of the

113 Ibid., 57. Indeed, when Socrates himself participates, one wonders how reliable the elenchos is. Could it be that, faced with an opponent of equal prowess, the results would have been very different?
elenchos is not such that produces 100% certainty. Vlastos refers to elenctic knowledge as "Ke," as opposed to certain knowledge, symbolized as "Kc."

Socrates was well aware that his own set of moral beliefs was only "Ke," something less than the irrefragable knowledge such as a god might possess, but it was the best he could do. So, to sum up Vlastos' position on this, when Socrates disclaimed knowledge, it was Kc he was speaking of, and when he claimed knowledge, or (far more often) acted with such remarkable moral fortitude, as if he had knowledge, it was Ke he was making use of. Vlastos refers to this (alleged) deliberate Socratic ambiguity as a case of "complex irony," not like the "simple irony" of the tempting argument. In simple irony, one says the opposite of what one means; in complex irony, one both means and does not mean what one says. Of course, Socrates himself never mentioned any of this, but Vlastos suggests that he didn't want to, that he preferred to taunt us "to ponder what he is hinting at by using words that do and don't mean what he says,"114 much as the Delphic oracle spoke in riddling ways. For example, Vlastos believes that Socrates' "doctrine that virtue is knowledge should be read virtue is knowledge,"115 which helps to explain why Socrates could coherently think of himself as virtuous (since he possessed Ke) while disclaiming knowledge (by which he meant Kc).

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114 Vlastos. SDK, 31.
115 Ibid., 61.
Given Vlastos' unequivocal characterization of Socrates as "no epistemologist," it is somewhat surprising to then be told that, actually, he had devised a rather sophisticated, proto-Popperian dual theory of knowledge. Nonetheless, Vlastos' hypothesis is an elegant one. His Ke-Kc distinction dissolves the apparent inconsistency between Socrates' professions of ignorance on the one hand and his occasional knowledge-claims and confident moral behavior on the other. It preserves the undying intuition that Socrates was very knowledgeable indeed, without simply playing the irony card every time Socrates says otherwise. And it is part and parcel of Vlastos' own autonomy thesis. For, if Socrates really did not have the knowledge he proved others did not have, then the fact that he did not supply others with the answers to his questions would be no big mystery or "paradox," as Vlastos calls it. But, if one believes that Socrates did in some sense have the answers, then one wonders why he didn't share them with others. As Vlastos puts it, again referring to the Euthyphro (although, he adds, almost any one of Plato's early dialogues would do to illustrate his point):

"As you watch Euthyphro hurry off, this is what you feel like telling Socrates: 'I don't believe you really care for that man's soul, for if you did, how could you let him go with his head still stuffed with his superstitions? You know that the pollution he fears has

116 Popper emphasized the tentative status of even our seemingly most secure scientific theories, and contrasted this with certain knowledge which, he thought, was beyond human powers to attain. This fits quite well with Vlastos' Ke versus Kc scheme.

117 Although Socrates would still be unusual in this regard, compared to the many people who also do not know, but who nonetheless confidently supply others with answers and advice - much of which may be harmful to the soul - as if they were knowledgeable.
nothing to do with the only piety you think worth talking about, the kind that will improve what you call the soul. Why then not tell him this?"\textsuperscript{118}

Why not indeed? Vlastos' answer, of course, is that Socrates "shunned didacticism"\textsuperscript{119} and so he denied having any knowledge, by which he meant Kc, as "the perfect excuse for not dispensing knowledge outright."\textsuperscript{120} Yet at the same time, he secretly strove to get others to autonomously discover the knowledge he did have, his Ke.

So Vlastos' hypothesis is elegant, but is it true? The clever Kc-Ke dichotomy is, after all, an import, which Vlastos, in the true spirit of Socratic humility, admits:

"my solution is a chancy one, for in the nature of the case it is not susceptible of direct confirmation. Its credentials are its explanatory power."\textsuperscript{121}

How impressive, then, is its explanatory power? I believe it is not as good as it first seems, actually. It seems to describe some cases of what Socrates said very well, but others not well at all. For example, one instance the Kc-Ke dichotomy works well for arises in the \textit{Gorgias}. There, Socrates seems adamantly convinced, and with good elenctic justification, that doing injustice is worse than suffering it, especially if one is not punished for their wrongful act. But, nonetheless, he challenges anybody to refute him if they can, saying:

\footnotesize{
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{118} Vlastos. \textit{PS}, 13.
\item \textsuperscript{119} Vlastos. \textit{SDK}, 30.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Versényi. 1963, 121.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Vlastos. \textit{VSS}, 68.
\end{itemize}
}
"This appeared true in our former discussion, as I say, and it is secured and bound fast, if it is not too rude to say so, by arguments of adamant and iron.\textsuperscript{122} So, at any rate, it would seem, and unless you, or someone younger and more daring than you, shall unbind and loose those arguments, it is impossible to speak well and yet say other than what I am saying now."\textsuperscript{123}

This suggests that even though Socrates had a very high degree of epistemic confidence about this, even so, he acknowledges that he could be wrong, and his core beliefs might someday be refuted. It is as if he were saying that he had "Ke," but not "Kc." But what about when, speaking of this same absolutely core Socratic principle, Socrates very confidently tells Polus that it would be "impossible" to refute, for "the truth can never be refuted."\textsuperscript{124} That sounds like Socrates is claiming something closer to Kc than to Ke. But, more to the point, I suspect that Socrates would take issue with Vlastos' whole contention that

"When Socrates renounces 'knowledge' he is telling us that the question of the truth of anything he believes can always be sensibly re-opened; that any conviction he has stands ready to be re-examined in the company of any sincere person who will raise the question and join him in the investigation."\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{122} Parenthetically, the reference to Socrates' beliefs being "secured and bound fast by arguments of iron and adamant" may be an allusion to Socrates himself, who also ends up "secured and bound fast" in jail, in chains, but refuses to escape because he believes it would violate his principle that doing injustice is worse than suffering it. The \textit{Gorgias} is rich with foreshadowing.

\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Gorgias} 509a (Allen).

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Gorgias} 473b (Allen).

\textsuperscript{125} Vlastos. PS, 10.
That is, I believe Vlastos is probably\textsuperscript{126} correct in saying that Socrates was always ready and willing to re-examine his beliefs. But is that \textit{all} he was telling us when he renounced knowledge? Or was he telling us that there are some things, important items of moral knowledge, that he just did not know – not Kc, but not Ke either? My own position is that the Vlastonian interpretation vastly underestimates the extent to which Socrates genuinely felt there were gaps in his knowledge of good and evil. In particular, Socrates frequently claimed to lack adequate accounts or “definitions” of the traditional virtues: courage, piety, justice, temperance and wisdom. But if Vlastos’ theory were correct, that would mean Socrates really did have “elenctic knowledge” of these definitions, and why should we believe this?\textsuperscript{127} After all, in none of the early dialogues does

\textsuperscript{126} See for example Crito 49e, where Socrates is willing to hear Crito’s new conclusion, if he has one, even though it would strike at the very heart of Socrates’ morality. But then again, at 54d, he says: “Be well assured, my dear friend, Crito, that this is what I seem to hear, as the frenzied dervishes of Cybele seem to hear the flutes, and this sound of these words re-echoes within me and prevents my hearing any other words. And be assured that, so far as I now believe, if you argue against these words you will speak in vain. Nevertheless, if you think you can accomplish something, speak” (Fowler). Here it isn’t entirely clear whether Socrates thinks the case can sensibly be re-opened or not.

\textsuperscript{127} Many have held the view that Socrates was, in Kraut’s phrase, an “expert in disguise” and that he \textit{must} have known the answers to his own “What is X?” questions. They reason that he must have, since he sometimes spoke in ways that suggest that without such definitions, one could not make any judgments whatsoever about particular instances of virtuous or vicious behavior. But Socrates surely did make such judgments. This has led some commentators to conclude that he must have known more about the answers to his definitional questions than he let on. As Versényi (1982, 14) asks: if Socrates was really as ignorant as he claimed to be about the virtues, including piety, how could he so earnestly confront his jurymen and defend his whole lifework against the charge of impiety? I believe this position has been adequately rebutted by Kraut (SS), Vlastos (SDK), Brickhouse and Smith (1994), and Nehamas (1999), among others. It just does not seem to be the case that Socrates held the view that one must be able to give a flawless definition of a virtue before one can say anything reasonable at all about that virtue (the so-called Socratic fallacy which Geach imputes to Socrates). For one thing, as Nehamas (1999) points out, the principle of the priority of definition may make it impossible to acquire that knowledge through Socrates’ elenctic technique, where proposed definitions are put forth and often rejected because they conflict with some concrete example of an action which is taken to be a counter-example.
Socrates ever put forth a definition of any of the virtues, let alone a definition that could pass elenctic muster. Vlastos practically concedes the point himself when he writes, referring to the account of piety Socrates was allegedly trying to get Euthyphro to see, that it's unclear "whether or not a formula could be devised to encapsulate this insight in an elenctically foolproof definition." But if it's not elenctically foolproof, and neither has it even, as far as one can tell from any of the dialogues, been exposed to the crossfire of an elenctic argument, then why be so sure it's Ke? Certainly, to characterize piety as "doing the god's work to benefit human beings - work such as Socrates' kind of god would wish done on his behalf, in service to him" does not seem likely to pass by Socrates' own rigorous standards. An adequate virtue-definition, as has been observed, "must be neither too broad nor too narrow; it must explain what it is about virtuous acts or persons that makes them virtuous; the property with which a virtue is identified must be as valuable as the virtue in question; and the definition must be usable as a standard for deciding which acts are virtuous." But if one couldn't make judgments about particulars before possessing knowledge of the definition or universal, this procedure wouldn't be possible. Like Kraut, I believe that Socrates, like every other sane adult, knew that some particular acts were bad, unjust, craven, impious, unwise and so on, but he lacked adequate knowledge to be a good judge of all cases of evil, injustice, cowardice, impiety etc. So in complex and borderline cases, lacking a standard or comprehensive knowledge, Socrates could be puzzled and could err, unwittingly of course.

128 Vlastos in Smith and Woodruff (2000), 64.

129 By which Vlastos can't mean that they are immune to any possible dialectical defeat, since his own account of Ke refers to propositions which have been corroborated by past elenchoi but which may always be defeated by future elenctic arguments (that is why it is not Ke). By "elenctically foolproof" he must mean that so far the proposition has held up.

130 Kraut. SS, 254.
Would the account of piety Vlastos puts forth satisfy these? It certainly seems narrow, excluding as impious or non-pious any activity other than the kinds of practices Socrates engaged in, which seems an odd position.

Indeed, Vlastos' whole "Ke" concept seems to come into conflict with his autonomy thesis, since, if Socrates was really so concerned about not telling his interlocutors the answers to his definitional questions, for fear of undermining their chances of autonomously discovering them, then how could Socrates ever test his own ideas elenctically? But if he could not test them elenctically, then they couldn't possibly be Ke, could they? And if not Kc, and not even Ke, then would Socrates be justified in believing that he has "the right answers" and trying to get others to believe them too?

Contrary to Vlastos, I believe we should take Socrates at his word when he claims not to have been in possession of the much sought-after definitions of the virtues. After all, he never offered one up, and he claimed, many times, not to have them. Moreover, in some of the early dialogues, he did offer definitions of some non-moral concepts to illustrate the kind of thing he was looking for in a definition. For example in the Laches, Socrates provides a definition of "quickness." In the Gorgias, he provides a definition of "the rhetorician," a concept which certainly has moral connotations for Socrates, though it is obviously not one of the virtues. Why not of a virtue? If Vlastos says

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131 As well as the answers to some other important questions about virtue discussed in the early dialogues.
this would be contrary to autonomous discovery, that may be true of the virtue being investigated, but I don’t see why this should preclude offering a definition of one which is not under examination, as an example. I believe the most plausible explanation of the Socratic practice is what he says: he doesn’t know. In this I concur with Kraut, who believes that Socrates was being “perfectly honest when he says that he cannot define the virtues.”132 Vlastos’ scheme effectively eclipses this genuine deficiency that Socrates apparently felt was present in his moral system, since it takes Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge as only a “conscientious objection” to the notion of certain moral knowledge, while at the same time a cryptic avowal of elenctic knowledge.

Brickhouse and Smith133 offer an alternative account of Socratic knowledge and ignorance. Their view is that Socrates knows that certain propositions are true, but does not know “how these things are.” This suggestion has the benefit of actually coming right out of the horse’s mouth. For example, in the Gorgias, (where Socrates’ conduct is not what one would expect from him if the autonomy thesis were true), after vigorously promoting the propositions that it is better to suffer wrong than to commit it, and that it is better to undergo deserved punishment than to escape it, and even after referring to these views as

132 Kraut. SS, 245.
133 Brickhouse and Smith. 1994, Section 2.2.
irrefutable truths, Socrates adds an important qualification. He says: “But I do not know how these things are.” The full quotation is:

“The same account is ever mine, namely, that while I do not know how things stand in these matters, I have never met anyone able to speak otherwise without being ridiculous. So again, I take these things to be so.”

This would mean that even though Socrates believes that some of his beliefs are true and justified, still he lacks the kind of comprehensive knowledge that would enable him to explain how or why these things are so. He wouldn’t be able to answer all the relevant questions someone (including himself) might ask about them. According to this view, what Socrates lacks is comprehensive, fully explanatory knowledge, even about his own most deeply-held beliefs, which, contra Vlastos, do not include definitional knowledge of the virtues. He feels he knows that the soul is better off suffering injustice than committing injustice, and better off undergoing deserved punishment than escaping it, but not exactly how these things are so, rather as I know that if I flick the light switch on, the light will (under ordinary conditions) come on, but I wouldn’t be able to tell you how electricity works. I just know it works. Obviously, there is a big difference in terms of expertise between someone who only knows “the that” and someone who knows “the how” of a subject.

134 Gorgias 509a5 (Allen): “ouk oida hopos ekhei.” The same expression appears elsewhere, as at Euthyphro 4e, Charmides 166c.
135 Gorgias 509a-b (Allen).
136 Brickhouse and Smith. 2000, 111.
137 While, from the point of view of the soma, just the reverse is true.
Another explanation of Socratic knowledge and ignorance can be
eXtracted from the writings of Kraut,\(^{138}\) according to which Socrates is
knowledgeable when compared to other, ordinary people, but not
knowledgeable when measured by the standard of a (hypothetical) genuine
moral expert. This suggestion basically points out that Socrates has come a long
way beyond the conventional moral education provided to ancient Athenians: he
has had the great insight to spot its many questionable and incoherent aspects,
unlike the vast majority who accept the traditional beliefs with an uncritical
certitude. By comparison with them, Socrates is knowledgeable, and can, in a
sense, be said to know about morality. He has replaced many of the
conventional beliefs with his own beliefs, which he can rationally defend in
argument, rather like what Vlastos calls Ke. But still, he feels profound
perplexity at times when contemplating moral issues, he can't define the virtues,
and he isn't always exactly sure what to do in difficult situations. In this sense,
he isn't knowledgeable. Kraut emphasizes that the amount and kind of moral
knowledge Socrates has, compared to what he lacks, is meager, as Socrates
seemed to be saying when he told his jurors that real wisdom is the property of
God, and that the oracle was the God's way of telling us that human wisdom is
of little or no value.

The advantage of both of these theories is that they take Socrates seriously
when he insisted there was much he did not know about good and evil, while

\(^{138}\) Kraut. SS, Section VII.7.
Vlastos' theory makes light of Socrates' rare and refreshing insight and humility.

In interpreting Socrates as a knower, Vlastos has not only (as I have argued above) run into difficulties with his own autonomy thesis, he has also created a false image of the gadfly, a false paradigm or model of the moral philosopher, which may, perhaps, be attractive, but is not Socratic. Instead of a Socrates who knows he does not know, and therefore seeks, Vlastos' Socrates is a knower and a teacher in disguise. True, he renounces godlike certainty in his opinions, but he holds them in enough esteem to spend his days discretely trying to get others to believe them too. For doing this in the way that he did, Vlastos claims that Socrates "would want to say that he is a teacher, the only true teacher." But would he? Again, if Socrates did not have (even Ke) answers to his "What is X?" questions, and there were moral issues which he was perplexed by, then isn't it more likely that he was hoping to get a reasonable answer out of his interlocutor than to covertly supply him with one? Or perhaps he was hoping that something fruitful would emerge from the "common search"? As Socrates told Protagoras:

"So, Protagoras, please don't suppose I wish anything else in discussing with you except to inquire into what I am myself often perplexed by. For I believe Homer is surely right in saying: 'When two go, one observes before the other.' For we're all somehow

139 Vlastos. SIMP, 32.
140 E.g. Crito 48e.
141 Iliad 10, 224. Perhaps Homer should receive partial credit for the Socratic method?
more resourceful in every deed and word and thought when we're together."\textsuperscript{142}

But according to the autonomy thesis, "the common search" is not really a search at all for Socrates, since he already knows the (Ke) answers. Whereas if we take him at his word when he claimed not to know or to teach, but only to eagerly enlist others in a common search, a very different picture emerges. Then it would seem that he was at least as concerned with helping himself, a learner, as he was with helping others, a teacher. I believe this to be more realistic; as Robin Waterfield notes, "it was typically Greek to justify moral behavior by arguing that it is good for the agent,"\textsuperscript{143} and Socrates' whole mission, atypical though it was, also seems to fall under this general rubric. Of course, a concern for oneself doesn't preclude being concerned for others, which no doubt Socrates was; nor is other-concern always entirely free of underlying self-interest, so that even if Socrates was in fact busying himself with teaching others the truth about good and evil, that would still also be beneficial for him, and for the community at large, of which he is a part, because it is better to live among good citizens than bad ones.\textsuperscript{144} My objection here to the Vlastos model is that, since his vision of Socrates has already obtained the virtue/Ke that shields his own soul from harm, Socrates' mission appears conducted primarily for the sake of others, so that they may learn and be benefited from him. For example, Vlastos writes: "his

\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Protagoras} 348c-d (Allen).

\textsuperscript{143} Waterfield. 1994, Introduction, xxiv.

\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Apology} 25c.
is the aggressive outreach, the indiscriminate address to all and sundry, of the street evangelist." But that is not quite the whole truth, since Socrates’ explicit strategy was to target those who were reputed to be wise. As he told Hippias, "I've always been accustomed when someone says something to pay attention, especially when I think the speaker is wise. I want to learn what he means, and I thoroughly inquire and repeatedly examine and go over what is said, so that I might learn. But if I think the speaker is worthless, I don't question him or care what he says. You'll always know by this who I think is wise, for you'll find me attentive to what he says, and I'll inquire of him in order to learn something and be benefited." My point is that, while it may be counter-intuitive or "contra-endoxic" to believe that Socrates could have thought of himself as a learner – after all, what could he have possibly learned from the likes of Euthyphro, or Ion, or even his dear friend Crito? – I believe that this picture is better supported than the Vlastonian cryptic-teacher hypothesis. He did, after all, spend many a day "seriously conversing" with Crito and said that he honoured and revered the conclusions they had reached together, even though, I think it's safe to say, intellectually Crito and Socrates were in very different leagues. And what about Gorgias, Hippias, Protagoras? Though Socrates was able to show that each of these three giants of the intellectual scene did not have the knowledge they thought they had, nonetheless he may have been hopeful going into a

145 Vlastos. VSS, 7.
146 Apology 21c.
147 Hippias Minor 369d-e.
148 Crito 49b (Fowler).
conversation with them that he might learn something from them, and he may well have. For example, at the end of his conversation with both Hippias and Protagoras, we see Socrates giving a kind of post hoc summation of its outcome, and in both cases, if nothing else, Socrates seems to have learned that some of his beliefs may be inconsistent with some of his other beliefs, and that he still has much to learn. The idea that Socrates was primarily a seeker and looking to learn, i.e. in the elenctic business as much for himself as for others, rather than a teacher, is strongly suggested in the Charmides, when Socrates tells Critias:

“Oh come, how could you possibly think that even if I were to refute everything you say, I would be doing it for any other reasons than the one I would give for a thorough investigation of my own statements – the fear of unconsciously thinking I know something when I do not. And this is what I claim to be doing now, examining the argument for my own sake primarily, but perhaps also for the sake of my friends.”\(^\text{149}\)

But in Vlastos' translation of this same passage, the last line becomes

“examining the argument chiefly for my own sake, though no doubt also for the sake of my friends.”\(^\text{150}\) The word isôs, meaning "perhaps, probably,”\(^\text{151}\) is rendered "no doubt." Why might Vlastos have translated it thus? Could it be because the degree of certainty in "no doubt" fits better with his theory that Socrates was a teacher of sorts, "no doubt" concerned with helping, i.e. teaching, others? It’s just a small detail, but, as Nietzsche wrote: “If someone hides an

\(^{149}\) Charmides 166d (Sprague in Cooper).

\(^{150}\) Vlastos. SDK, 19.

\(^{151}\) Isôs can also have the meanings “equally, in like manner,” but most translators have rejected this possibility (since it would clash with the logic of Socrates' statement that he is examining the argument most of all, “malista,” for his own sake).
object behind a bush, then seeks and finds it there, that seeking and finding is not very laudable."\textsuperscript{152} So too, if one translates as “no doubt” a phrase which does leave room for doubt, that isn’t very laudable either, even if Vlastos erred unintentionally.

To conclude, the autonomy thesis, although it presents a popular image of Socrates, as a knower and a teacher who does not preach (or even, for the matter, speak his mind openly), just contains too many problem-areas and discrepancies with the actual dialogues to be accepted \textit{holus bolus}. Socrates says nothing about autonomy, Vlastos says it was his strongest and deepest concern; Socrates says that even the threat of death would not make him forsake his moral principles, Vlastos says that the results of Socrates’ elenctic investigations were not nearly as important to him as his method, (while at the same time describing his method as a vehicle for discretely passing his principles along to others); Socrates says that there is much he does not know, Vlastos claims that Socrates was only really renouncing certainty; Socrates says that he does not teach, Vlastos says that “he teaches saying he isn’t teaching.” In addition, as I shall discuss in chapter six, there is at least one rather conspicuous counter-example to the thesis: Socrates’ behavior in the \textit{Gorgias}. There, it seems clear that Socrates was much more concerned that his fellow dialoguers lived well, by adopting certain principles and practices which Socrates puts forth, than that they make a mess of their lives.

\textsuperscript{152} As quoted in Babette Babich’s book \textit{Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Science}. 

and perhaps irredeemably damage their souls until they discover these principles for themselves, (if they ever do).\textsuperscript{153}

I turn now to examine the interpretation of Richard Kraut, who also rejects the autonomy thesis, gently deriding it thus:

"The truth, in other words, is worth knowing only when one discovers it on one's own, without having heard it first from others?"\textsuperscript{154}

However, as I shall argue, Kraut's mistake is to then ride the pendulum too far in the other direction, defending an extreme thesis that, far from having an interest in moral autonomy, Socrates should actually be characterized as a moral authoritarian.

\textsuperscript{153} Socrates was not optimistic that most people, left to their own devices ("automatos," cf. Protagoras 320a; Meno 92e8) would ever be able to make much moral progress.

\textsuperscript{154} Kraut. SS, 252 n.15.
V. THE AUTHORITY THESIS

Some commentators, such as Vlastos, believe that between Socrates and Plato, a kind of alchemy-in-reverse took place on the issue of moral education. Kraut sums up their view thus:

"One way of contrasting them is to portray Socrates as an upholder of autonomous choice, Plato as an oppressive authoritarian. According to this picture, Plato wants the state to mold the individual's conception of virtue, whereas Socrates thinks we should discover the proper conception of the virtues on our own."\(^{1}\)

Sir Karl Popper even referred to this sea-change as Plato's "betrayal"\(^{2}\) of Socratic values. But Richard Kraut contends that, far from being a betrayal of Socratic values, "moral authoritarianism is something Plato inherited from Socrates."\(^{3}\) He believes that

"the great value Socrates saw in critical inquiry was combined with, and is consistent with, a highly authoritarian streak, which he passed along to Plato"\(^{4}\)

and that he can demonstrate his view, that "a form of authoritarianism must be attributed to Socrates, and not just to Plato,"\(^{5}\) by showing that there is an undercurrent of "undeniable authoritarianism"\(^{6}\) in the *Apology* and in the *Crito*. This alleged Socratic moral authoritarianism may be summed up as follows:

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1 Kraut. SS, 9.
2 Popper. 1945, 194.
3 Kraut. SS, 10.
4 Ibid., 194.
5 Ibid., 233.
6 Ibid., 238.
“[Socrates] thinks there is a stage of moral development that he has not yet reached, and he believes that anyone who reaches that stage would be so far superior to him that he would be entitled to the same level of obedience that human beings owe the gods.”

According to Kraut, in this hypothetical world with genuine moral experts in it, Socrates would have been happy to follow the advice of an expert about good and evil, instead of having to continue searching for the truth with his comparatively profitless elenctic routine. Can this be true? Was the examined life, as Socrates lived it, only a regrettable necessity in a world devoid of experts who could simply give us the correct answers to moral questions?

I turn now to examine the evidence Kraut proffers for his authority thesis.

(A) AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE APOLOGY

At the very heart of Kraut’s argument is a single statement that Socrates makes to his jurors in the Apology:

“...To do an injustice and disobey a superior [bèltion], whether divine or human: that, I know, is bad and shameful’ (29b6-7).”

Here are Kraut’s comments on this statement:

“When Socrates says this, he is in the midst of explaining to the jury that his philosophical mission is divinely ordained, and he then goes on to tell them (29c6-d5) that he would have to disobey them if their orders were to conflict with the god’s. But what interests me is the fact that Socrates talks about obedience to god and to man in the same breath: the absolute submission owed to an immortal is

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7 Ibid., 234. Furthermore, as discussed anon, the level of obedience owed in both cases is said to be “absolute submission,” a phrase Kraut borrows from Grote.

8 In Kraut’s translation. For the reader’s ease of reference, I supply the original as well: “To de adikein kai apeithèin tò bèltion, kai theò kai anthemòpò, hoti kakon kai aischron estin oida.” This is, incidentally, also an example of a Socratic knowledge-claim.
also owed to a human superior. Now, under what conditions will Socrates say that a human being is superior? Is he thinking of military officers, magistrates, and anyone else who occupies a position of power? Certainly not... Neither in the Apology nor in the Crito does Socrates ever commit himself to the position that political officials or the state deserve absolute submission. And so our passage from the Apology must mean that Socrates is prepared to obey someone who is superior to him in virtue.”

There it is: Kraut’s chief piece of evidence for “my own view... that a form of authoritarianism must be attributed to Socrates, and not just to Plato.” According to Kraut, this one line resonates with unmistakably authoritarian tones, although he boldly places all his eggs in one basket by writing that: “Everything depends on how we take beltion.”

I believe that Kraut’s interpretation of beltion or superior, which he thinks “must” refer to a moral superior (who quickly becomes a “godlike moral expert”), is neither true nor in the text. Torn out of context, Socrates’ statement to his jurors may admit of the authoritarian reading Kraut gives to it, but, to get at its real meaning, one would do better to consider the circumstances to which Socrates is plainly alluding at Apology 29b6-7.

When Kraut excerpts Apology line 29b6-7 to make his point, he says that Socrates is in the midst of explaining to the jury that he believes his philosophical mission is divinely ordained, and that he therefore will not break faith with the

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9 Kraut, SS, 234.
10 Ibid., 233.
11 Ibid., 23 n.38.
“orders to spend my life in philosophy and in examining myself and others.”

To do so would be to disobey a “divine superior,” namely the god whom Socrates believed to have assigned him to his philosophical work through the cryptic utterance of the Delphic oracle, and would be bad and shameful. This part of Socrates’ statement is unproblematic: it is clear that he is referring to the god as his divine superior. But who are the human superiors that Socrates is speaking of? Kraut argues that Socrates “must” mean by beltion someone who is morally superior, reasoning that if someone is superior merely by being in a position of political power or authority, then Socrates is committing himself to an extremely conservative political doctrine, and he is also contradicting the position he took when he disobeyed the Thirty. After all, they were his superiors in the sense that they were his rulers. . . But a ‘superior’ can mean someone who is more virtuous (Protagoras 320b3, cf. ameinon at Apology 30d1), and surely this is what Socrates means here.

Again, perhaps in vacuo Kraut’s reading of Apology 29b is a possibility. But, a wider view of what Socrates was saying, one which respects the text by taking into account the surrounding passages, tells a very different story. At Apology 28c to 29c, the discussion is replete with military references: the heroes who died at Troy: Achilles, Hector, Patroclus; making light of danger; fate; warnings;

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12 Apology 29 (Fowler).
13 Kraut. SS, 23 n.38.
14 But even so, there are problems with it. For example when Kraut asks: “Now, under what conditions will Socrates say that a human being is superior? Is he thinking of military officers, magistrates, and anyone else who occupies a position of power? Certainly not,” and concludes “and so our passage from the Apology must mean that Socrates is prepared to obey someone who is superior to him in virtue,” Kraut seems to be operating within the confines of a false dichotomy.
avenging friends; requiting villains; death and danger; obedience to military
orders; being assigned to a post by a commanding officer; the disgrace of
running away from that post; and the battles at Potidaia, Amphipolis and
Delium, at each of which Socrates was assigned to a particular position in the
hoplite battle-formation by a superior officer. This is the passage from which
Kraut’s beltion argument arises. Socrates was telling the jury how he remained at
his post at each of these battles, facing death but not disobeying his orders from
his commanding officer. The point of this, in the context, is simply to remind the
jury that a soldier who does not abandon his assigned post in battle, but rather
remains there and faces death, is surely not doing a shameful thing. On the
contrary, it is the soldier who deserts his assigned post who acts in a shameful
manner. Why does Socrates bring this up? Because it would almost certainly be
accepted by most if not all of his jurors; the idea of “remaining at one’s post” was
“a requirement essential to the tactics of heavy infantry combat, with which
every Athenian citizen was familiar.”15 And by analogy, Socrates argues, it
would also be bad and shameful if he were to abandon his other “post,” his
philosophical one, his charge to live philosophizing, where he felt he was
assigned to stay by the god, through the Delphic oracle. Socrates tells how it
would have been a shocking inconsistency if, having obeyed his human military
superiors in those three battles, he then disobeyed the god by deserting his
metaphoric post, where, at least according to his interpretation of the Delphic

oracle's message, the god had assigned him. Indeed, as Socrates points out, if he had absconded from what he believed to be his divinely-commanded (philosophical) post, then "truly one might justly hale me into court, on the charge that I do not believe that there are gods, since I disobey the oracle and fear death and think I am wise when I am not." In other words, what Socrates is saying is that it would have been bad and shameful to have fled from his assigned posts in battle, a sentiment with which most would agree. And similarly it would be bad and shameful to desert his other "post," carrying out his philosophic mission as the god had ordained. In both of these cases, the standard Greek expression for deserting one's military post is used: _lipein tēn taxin_, and in both of these cases, Socrates' point is that it is better to stay and face death than to run off and desert one's post. This analogical argument is Socrates' reply to those who wish he would just abandon his pesky philosophical examinations and "live quietly, without talking." But, as Socrates explains on the basis of this analogy, "Therefore I say to you, men of Athens... I shall not change my conduct even if I am to die many times over." And _that_ is what Socrates is talking about when he states that

"... to do an injustice and disobey a superior [beltion], whether divine or human: that, I know, is bad and shameful."

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16 _Apology_ 29a (Fowler).
17 _Apology_ 37e (Fowler).
18 _Apology_ 30b (Fowler).
By his divine *beltion* here, Socrates is clearly referring to the god who assigned Socrates to his philosophical post. And by his human superiors, Socrates is clearly referring to his military superiors who assigned him to his post in battle, *not* to some mysterious unidentified “moral experts” who suddenly pop into the discussion, as if they would be lurking in the vicinity of battle, perhaps to shout “Foul!” if someone does something beneath contempt.

But Kraut implicitly claims that all the military references are of no relevance, and that the “human superior” in question “must be a moral superior,” in fact a “godlike moral expert.” In so doing, he treats the context of this beautifully written, extraordinary passage as if it were of no significance. If “everything depends on how we take *beltion*,” as Kraut claims, then it appears that Kraut has actually done nothing to establish the moral authoritarianism he contends is lurking in the *Apology*. He was quite unjustified in taking the word *beltion* out of context. *Beltion* is the comparative of the adjective *agathos*, meaning “good.” So someone who is one’s *beltion* is therefore more *agathos* than oneself. But one must always ask: more good, better, superior, *beltion* in what way?

*Agathos* and *beltion* are words which are *highly* context-dependent: sometimes bearing moral connotations, but often not. Frequently they highlight high capacity or achievement in a specific area: one can be *agathos* at arguments (as at *Hippias Minor* 367b), an *agathos* runner (*Hippias Minor* 373d), and of course one can be someone’s *beltion* (superior) at arguing or running too. At *Euthyphro* 13b, Socrates speaks of horses becoming better (*beltiones*) when attended to by the
horseman's art, obviously with no moral connotation implied. The Apology is replete with instances of the word beltion: it occurs at 18b, 22b, 24d, 24e, 25a, 25b, 29b, and 41d, for example. Some of these instances have little moral connotation, as when Socrates mentions how many people are better than the poets themselves at analysing the meaning and implications of a poem. Some of the instances do have moral connotations, as when Socrates asks his accuser Meletus: "If I corrupt people, who makes them better?" At Apology 24e, Socrates even addresses Meletus as "Ô beltiste," that is, "Most superlatively excellent one"; this probably had moral connotations, but was obviously, in this case, heavy on the irony. If Kraut had interpreted this instance of the word "beltiste" without considering the context, he might have concluded that Socrates considered his asinine accuser Meletus a moral superior, instead of the malicious fanatic that he was.

I conclude that Kraut would need some much beltion evidence to establish that there is any authoritarianism of the type he imputes to Socrates in the Apology. Clearly the plain vanilla version of Apology 29b6-7 implies no such thing. Thomas Hardy called the interpretation of a poem which quotes its worst line, stripped of context, and then invites the reader to judge the whole poem, or even the poet, by that part, a case of "mischievous criticism." Similarly - without the slightest imputation of mischievous intent to Kraut - I believe that Kraut's beltion argument is an instructive error, a cautionary tale against reading
Plato's dialogues as if they were "treatises doused in drama sauce,"19 where the goal is to scrape off the drama sauce and get down to the "real philosophy," the string of propositions beneath.

However, someone might object that, actually, taking what Socrates says at *Apology* 29b6-7 at face value, he seems to be committing himself to an even *stronger* form of authoritarianism than what Kraut is suggesting, one that is severed from the dream of reliable moral authority. For, as Kraut notes, Socrates does "talk about obedience to god and to man in the same breath."20 Does this imply that Socrates would follow with equal obedience the commands of the gods and of his commanding military officers? Kraut infers from the fact that Socrates speaks of his obedience to god and to his human superiors in the same sentence that the degree of loyalty Socrates felt towards them must be on par, and that "the *Apology* tells us that the absolute submission owed to an immortal is also owed to a human superior."21

Operating on the assumption that the obedience Socrates felt he owed to god was "absolute submission,"22 Kraut infers that Socrates cannot be "thinking of military officers"23 at the hotly-contested *Apology* 29b, since "nowhere in the early dialogues does Socrates commit himself to the position that political

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19 Orwin in Griswold (1988), 172.
20 Kraut. SS, 234.
21 Ibid., 234.
22 Kraut. SS, 234.
23 Ibid., 234.
officials or the state deserve absolute submission. And so our passage from the
*Apology* must mean that Socrates is prepared to obey someone who is superior to
him in virtue." But why should we suppose that Socrates is committing
himself to the position that his human superiors deserve “absolute submission”? Notice that the phrase “absolute submission” is something Kraut imports into
the argument here; those are not Socrates’ words. Indeed, as Kraut points out,
nowhere in the *Apology* or in the *Crito* does Socrates say that military officers, or
any other fallible human being, deserve “absolute submission.”

Would Socrates even grant absolute submission to *the commands of the
gods*? Although Socrates described himself as always the sort of person who
follows nothing but the *logos* which seems best to him, he also obeyed
commands which he thought were of supernatural origin and reached him
through supernatural channels. But would his obedience to the gods be
accurately characterized by the expression “absolute submission”? Let us
consider, for example, the famous Delphic oracle that “No one is wiser than

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24 Ibid., 234.
25 *Crito* 46b.
26 Although some commentators, who (as McPherran puts it in G.A. Scott, 2002, 119) have
perhaps been “repelled by the shady religious origins on which Socrates grounds his
uncompromising allegiance to philosophy,” have tried to interpret away the religious aspects of
Socrates’ thought. Consider, for example, Martha Nussbaum’s view (in Smith and Woodruff,
2000, 32) that all Socrates’ talk about his *daimonion* or divine inner monitor was really an “ironic
way of alluding to the supreme authority of dissuasive reason and elenctic argument.” Vlastos
writes that he would “waste no time arguing against these scholars. The fact they are denying is
so firmly attested in our principal sources that to cut it out of them would be surgery which kills
the patient” (SIMP, 158).
Socrates,” which Socrates took to be a divine command although it would seem to be a strictly descriptive statement. When Socrates first heard about this proclamation, what did he do? Did he simply take it at face value and “absolutely submit” to it, even though it was at odds with his own impression that he was not wise? Not at all. A.E. Taylor perhaps overstates the case when he writes that Socrates “thereupon set to work to prove Apollo a liar by finding some one wiser than himself,” but certainly he did not just rest on his laurels as the divinely-anointed wisest of human beings. Instead he chose to investigate the matter by interviewing

“one of those who had a reputation for wisdom, thinking that there, if anywhere, I should prove the utterance wrong and should show the oracle ‘This man is wiser than I, but you said I was wisest.’”

Socrates relates how he continued investigating thus, first going to the politicians, then to the poets, and finally to the craftsmen, seeking a counter-example to the god’s assertion, since Socrates did not think of himself as wise, let alone superlatively so. But during the course of this research, it began to dawn on him that he was wiser than other people, since they were also not wise, but thought they were, a mistake that Socrates felt he was free of. After a while,

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27 *Apology* 28e.
28 A.E. Taylor. 1953, 80.
29 Not just *beltion* (superior) but in fact *beltistos* (the tops).
30 *Apology* 21c (Fowler).
Socrates realized that the oracle was probably true, but that the god, like a poet, did not use the clearest language, and really meant

"that real wisdom is the property of god, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, 'The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is essentially worthless.'"  

Another example of Socrates obeying what he took to be a divine command occurs in the *Phaedo.* There Socrates relates how he has had strange recurrent dreams throughout his life bidding him to "make music, make music," which he took to mean "do philosophy, do philosophy." He says he thought that the dream was "urging and encouraging me to do what I was doing already and that just as people encourage runners by cheering, so the dream was encouraging me to do what I was doing." Probably this interpretation did not seem quite as far-fetched to Socrates as it seems to us, since the Greek word *mousikê* could refer to any art or study over which the Muses presided, including philosophy. But ordinarily, as Socrates himself points out, it just meant music. Even so, Socrates chose to do philosophy rather than make music (until the very end of his life, when, to be on the safe side, Socrates thought he'd better make some actual music). Is this response to a divine command well described as "absolute

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31 *Apology* 23a-b (Tredennick in Cairns and Hamilton).
32 *Phaedo* 60e-61b This is not considered an early dialogue, but Socrates' response here is typical of his highly interpretive approach to following what he thought were divine commands.
33 *Phaedo* 60e (Fowler).
34 *Phaedo* 61a.
submission”? I believe that the phrase is suggestive of a degree and kind of religious fanaticism quite foreign to Socratic theory and practice, and so Kraut’s contention that Socrates would recommend “absolute submission” towards a human moral expert seems all the more overstated.

In addition, it surely does not follow from the fact that Socrates mentions both his divine and his human superiors in the same sentence that he believes these two groups are owed the same level of obedience, especially since the idea is plainly contradicted by a statement Socrates makes at *Apology* 28e. There he tells the jury that:

“So I should have done a dreadful thing, if, when the commanders whom you chose to command me stationed me, both at Potidaia and at Amphipolis and at Delium, I remained where they stationed me as others did, and ran the risk of death, but when the god gave me a station, as I believed and understood, with orders to spend my life in philosophy and in examining myself and others, then I were to desert my post through fear of death or anything else whatsoever.”

In other words, it would have been bad and shameful to disobey his commanding officers and flee his assigned post as a hoplite; and it would have been bad and shameful to disobey god and desert his other post as a philosopher; but it would have been still worse to have obeyed his human superior officers, but then to disobey god. The phrasing of the Greek conditional sentence makes this even clearer perhaps than it is in most English translations: the particles *men* and *de* are both duplicated to signify heavy emphasis on the

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35 Translation by Dyer and Seymour.
contrast: the inanity of obeying a man but not the god. As Dyer and Seymour describe the situation, "the outrageous conduct for Socrates would be with this combination of facts and convictions, after his past fidelity to human trusts, to then at some future time desert his divinely appointed post of duty," that would be a dreadful thing. What this strongly suggests is that Socrates would consider it far worse to disobey the god than to disobey his human superiors, contrary to Kraut's contention. It should also be noted that this hierarchical ordering of superiors, with gods ranked higher than men, opposes the charge of impiety that Socrates has been accused of; in so doing, it is consistent with Socrates' plea of innocence. But the way Kraut has it, on the other hand, with Socrates conferring equal obedience to humans as to gods, would do little good for Socrates' case. And last but not least, Kraut's claim about the equality of obedience owed to gods and human beings seems contrary to the heightened Socratic sense of human fallibility. But Kraut needs the equality to make his argument fly. The kind of human being whom Kraut envisages as someone Socrates would be prepared to follow "as if he were a god" would have to be, like a god, intellectually and morally infallible. But Kraut has done nothing to support the notion Socrates imagines such a thing is even possible, except to say

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36 See Denniston's *The Greek Particles* on the duplication of such particles.

37 Dyer and Seymour. 1992, 75 n.1.

38 Like Socrates' conception of a god, anyway; see Vlastos (SIMP), Ch. 6.
that Socrates mentions gods and human superiors in the same sentence, a very weak reason. Kraut virtually concedes this point himself when he writes:

“I take [Socrates] to be suggesting that there is a great gulf between the wisdom of the gods and the wisdom of human beings – a gulf that he strongly suspects is unbridgeable.”

But if so, then why should we believe “the Apology tells us that Socrates himself is prepared to follow a certain kind of human being as though he were a god”? Kraut’s response is that we cannot “dogmatically” reject the possibility, however remote, that there might one day be a god-like human moral expert after all. Can’t we? Socrates spoke with obvious mocking irony about the wise men of the past as *sophos kai theios*, meaning, in various translations: “wise and godlike,” “wise and inspired,” or, in Robin Waterfield’s characteristically more cheeky translation, “superhumanly clever.” He thought that human wisdom was worth very little compared to that of the gods, and had good reason to suspect the gap between gods and humans unbridgeable. Consider the care and attention that Socrates devoted to moral issues, just the sheer quantity of intense conversations he had concerning them. G.A Scott estimates that he must have had nearly 15,000 such conversations, operating on the assumption that he had just one a day over a forty year period leading up to his trial. I believe the

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40 To borrow Brickhouse and Smith’s phrase, most recently in (2000), 60.
41 *Republic* I 331e, as translated by Grube; Davies and Vaughan; and Waterfield.
42 *Apology* 23a-b.
figure would be closer to 9000, on the assumption that he had just one a day, for a twenty-five year period leading up to his trial. Of course, if Socrates had more than one such discussion per day, which he probably did, or if he had started having such conversations before he heard about the Delphic oracle’s pronouncement, which he probably did, the number would be much higher.

Suffice it to say, Socrates dedicated much of his life to thinking and talking about virtue and vice, not putting it off until an unfortunate set of circumstances forced him to confront such issues, but every day. But even so, he still felt he was far from being an expert on the subject, although he was unable to find anyone else who was more knowledgeable. As Kraut puts it:

"There was no one who could defeat him in moral argument, even when he faced the leading intellectual figures of the day." 47

But if even Socrates - who was obviously brilliant and probably unsurpassed for his degree of dedication to the moral life - was not a moral expert, is it really so unreasonable and "dogmatic" to reject the possibility of there ever being a "god-like" moral expert? Be that as it may, Kraut, for one, doesn’t want to preclude the possibility that there could one day be such a creature. Hence the alleged Socratic authoritarianism is all in the hypothetical

44 At *Apology 28e*, Socrates seems to be saying that he was assigned by the god to his philosophical "post" after he fought in the battles of Potidaia (432-430), Amphipolis (424) and Delium (424). That would mean the earliest that “appointment” could have been made was in 424 B.C., 25 years before Socrates’ death.


46 As McPherran argues in G.A. Scott (2002), 120.

future mode, and therefore one would think, since Socrates never encountered such an expert, that he would not speak of ever having obeyed one. So why then, when Socrates says at *Apology* 28e that it would be a dreadful thing to have obeyed his human commanders but not the god, does he speak in the past tense? These are the same human superiors spoken of at *Apology* 29b6-7.

To sum up, apparently C.D.C. Reeve considered the error of Kraut's interpretation of *Apology* 29b6-7 as so plain as to scarcely merit any rebuttal. He simply writes of Kraut's position that

"it overlooks one crucial piece of evidence. Socrates clearly includes his military commanders at Potidaia, Amphipolis, and Delium among those who are his superiors in the requisite sense. He can hardly be supposing, however, that these commanders had all reached a 'higher moral stage' than himself. So it is back to the drawing board." 48

Similarly, Brickhouse and Smith simply point out the military theme of the passage and comment that the attempt to "establish a broadly moral conception of the relevant superiority" strikes them as a "most bizarre and unlikely way to read what Socrates says at 29b6-7." 49

Obviously, I agree with these conclusions, but I have tried to provide more argumentation against Kraut's *belition* argument, since it does have some supporters, 50 and since Kraut is nothing but tenacious and tries again to confirm

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48 Reeve. 1989, 111.

49 Brickhouse and Smith. 1994, 141.

50 Such as Iakovos Vasiliou (1999, 46) and Roslyn Weiss (1998, 12), for example.
his thesis, this time looking for evidence of moral authoritarianism in Socrates’ jail cell.

(B) AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE CRITO

In the Crito, Crito implores Socrates to escape, appealing to him “on every ground; take my advice and please don’t be unreasonable!” But many of Crito’s grounds were of the kind that Socrates would expect from “the general public” or “the many,” not from the “really reasonable” people. So Socrates reminds Crito of what they used to say, before they were in this particular, very tense, situation: that some people’s opinions should be taken seriously (those of the wise, the most reasonable people, and preferably those of an expert), while the opinions of the uninformed majority should not guide our decisions. He offers an illustrative analogy: when a man is in serious physical training, would he be better off listening to the advice from the spectators, or to the advice from a trainer, an expert about what makes the body healthy and strong? If he listens to the advice from the crowd rather than the trainer, won’t his training suffer, and his body be harmed? Likewise, Socrates asks, since there is (as Socrates and Crito agree) a part of us which is benefited when we do right actions but is harmed when we do wrong, would it be better for us to listen to what the crowd says about right and wrong, or to an expert about such things, if there were such a person? There isn’t one, but if there were, wouldn’t it be prudent to take

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51 Crito 46a (Tredennick in Cairns and Hamilton).
advice from "the one who knows" rather than from the many who have no special knowledge of such matters? Otherwise won't one's soul be harmed? Crito agrees to all this. Kraut summarizes this analogy between a physical trainer and a moral expert as Socrates' way of saying that

"if there ever are people who know as much about virtue as other experts know about their own fields, then we should subordinate ourselves to them in the same way we look up to nonmoral authorities." 

Then, combining this with his beltion argument, Kraut believes that Socrates is in fact advocating an attitude of "absolute submission" towards the moral expert, by which he means that Socrates "is not merely bidding us to consult with moral authorities – if there ever are any – and then go off and make up our own minds," but to simply submit to their prescriptions, even if they are not understood or endorsed (just as one might not understand a doctor's suggested course of medical treatment, yet follow it). As Nehamas points out, this is a "voluntaristic approach to moral expertise, which gives relatively little weight to the role of argument and persuasion in Socrates' view of the nature of the expert of aretê." What would such an expert be like, that Socrates would supposedly drop his old habit of "questioning the wise," and instead

52 Kraut. SS, 244.
53 Which sounds to me like a much stronger claim than that we should defer to the moral expert "in the same way" we defer to trainers and other non-moral authorities.
54 Kraut. SS, 238.
55 Nehamas. 1999, 40.
56 Hippias Minor 372b.
"absolutely submit" to his or her directions? I have already argued that the language of "absolute submission" imports a degree of confidence in the alleged expert which is quite foreign to Socrates' scrupulous ethos of always thoroughly investigating the merit of what he is told before receiving it "into his soul." But, leaving aside that issue for now, I turn to examine exactly what kind of human being it is that Kraut envisions as one which Socrates would submit to absolutely. I believe this to be another seriously problematic part of his thesis.

Kraut distinguishes what he calls the four stages of moral development, and claims that, while Socrates has worked his way up to stage three, he did not reach stage four, the stage of genuine moral expertise. It is a "stage four moral expert" that Kraut believes Socrates sought, and would have obeyed absolutely. The stages are as follows:

• I) Those who have received and accepted the lessons of their conventional moral education, the Athenian paideia, but who are still unaware of any deficiencies that exist in their moral system. Let us call this the paideia stage.
• II) Those who have gone through the paideia stage but who now recognize some problem-areas and inconsistencies that exist within their belief system. Let us call this the post-elenctic stage.
• III) Socrates' level: "He has systematized many of his beliefs and has rid himself of errors. He can defend many of his views in arguments, but he is still afflicted by puzzles, the most important of which are definitional. He realizes he still has a long way to go before he completes his moral education."

57 Cf. Protagoras 314b.
58 To summarize from Kraut (SS), 231.
59 Which is not to say that going through an elenchos is a necessary condition for this, since one could arrive at this stage through other means.
IV) The level of moral expertise. Such a person "can define the virtues, is free from moral perplexity, and can determine how to act even in difficult situations."

As one can see from his description of a stage four genuine moral expert, Kraut packs a lot into being able to define the virtues. He believes that, according to Socrates, "whoever becomes a moral expert will possess moral definitions that tell him precisely what to do, even in difficult situations."60 Should Socrates be interpreted in this way, as really expecting such a panacea for moral problems when he asked his "What is X?" questions? Was he really of the opinion that unresolved moral problems and perplexity would no longer persist, once a correct definition of virtue, "or perhaps one corresponding to each of the virtues,"61 was found? It is hard to imagine him as failing to suspect that, even with such a formula in hand, there would still be perplexity in any situation where it is unclear whether the conditions of the definition are satisfied. But Kraut points to a passage in the *Euthyphro* which, he thinks, does commit Socrates to the position that the virtue-definitions will provide someone with a "definitive guide to the solution of practical problems."62 In the passage, Socrates is requesting that Euthyphro desist from telling him one or two of the many holy acts, and describe instead that one essential aspect, by which *all* holy acts are holy. He says:

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60 Kraut. SS, 234.
61 Ibid., 279.
62 Kraut. SS, 256.
"Tell me what this aspect is, that I may keep my eye fixed upon it and employ it as a model, and, if anything you or anyone else does agrees with it, may say that the act is holy, and if not, that it is not holy."

But why should we assume that what Socrates is saying here is that a definition would, or should, free one from moral perplexity? Why disregard the part of his statement where he talks about particular acts "agreeing" or not "agreeing" with the model or standard? Certainly, trying to determine which acts do and do not agree with a given moral principle is one of the most trenchant problems of contemporary applied ethics. Much more is needed for responsible moral deliberation, it seems, than general principles or "definitions" alone; one also needs to look carefully into the particular facts of the matter concerned. For example, in his essay entitled "Moral Experts," Peter Singer provides an example of what one might be up against in trying to resolve a moral problem. Singer's example is (not surprisingly) of a person who eats meat and enjoys it, but is uneasy about it, wondering if he is doing something immoral. He is aware of moral principles, but he also needs to look into the relevant particulars in order to make a conscientious choice. For example, he

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63 Euthyphro 6e (Fowler).

64 Cf. Brickhouse and Smith (1994), 62: They believe that this passage "does not commit Socrates to the view that knowledge of the paradigm will be sufficient to allow Socrates to judge all cases. This was presumably how Kraut read it. But the passage may be taken as stating only why Socrates is interested in obtaining the definition: if one knew the definition, one could use it 'as a paradigm' to judge whether or not any particular action or person is pious. Such knowledge does not by itself guarantee that one will know all that it needed in order to make the right judgment, however... Obviously, knowledge of the definition of piety would contribute significantly to one's power to judge putative instances of piety; but even that knowledge, great as it would be, is a far cry from providing an entire moral theory by which every moral problem pertaining to piety could be solved."
would need to learn about animals' capacity to suffer and about how animals are raised and slaughtered; learn about the effects of a largely meat diet and about a vegetarian diet; he might consider whether a meat diet or a vegetarian diet would impact on world food shortages if there was a large-scale switch from meat diets to vegetarian diets or vice versa; consider bias (e.g. "I like meat" or "I don't like meat"); learn about what sorts of hormones and antibiotics are injected into animals and what dangers may arise from this practice, etc. In other words, at least on the Singerian model of expert moral deliberation, one would clearly have to have much more knowledge at one's disposal than just a virtue-definition, or any other kind of general principle such as the utilitarian maxim.

But what would Socrates say about all this? Because he never offered an elenctically acceptable definition of any of the virtues, it is difficult to know for sure whether or to what extent he thought such a thing would free its possessor from perplexity when actually trying to solve a moral problem, and anyway it is unclear how he would be able to know this in advance of actually discovering at least one such definition. But, let us take a look at one example of a core Socratic principle which I think Socrates would always have in mind when trying to solve a moral problem, and how its possession, I believe even if supplemented by the rare and much-desired definitions, would not necessarily exorcise the potential for perplexity. Since Kraut seems to think that a genuine moral expert, equipped

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Singer. 2000, 3.
with such information, would, like a god or a perfectly-programmed robot, never feel perplexed, it is useful to test the reasonableness of such an idea.

Socrates believed that there is a part of us which is made better when we do good acts, but is made worse when we do wrong. In the Crito, this part of us remained unnamed; in the Gorgias, it is clearly enunciated to be the soul. According to Socrates, this part of us, our soul, is mutilated by repeated immoral acts, and, if this part of us is ruined, life is not even worth living anymore. But, fortunately, the soul can (usually) be restored to a healthier condition by undergoing corrective punishment, and can be benefited by doing good acts. According to Socrates, one guaranteed way a person will cause damage to his or her soul is by wronging another. Socrates believed this adamantly, that one should never do wrong, under any circumstances. He believed that “to do wrong is in every sense bad and dishonourable for the person who does it.”

Drawing out the implications of this principle, Socrates thinks it follows that one must not do wrong even if someone wrongs you first. One must not do injuries to others, even in retaliation for an injury, because injuring someone is wronging him: there is no difference. No matter what the provocation, one ought not return a wrong or do an injury to anyone. One must not retaliate. In fact, one

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66 Crito 47e.
67 Crito 49b (Tredennick in Cairns and Hamilton).
68 Crito 49c.
ought not even defend oneself against injury by retaliating.\footnote{Crito 49d. A position which certainly invites questions about Socrates' involvement in battles.} All such acts would cause damage to that part of us, our soul, "in which right and wrong operate."\footnote{Crito 48a (Tredennick in Cairns and Hamilton).} In the \textit{Crito}, the precise nature of the damage caused to the soul by wrong-doing is not specified, though it is compared, by who knows how strict an analogy, with the ruination of the body caused by an unhealthy lifestyle.\footnote{Crito 47e-48.} In the \textit{Gorgias}, Socrates provides a much more graphic depiction of the damage done, claiming that when a person dies, the soul is stripped of the body, and evidence of all the experiences which a person has had are visible on it.\footnote{Gorgias 523-526.} All thewrongs done by a person leave visible scars on the soul, and the soul of a corrupt person is warped because it has been "reared a stranger to truth."\footnote{Gorgias 525a (Tredennick in Cairns and Hamilton).} With all of this revealed, the judges of the dead can see the wrongs an individual has done and judge him or her accordingly. (As an interesting aside, it's worth noting that even when speaking of these "real judges,"\footnote{Apology 41a.} the judges of the dead, who are demigods,\footnote{Apology 41a.} Socrates mentions how if one of them gets "perplexed,"\footnote{Gorgias 524a.} he will call in another to confer with. I guess even the judges of the underworld are not as wise as Kraut's godlike stage four moral experts, since they still get perplexed.)
Socrates kept continual vigil against doing wrong to avoid incurring harm to his soul. But, as a hypothetical problem, suppose Socrates were walking in a dangerous area of Athens, perhaps the Piraeus at night, and he came upon a thug attacking someone. Suppose Socrates wanted to intervene, but realized that he would have to use force and injure the thug in order to prevent injury to the person being attacked. But that would seem to require that Socrates violate his own moral code, which states that a person must never do an injury to anyone. So, if he fights the attacker off, injuring him in the process, he risks doing harm to his own soul. However, if Socrates does not intervene, although this may keep the chronicle of deeds written on his soul pristine, the attacked person will be left to fend for himself or herself. Socrates’ act of omission may have terrible consequences for that person. So, Socrates may be wronging someone whether he intervenes or not. What should he do? My point is that it seems like Socrates cannot know for certain which course of action best agrees with his principle and will keep his soul healthiest. Just as the judges of the underworld get perplexed, so too may Socrates be in such a case, and in others like it, that can be contrived for the sake of argument, or actually encountered in the hurly-burly of one’s ordinary moral life. And so one wonders about how far a small set of core statements of the definitional kind could possibly take a person towards

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77 Arguably though, Socrates might really be benefiting the attacker by preventing him from harming someone else. Perhaps a more clear-cut example would be if Socrates were ever in a position where he had to choose between injuring one innocent person to prevent injury to several other innocent people.
"flawless and foursquare"\textsuperscript{78} moral expertise either. Of course, Kraut would object to my example on the grounds that while Socrates' prohibition on wrongdoing, being rather vague, leaves room for such uncertainty, adequate definitions of the virtues would not, since they would be vastly more specific and therefore vastly more action-guiding. But would having the definitions of the virtues at one's disposal really help settle the issue in the hypothetical situation of Socrates and the Athenian thug, and if so, how? Would Socrates consult with his definition of courage to determine what to do? Or would he check with what his recipe for justice prescribes? But then one would also want to make sure that one was not acting impiously or immoderately, and certainly not unwisely. In other words, it is not at all clear to me how one is supposed to proceed, even with all this valuable moral information in hand. Perhaps the procedure would be simplified if, consistent with Socrates' suggestion that the traditional virtues were really all parts of one thing,\textsuperscript{79} there were some singular super-definition, an account of the essence of Virtue itself, with which to consult. Kraut concedes that this may have been what Socrates was ultimately looking for, rather than a handful of particular virtue-definitions.\textsuperscript{80} But an account of Virtue that is broad enough to encompass all the virtues would be likely to lose much of the action-

\textsuperscript{78} In Simonides' words.

\textsuperscript{79} The idea that there is a "unity of the virtues" is broached especially in the \textit{Protagoras} (329c-330b and 349a-c). It is unclear whether the many virtues are all part of Virtue like the eyes, ears, nose and mouth are parts of a face, or whether they are like the parts of a bar of gold. It is also unclear whether Socrates expected one definition (of Virtue) or one corresponding to each virtue.

\textsuperscript{80} Kraut. SS, 279.
guiding specificity Kraut associates with the Socratic definitions. (This is why, for example, he rejects the statement “Virtue is knowledge of good and evil” as an unsatisfactory account of virtue: because it “fails to provide a usable standard for making practical decisions.”) Moreover, suppose for the sake of argument that someone did have the ability to define “virtue” with such finesse that it emerged undefeated from an elenchos, or, better yet, from a great number of elenchoi. There would still always be the possibility that another argument, on another day, with another interlocutor, could unearth problems for the hitherto triumphant definition. I don’t see how one could reasonably preclude the possibility that some more imaginative or experienced interlocutor, or some emerging new ethical problem area (such as weapons of mass destruction; organ transplants; tree rights; human cloning, and so forth), might not reveal some measure of inadequacy in any current definition or standard. For example, Bertrand Russell and his friend Einstein had advocated pacifism, but they changed their minds when confronted with Nazi atrocities. In the Laches, Socrates says he believes that a man who possessed full knowledge of virtue X would have to know about all cases of X, present, past, and future. Based on this apparently superhuman requirement, Kraut would likely respond that the kind of objection I am raising is a weak spear thrown to no effect against his view, since a definition which could be upset by any future counter-example, or

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81 Ibid., 260.
82 Laches 199d.
which does not tell us how to handle some particular situation, is not the kind of
definition he has in mind. But would any definition ever be? And how could the
expert be sure of this? Certainly, we would not want our moral "experts" to be
guilty of reprehensible ignorance, or thinking they know what they do not know.

In casting doubt on Kraut's characterization of who would count as a
"genuine moral expert" for Socrates (i.e. as someone who can define the virtues
and therefore feels no perplexity and knows how to act even in difficult moral
cases), I do not mean to belittle the importance of the definitions Socrates so often
asked people for. But, I just think it a mistake to suppose that obtaining the
answers to Socrates' "What is X?" questions was the be-all and the end-all of his
style of moral inquiry, that, in Kraut's words, "the ultimate goal of moral
development... is to possess a satisfactory definition of the virtues." 83 This
suggestion is made even more problematic by Kraut's contention that "if
Socrates ever found such an expert, he would treat him like a god." 84 Again,
how does Kraut know this? Because Socrates mentioned his divine superior and
his human superiors "in the same breath"? As argued in the preceding section,
Kraut made two meals of a pea when he read so much into this, and taken out of
context too.

Even Kraut acknowledges that there are a few at least prima facie problems
with his program, one of which is the problem of how one is supposed to be able

83 Kraut. SS, 211.
84 Ibid., 237.
to recognize a moral expert without being such an expert oneself, which Hugh Benson calls "the Charmides problem."\(^{85}\) This is no trivial problem, but a serious one, and one which obviously was of interest to Socrates.\(^{86}\) For example, when young Hippocrates was eager to take lessons in aretē from Protagoras, Socrates warned him at length that:

"If you know what is good and bad, then you can safely buy your knowledge from Protagoras or anyone else; but if you don't, look to it, dear friend, lest you risk and hazard things of utmost value."\(^{87}\)

Kraut, on the other hand, treats the major practical problem of recognizing true expertise in the moral realm rather cavalierly. For example he writes that

"We frequently take others to be experts simply because we have confidence in the institutional framework that certifies that status. Given the proper social setting, certain individuals will come to be looked upon as moral experts."\(^{88}\)

Maybe so, but will these individuals really be moral experts, or might they only be "looked upon" as such? One is reminded that Socrates' whole mission, at least according to one account he gives of it, was to investigate people who had a reputation for wisdom, and demonstrate that they are not very wise.\(^{89}\) Apparently there was no shortage of false so-called moral experts to expose.

Unmasking these counterfeits was something Socrates took to be of the highest

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\(^{86}\) In fact Nehamas (1999, 43) calls it "one of the most crucial, interesting, and paradoxical consequences of Socrates' views on moral education: [that] only one good human being can recognize another."  
\(^{87}\) Protagoras 313d (Allen).  
\(^{88}\) Kraut, SS, 239-40.  
importance,\textsuperscript{90} his service to the god.\textsuperscript{91} As well as \textit{elenchō}, meaning to refute or put to shame, another verb Plato sometimes\textsuperscript{92} used to describe Socrates' tests is \textit{basanizō}. The \textit{basanos} is a dark-coloured stone by which gold can be distinguished from fool's gold. In like manner, Socrates tested the so-called wise men of his day to see if they were the genuine article or counterfeit, and his extensive testing revealed surprising results:

"And by the Dog, men of Athens – for I must speak the truth to you – this, I do declare, was my experience: those who had the most reputation seemed to me to be almost the most deficient, as I investigated at the god's behest, and others who were of less repute seemed to be superior men in the matter of being sensible (\textit{phronimos})."\textsuperscript{93}

So the issue of identifying genuine moral experts and distinguishing these from pseudo-experts does not seem to have been one which Socrates took lightly. Yet Kraut presents us with a Socrates who would let down his guard and happily acquire his moral beliefs from a genuine moral expert, who would supposedly be easy to recognize, presumably because s/he would never be perplexed and always know the correct answer to every moral question because of their virtue-definitions. The way Kraut sets up this possible world, he would probably be surprised to hear that anyone could have reservations about it: after

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Apology} 21e.
\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Apology} 23b.
\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Laches} 188a, d; \textit{Gorgias} 486d, 487a, e.
\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Apology} 22a (Fowler).
all, what could possibly be wrong with acquiring your beliefs from someone who speaks with the authority of knowledge? As Kraut puts it:

“If you acquire your beliefs from someone you recognize as a moral expert, then you can be fairly sure that nothing you believe is false,”94

and who in their right mind would decline this great benefit? But unfortunately this short-cut technique to learning virtue presupposes that recognizing the expert would be relatively unproblematic, but so long as it is not, so long as you yourself do not “know what is good and bad... then you are risking and hazarding things of the utmost value.”95 In addition, as Kraut acknowledges, there is at least one other problem – though Kraut thinks it is only an apparent, not a real, problem – with the picture he presents: what becomes of the examined life if one just follows the advice of a moral expert? He writes:

“At this point, someone might protest against my interpretation in the following way: ‘You are completely forgetting about Socrates’ most famous philosophical maxim: the examined life is not worth living... If the rest of us just take orders from moral experts and never think for ourselves, then we are not living an examined life. So even if there ever are moral experts, they would just ask moral questions, as Socrates does; they would try to get us to think for ourselves, but they wouldn’t tell us what to believe or what to do.’96

Kraut’s response is that this objection “makes an important philosophical mistake.” He believes that there is no real conflict between living the examined

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94 Kraut. SS, 241.
95 Protagoras 313d (Allen).
96 Kraut. SS, 241.
life and adopting your moral beliefs on the basis of expert testimony, since "just accepting what someone says doesn't give you much understanding of what he says... [there is] still a good deal of work for you to do." Kraut explains that one could and should still live the examined life while obeying the moral mandates of an authority, as long as one were busying oneself with trying to deepen one's understanding of what the expert says. The order of operations here is as follows: first believe the expert, then try to understand him or her; first assent, then try to understand exactly what you are assenting to. (Kraut believes it would be contrary to Socrates' ethic of "absolute submission" to the expert to withhold assent until one understands his or her commands.) Of course, this is not the kind of thing Socrates had in mind when he spoke of the examined life in the real world, but Kraut claims that Socrates would have approved of such a scheme if there were genuine moral experts in existence. In such a world, the purpose of an elenctic argument would only be to test one's understanding of the (ostensible) truths already accepted from the expert. In such a world, far from following an argument wherever it may lead, an argument would only be taken seriously so long as it confirmed the foregone conclusion(s), as vouched for by the expert. Should a discussion seem to evince some flaw in the godlike expert's views, one would have to assume that the fault lay with one's own understanding of those views, and must strive not to allow their own results of inquiry to override the expert's, should these conflict. One can imagine that it

97 Kraut. SS, 241.
might be difficult to dislodge one’s own beliefs in favor of someone else’s, just as
Socrates “found it hard to accept” the traditional stories told of the gods; and in
fact Socrates had a conscious policy of trying to agree with himself rather than
with others:

“For my own part, I would think it better if a whole multitude of
people disagree and contradict me, than that I, but one man, should
contradict and be at discord with myself.”

But, according to Kraut’s interpretation, this policy would no longer apply
if it were a genuine moral expert who contradicted Socrates; in that case, if one
wants to avoid doing something bad and shameful, one should yield to the
expert’s beliefs, and try to suppress any psychic disharmony by coming to see
things the same way that the expert does. But all this, of course, is premised on
the idea that one doesn’t find it too hard to accept the grandiose hypothesis that
the expert is, like a god, infallible.

To sum up, Kraut admits that the Socrates he presents is very different
from the popular image of him, in which he appears as a perpetual questioner of
authority and a champion of individual conscience. But, he believes that,
“though we might not like to admit it,” his version of Socrates is the real
McCoy. In this chapter, I have argued that Kraut’s authoritarian thesis is based
on a misreading of *Apology* 29b, an imported notion (of “absolute submission”),

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98 *Euthyphro* 6b (Fowler).
99 *Gorgias* 482 c (Allen).
100 Kraut. SS, 234.
a nonchalant attitude to the problem of recognizing a moral expert, and an
unrealistic idea of what such an expert would be. I have also argued (in a
previous chapter) that Vlastos’ autonomy thesis is not supported by good
evidence. But, so far, in arguing against both of these views, I have confined
myself to looking into the details of the particular arguments proffered by their
authors, rather than taking on the larger issues which are raised by this debate. I
now wish to do so. What was Socrates’ strongest and deepest concern, really?
What was the ultimate point and purpose of his mission?

In the next chapter, I turn to discuss what I take to be Socrates’ absolutely
core beliefs, of which he said, “Among so many arguments, others have been
refuted but this alone abides.” I base my discussion largely upon the Gorgias,
although, for the most part, the rest of the early dialogues are suffused with the
principles he propounds explicitly here. What I find is that, although there is a
modern tendency to think of a moral theory in terms of a set of rules which
should help us to generate, in an almost mechanical way, the correct answer to
the question “What should I do?” in any given moral situation, this model
does not fit well with Socrates’ explicitly-stated set of core moral injunctions.
Rather than telling us “precisely what to do, even in difficult situations,” as

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101 Gorgias 527b.
102 With some exceptions; see my comments on the Gorgias and how it differs from the other early
dialogues in chapter three.
103 Sharpe. 1997, 10.
104 Annas. 1993, 6.
Kraut describes the definitions, or serving as a clear criterion for "solving all vexing moral problems," as Vlastos describes them, they would be better described as telling us what sort of aim to have in our deliberations about what to do.\textsuperscript{105} In Socrates' day, the very word \textit{areté} had at least two, very different, meanings. The sophistic movement, and rhetoricians, taught their students how to become economically and politically successful. Students flocked to these experts to acquire this kind of "\textit{areté}." The other kind of \textit{areté}, with which Socrates concerned himself, was not aimed at amassing power, wealth or reputation, but with gathering wisdom and minimizing ignorance and especially reprehensible ignorance, and with keeping the soul unsullied by wrong-doing. Inciting people to pursue this kind of \textit{areté} was Socrates' forte, and if he was able to persuade someone to prefer his values to those others, he would have accomplished much. But, obviously, seeing the force of and adopting these core Socratic values does not provide one with a convenient short-cut to virtue;\textsuperscript{106} on the contrary, what Socrates said he summoned people to, as far as he was able, was to a certain kind of \textit{life (bios)}, which requires one to be or become a certain kind of \textit{person}.\textsuperscript{107} He wanted his fellow dialoguers to be "the kind of man he

\textsuperscript{105} What Vasiliou (1999) calls "aiming" rather than "determining" principles.

\textsuperscript{106} I borrow this phrase from Brickhouse and Smith in Scott (2002, 156), who believe (I think rightly) that one of the things we should learn from Socrates' life is that "we must not be seduced into thinking that there are wonderful special steps we can take or 'unique methods' we can master to shortcut the impossibly long distances to be traveled" in our quest to avoid the two worst evils for a human being. Contrast Protagoras (318a), who promised that "on the very first day you join me, you will go home a better man."

\textsuperscript{107} Crito 46b; Gorgias 458a.
is,",¹⁰⁸ indeed, one almost has to be to truly uphold the core Socratic system of values, tenaciously following through with its implications in actual practice. I believe that the Socratic examination was meant to initiate this personal transformation, and help sustain it, by not only targeting a person’s arguments and propositions for moral assessment and development, but also the person himself. It is meant to work on the substance of the answerer as well as on the substance of his answers, bringing him around to "a more realistic view of himself and hence, perhaps, to a desire for improvement."¹⁰⁹ Hence a salient feature of the early dialogues is that the participants of an elenchos "do not merely analyze ideas, remaining themselves detached and out of the focus of the inquiry,"¹¹⁰ but are themselves being put to a moral test, which certainly has the potential for waking someone up to the kind of personal transformation needed to get serious about Socratic values. So, contrary to Kraut who depicts Socrates' goal as getting at the correct propositional results of moral inquiry (chiefly the answers to his "What is X?" questions) as expediently as possible, and contrary to Vlastos who also portrays these kinds of results as of primary importance to Socrates, with the proviso, of course, that these results must emanate autonomously from the individual, I believe there was another kind of result

¹⁰⁸ Gorgias 458a.
¹¹⁰ Versényi. 1963, 125.
Socrates sought, of a more "psychotherapeutic"\textsuperscript{111} nature. I believe an adequate account of Socrates' philosophy must give weight to this important personal dimension. I turn now to discuss these issues.

\textsuperscript{111} Schmid in Scott (2002), 237.
VI. SOCRATES' REAL STRONGEST AND DEEPEST CONCERNS

In most of Plato's early dialogues, Socrates is seen questioning people, usually people with a reputation for being wise. He seeks satisfactory answers to basic moral questions, but he does not find them. Rather, what he repeatedly finds is that "though a man seemed to be wise to many people, and especially to himself, he was not."\(^1\) Socrates himself frequently disclaims knowledge, and so, just as his interlocutors are unable to provide Socrates with the answers to his questions, so too they do not receive answers from him. Though a procession of faulty opinions may be discredited, rarely was a positive solution reached. Instead, *aporia* usually descends upon the scene and the discussion ends on an unfinished note. As we have seen, some have referred to this lack of conclusive finality as "the dialogue ends in failure." But could it actually be worse than that, positively detrimental to its participants? Consider this plausible scenario from the seventh book of Plato's *Republic*:

> "There are certain beliefs about right and honourable conduct, which we have been brought up from childhood to regard with the same sort of reverent obedience that is shown to parents. In opposition to these, other courses attract us with flattering promises of pleasure, though a moderately good character will resist such blandishments and remain loyal to the beliefs of his fathers. But now suppose him to be confronted by the question, What does 'honourable' mean? He gives the answer he has been taught by the lawgiver, but he is argued out of his position. He is refuted again and again from many different points of view and at last reduced to thinking that what he called honourable might just as well be called disgraceful. He comes to the same conclusion about justice, goodness, and all the things he most revered. What

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\(^1\) *Apology* 21c.
will become now of his old respect and obedience? Obviously they cannot continue as before. And when he has disowned these discredited principles and failed to find the true ones, naturally he can only turn to the life which flatters his desires; and we shall see him renounce all morality."²

The worry here is that, rather than rousing in someone a deeper commitment to morality, or even just leaving them exactly as they were, couldn't Socratic-style questioning actually breed such skepticism towards morality as to corrupt a person?

However, in most of the early dialogues, there was at least one belief which people had been brought up with that was shielded from critical questioning: "the virtue axiom,"³ or the belief that virtue is always good and honourable, whereas vice is always bad and shameful. In most of the early dialogues, Socrates maintained this principle, and no one seemed to doubt it.⁴ In fact they believed in it strongly enough that they would reject any belief that was thought to be in conflict with it. Apparently, however inadequate the paideia system may have been in its account of what virtue was, it did at least instill in people a very strong feeling that virtue was something fine and good. Insofar as people believed this, Socrates had no quarrel with them, and he never challenged anyone to defend or even explain the virtue axiom. One might surmise that he was content to leave well enough alone, that he was not attempting to destroy

² Republic 538c-539a (Cornford). This passage is often taken by interpreters to refer to Alcibiades in particular, though Plato says he is describing a typical effect of philosophy upon young people in general.

³ McKim in Griswold (1988), 35.

⁴ With the exceptions of the Gorgias and Republic I.
any true and useful convictions a person might have. At any rate, the virtue axiom is simply taken for granted in many of the early dialogues.

However, although many of the people with whom Socrates conversed in the early dialogues still honoured the traditional moral code that they had been brought up with since childhood, Socrates lived in a period during which many things which had been taken for granted - including the virtue axiom - were finally beginning to be openly questioned, though this was still a dangerous thing to do. The once stable Athenian culture and morality was beginning to be jarred loose, and no doubt the endless warfare and changing governments played a role in this. Exposure to

"the wide variety of conflicting laws and customs in different cities, as well as the seemingly arbitrary changes within one city’s laws and customs cast doubt on the divine, or natural, or rational basis of any and all civil law. The nature versus convention controversy, which was the chief intellectual battle ground of 5th century Greece struck at the roots of all conventional religious, moral and political beliefs and threatened to undermine the traditions of communal life."\(^5\)

So, while many Athenians held fast to the established conventions, others wavered, and some embraced new ideas eagerly. In other words, as the philosopher Robert Zimmerman put it, “The times they were a-changin.” Some of these changes are conspicuous in the *Gorgias*.\(^6\) There, the benefits of virtue are doubted and even ridiculed, and vice seems to be in ascendancy. Instead of the

\(^5\) Versényi. 1982, 6.

\(^6\) A dialogue which both Vlastos and Kraut catalogue as an early Socratic one.
virtue axiom being taken for granted, the burden of proof is bluntly thrust upon Socrates by his interlocutors, who indeed seem to have renounced morality, but certainly not because of Socratic questioning. On the contrary, what we see here is how Socratic questioning can bring someone back to morality. Unlike in the other early dialogues where the virtue axiom is quietly assumed and the virtuous person (the kalos ἑαγαθός) admired, in the Gorgias Socrates is confronted with three advocates of vice, who come in varying shades of candor. Two of these lifelike characters in particular, Polus and Callicles, openly admit that they believe vice to be very profitable, and they relish the thought of the power and the pleasure enjoyed by the adikos eudaimôn (the prosperous malefactor), while they view the traditional Greek virtues such as moderation as depriving people of power and pleasure. Since they associate power and pleasure with the good, they see the traditional virtues as depriving people of the good, i.e. as making people worse, not better, contrary to popular opinion. They therefore tend to think of virtue as really only suitable for people who have been brainwashed by their childhood moral education, or are too timid, to pursue what is really in their self-interest. With their basic hostility to morality and also their "philosopher-bashing," these interlocutors represent a total affront to the Socratic outlook. It's no wonder then that the opening words of the Gorgias are

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7 With the exception of Thrasymachus in Republic I.
"polemou kai machēs": war and battle.\textsuperscript{9} In the intense battle of words that follows, Socrates advances his position that the two worst things for a human being are:

(1) To do wrong and escape punishment for that wrong,\textsuperscript{10} and

(2) Having false opinions about good and evil and escaping correction.\textsuperscript{11}

I turn now to discuss these fundamental Socratic beliefs (the theory), and then to examine how their conscientious upkeep requires that specific personal and lifestyle changes be made to their subscriber (the practice).

(A) SOCRATES’ CORE BELIEFS

When Socrates considered someone’s wrongful actions, he tended to visualize them from the perspective of the culprit, not the victim: in present-day philosophical parlance, from the perspective of the “moral agent” rather than from that of the “moral patient.” Even though the victim of a wrongful deed may have suffered something detrimental, still Socrates’ focus is on the doer of wrong. In this way, his approach is in keeping with the typical ancient Greek way of “justifying moral behavior by arguing that it is good for the agent,”\textsuperscript{12} and therefore, presumably, of justifying the avoidance of immoral behavior because of its ill effects on the agent. But, ordinarily, it seems to have been primarily the

\textsuperscript{9} As E. Voegelin (1957, 24) notes.

\textsuperscript{10} Gorgias 478e, 479d, 509b.

\textsuperscript{11} Gorgias 458b. Cf. 454b ff. That good and evil are the most important things (ta megista) to have correct views about is a recurrent theme throughout Plato’s dialogues: e.g. Gorgias 487b 5, 527e 1; Apology 22d 7.

\textsuperscript{12} Waterfield. 1994, Introduction, xxiv. See also Plato’s Republic II 366e.
good reputation, honour, friends, and perhaps the goodwill of the gods that was hoped for in return for behaving virtuously, and the fear of losing these sorts of things, as well as perhaps one’s quiet conscience, may have motivated much moral behavior. But Socrates had a different spin on all this. As he sees it, it is not these external things which may be diminished or even lost because of your bad deed that really matter, but the perpetrator has actually harmed himself in a much more immediate, serious, and inevitable way: he has damaged his own soul or “that part of us which is marred by wrong actions and benefited by right ones,” and the harm that he does to himself is worse than the kind of injury he inflicts on the victim. Socrates believed this so strongly that he believed the jurors who voted to convict him and condemn a just man unjustly actually did a far greater injury to themselves than to him. He believed that while the victim of a bad deed may have a physical injury and/or a mental injury, as long as he does not do wrong himself by retaliating, he will not suffer the even more baneful type of injury that the wrong-doer is said to afflict himself with. As a corollary of this belief, Socrates thought that even if someone could commit a great number of wrongful acts, but with sufficient stealth so as not to be detected and punished, such a person would still be pitiful and wretched, indeed even worse off than the wrong-doer who is caught and punished, who at least has some

14 *Crito* 47d, 48.
15 *Apology* 30d.
chance of having his soul restored to a heathier condition. According to the Socrates of the *Gorgias*, a person’s soul becomes worse as each bad deed is done, and these baneful self-inflicted injuries do not heal over time but fester. There is only one way to heal or cure such damage, and that is by undergoing corrective punishment, which can usually (but not always) heal the wrong-doer’s psychic wounds. And so, from Socrates’ point of view, since corrective punishment can work to relieve a person of one of the very worst things that can happen to a human being, it should be as gladly received as a (perhaps bitter) medication which cures some horrible illness:

"And was not punishment admitted to be a release from the greatest of evils, namely wickedness? A just penalty disciplines us and makes us more just and cures us of the evil that was present in us. Then the happiest of men is he who has no evil in his soul, since that was shown to be the worst of evils. And second best is he who is delivered from evil, the man who has been admonished and rebuked and punished. . . But when punishment is evaded, the evil abides."

R.E. Allen calls this the most profound of all Socratic paradoxes: that the doing of injustice is the greatest of evils, that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it. As it stands, it is terrifically underargued, but in the *Gorgias*, Socrates attempts to convince his interlocutors of this in a series of *ad hominem* elenctic

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16 *Gorgias* 472e, 478e, 479d.
17 *Gorgias* 478d, 479c (Woodhead in Cairns and Hamilton).
19 And it is never defended in the early dialogues against an opponent who explicitly denies the existence of the human soul. It would have been interesting to see how Socrates would handle such a person.
exchanges. I shall confine my discussion here to Socrates' exchange with Polus, who, I believe, represents the majority of people who are in some sense fond of vice and its advantages, but who do not wish to be widely known as vicious and corrupt and predacious. Polus, who has a greedy appetite for power, thinks it is a great power (*to mega dunasthai*) to be able to do whatever one wants, including and perhaps especially unjust things, as long as, of course, one is able to get away with it without penalty (since to be caught and punished is *not* to be able to do whatever one wants). He speaks with obscene zeal about the enviable position of tyrants, who can do whatever they want with apparent impunity, killing people and stealing their wealth, and hopes that by using the kinds of rhetorical skills he has learned from Gorgias, he too might be able to gain such power someday. Still young, he looks forward to the day when he might be able to accomplish similar things, by using his "ability to persuade by speeches judges in a lawcourt, Senators in the Council chamber, Assemblymen in the Assembly, or in political gatherings of any other kind whatever." Perceiving a definite lack of enthusiasm for this plan from Socrates, he protests:

"What, don't orators have the greatest power in their cities? Aren't they like tyrants? Don't they put to death whomever they wish, confiscate property, and send into exile whomever they see fit? Isn't that great power?"

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20 See *Gorgias* 469d-e for Socrates' derisive parody of the kinds of appalling things Polus seems to desire and think enviable.

21 *Gorgias* 452e.

22 *Gorgias* 466c, 466e.
But Socrates replies that actually,

"I claim that orators and tyrants have the least power in their cities. . . for they virtually never do what they wish, even though they do whatever may seem best to them."\textsuperscript{23}

Socrates argues that if great power is something good for the person who has it, as Polus has conceded, and if a person who does what seems good but lacks sufficient intelligence to do what really is good lacks great power, as Polus also concedes, then orators and tyrants, such as Polus admires, are actually quite powerless. Since they have the seriously mistaken notion that it is profitable to do bad things, whereas by Socrates' calculations, there's nothing worse for the agent than that, they fall squarely under the category of those who lack sufficient intelligence to do what really is good and thus to have real power. According to Socrates, a tyrant who puts someone to death unjustly is not at all powerful and enviable, as Polus thinks, but miserable and pitiful. Polus is seriously confused by all this. Hardly able to believe his ears, he asks Socrates: "Surely it is the man put to death unjustly, who is miserable and pitiful?!" to which Socrates answers: "Less so than his slayer, and less than he who is put to death justly."\textsuperscript{24}

By now Polus is truly bewildered and demands an explanation. Socrates claims that it is better to suffer wrong than to do it. Challenging Polus to "refute me," Polus begins by laughing at Socrates, saying that he refutes himself by putting forth views that nobody would accept. He implies that Socrates is either being

\textsuperscript{23} Gorgias 466e.

\textsuperscript{24} Gorgias 469b.
dishonest, or is a simpleton, for refusing to admit what everybody knows is true: that it is better to do wrong than to suffer it. Again Polus is stunned when Socrates replies that, actually, he thinks everyone holds that it is worse to do wrong than to suffer it, and, what’s more, worse to escape punishment for a bad deed than to be punished for it. Polus is incredulous: why would anyone possibly prefer to suffer wrong?

Socrates claims that it is worse to do wrong than to suffer wrong, while Polus claims it is worse (kakion) to suffer wrong than to do wrong. But Polus admits that it is more shameful or ugly (aischion) to do wrong than to suffer it. So, while Polus is convinced that wrong-doing can be good, as in beneficial (ophelimon) for the wrong-doer, he is not prepared to claim that it is particularly honourable or admirable or “beautiful” (kalon). Take, for example, the benefits to the wrong-doer that might accrue from, say, stealing someone’s money. Perhaps one had to bludgeon someone to get it, or maybe one used lies and deceit in a court of law. But still, in the end, one gets the money, and so it seems that crime can be profitable, at least as long as one doesn’t get caught and penalized. Even so, Polus is not so detached from normal human sentiments as to think that bludgeoning or perjury are beautiful, brag-worthy acts; he would prefer, like many people, to reap the rewards of injustice without people knowing exactly how he got them. Investigating the implications of this distinction Polus makes, Socrates notes that it must mean that doing wrong is something different than doing something shameful or ugly. And if these terms differ, then their
opposites also differ. Socrates claims that “beautiful” means beneficial and useful or pleasant. Polus agrees, telling Socrates that he has “beautifully delineated the beautiful, defining it as pleasure and good.”25 This is not exactly what Socrates said, but nonetheless Socrates accepts Polus’ terms, that beautiful is defined by pleasure and good. He points out that the opposite of pleasure is pain, and the opposite of good is evil or bad. So if there is more evil and pain on one side of the equation (doing versus suffering wrong) than on the other, that side must be worse. Since Polus thinks doing evil is more ugly and shameful than suffering evil, doing evil must surpass suffering evil in either painfulness or badness or in the sum total of the two. But since the doing of injustice certainly does not surpass the suffering of it in painfulness, then the surpassing factor cannot be pain. And if not pain, then it can’t be pain plus badness. Therefore it must be in badness alone. “So then it is worse to do evil than to suffer it?” Socrates asks, and Polus concedes, “So it seems.”

So it seems, indeed. Twenty-four hundred years later, there is still much controversy and debate as to whether Socrates really established his position against Polus, or whether there were some unintentional flaws in the argument, or even some sort of Socratic scam involved.26 But whether or not some third party is satisfied by the cogency of Socrates’ argument against Polus, Polus himself is a changed person because of it. Pre-elenchos, Polus had been

25 Gorgias 475a.

26 This would fly in the face of Republic I 336e.
absolutely certain that it was worse to suffer than to do wrong. But now it turns out that what he thought was self-evident is not even evident to himself. Socrates has shown Polus that he does not really know himself. Polus had imagined himself at his happiest living as a wolf in sheep's clothing, capable of using rhetoric to deprive people of their life, their rights and their property, ideally without earning a bad reputation. But now he has to wonder whether perhaps he is really more like a sheep in wolf's clothing, whose harsh talk of killing and stealing did not really represent his inner (though hitherto unbeknownst to himself) self. Who can say how long these effects on Polus lasted, but Polus himself admits that he feels bound by the argument, at least until such time as he can overturn it.

By possibly ridding Polus of a false belief, Socrates may have been relieving him of one of the two worst evils, acting as a physician of the soul. He may also be preventing Polus from the other worst evil, the bad deeds he was planning on doing, as false beliefs can lead to bad deeds. Socrates maintains that the first and greatest of all evils is to do wrong and escape punishment. But when Socrates was in debate with the learned Gorgias on the subject of the merits, if any, of rhetoric, he also said he believed there to be no worse evil for a human being than to harbour false opinions about "the subject of our present discussion," and I am presuming Socrates felt this way about other important moral issues too. From Socrates' description of these "two worst evils," he

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27 Gorgias 458b.
apparently thinks they are equally bad. But why would Socrates consider having a false opinion concerning whether rhetoric was just and honourable or not as being on the same plane of evil as actually doing wrong and escaping punishment for it? Why would one think that harbouring a false moral opinion is as bad as actually committing some nefarious deed? This seems strange, an extreme position. Can we attribute it to Socrates? Surely, we want to say, as perverse as it may be, merely day-dreaming as young Polus did about all the “fun” one could have as a tyrant isn’t as bad as actually carrying out one’s depraved fantasies? Surely, “between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act,” there lies a world of moral difference, and the wrong-doer is immeasurably more reprehensible than the wrong-thinker. But apparently, Socrates didn’t see it quite that way. Apparently, he thought that letting false notions about important moral topics take up residence in one’s web of beliefs was to be avoided with as much vigilance as abstaining from bad deeds. But why? Was it for the simple reason that false thoughts have a tendency to lead to bad deeds? That would at least make some sense. But Socrates sometimes spoke in ways which suggest he believed that, quite apart from how a cognition relates to one’s subsequent actions, the mere presence of a warped thought in a person has an immediately negative impact upon them. For example, in the Protagoras, Socrates warns young Hippocrates about taking advice or lessons from sophists and orators. He warns him at length about

28 From T.S. Eliot’s The Hollow Men.
"those merchants or hucksters who tour our cities peddling 'knowledge' to whomever desires it; they praise everything they sell, but perhaps some of them, dear friend, are ignorant whether the things they sell are good or bad for the soul. So too for those who buy from them, unless they also happen to be physicians of the soul. So if you know what is good and bad, you can safely buy your knowledge from Protagoras or anyone else; but if you don't, look to it, dear friend, lest you risk and hazard things of utmost value."  

He cautions him that

"knowledge cannot be taken away in a parcel. When you have paid for it you must receive it straight into your soul. You go away having learned it and are benefited or harmed accordingly."  

It is interesting to see that, in the advice Socrates gives Hippocrates, a false opinion is said to be dangerous to the same part of you that is harmed by wrong acts. It is hard to understand exactly why Socrates would rank the pollution of the mind with false notions about morality as on par with actually doing wrong deeds, but, he seemed to. Be that as it may, it is certain that by acting under the influence of a false opinion one may do a wrong, and so by stamping out false opinions, there would be fewer wrongs done, whereas by spreading false opinions, even inadvertently, one would be doing harm to the soul who receives them, and thereby, in Socrates' scheme, harming oneself, in a cyclical pattern of corrupting and being corrupted.

To return to Vlastos' interpretation for a moment, I believe that fully appreciating this aspect of Socrates' belief system provides a simpler, and better, 

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29 Protagoras 313d (Allen).
30 Protagoras 314b (Guthrie in Cairns and Hamilton).
explanation of his reticence, his tendency not to “turn didactic” on his interlocutors in many of the early dialogues, than does the autonomy thesis. That is, I believe the reason Socrates did not offer a whole lot of advice about life-transforming moral issues was because he did not want to “commend the poisoned chalice to the lips”\textsuperscript{31} by spreading what might be false beliefs, \emph{not} because he was secretly holding back what he thought to be truths. When Socrates did not feel sufficiently confident about a subject, he was aware of his limitations, and did not try to pass himself off as someone knowledgeable when he was not. I believe this point is driven home by the fact that, in the \textit{Gorgias}, Socrates is clearly not content only to hint at (what he thinks is) the truth of the matter, but is positively “\textit{biaios},”\textsuperscript{32} a “bully” in Terence Irwin’s translation, about getting his point across to Polus. Far from concealing his thoughts behind a cloak of ironic ignorance and trying to tease them out of Polus, Socrates confidently asserts them and sets forth to persuade him:

\textbf{Polus}: “Surely you try to state absurdities, Socrates!

\textbf{Socrates}: And I shall also try to make you, Polus, state the same thing, for I consider you a friend.”\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} In Shakespeare’s phrase.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Gorgias} 505d. Callicles calls Socrates this. In a way, his complaint is probably a subtle Platonic joke, since not long before, Callicles had boldly proclaimed the violent credo that “Might makes right,” but in actual practice he cannot even tolerate Socrates’ use of “excessive force” with words in argument. (In fact the theme of the relationship between \textit{logoi} and \textit{bia} (force) lingers in the background of the entire dialogue, since the historical Gorgias spoke of the \textit{logos} as having its own kind of \textit{bia}.) But there is clearly also something right about Callicles’ complaint; in this particular debate, Socrates won’t take no for an answer, but is resolved to make his interlocutors accept his conclusions.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Gorgias} 473a.
What this suggests to me is that when Socrates did have something he thought worth advising others about, he did not hold back from doing so. If Socrates was willing to do this in the case of these beliefs, why wouldn’t he also be willing to relay his (alleged) Ke definitions of piety, courage, justice, temperance and so on, in the other early dialogues? The Socrates of the Gorgias disclaims knowledge just as he does in the aporetic dialogues, so the difference can’t be attributed to that. As Irwin notes,

"the deliberate juxtaposition of Socrates' confident conclusions [in the Gorgias] with his disavowal of knowledge implies that Socrates' frequent disavowal of knowledge was not a disavowal of positive convictions."\(^{34}\)

So then, when Socrates disclaimed knowledge in the aporetic dialogues but then did not offer any positive conclusions, I’d say the best explanation is that, in those cases, he just didn’t have any to offer. And so it seems to me that not only is Vlastos’ autonomy thesis unwarranted by the aporetic dialogues, because it assumes on insufficient evidence that those were only aporetic because of a pedagogical choice that Socrates made, but it is also unwarranted by the Gorgias, for the very different reason that here we do see Socrates providing answers, imploring his young interlocutors to take up his core moral principles and live accordingly, and even being a little "biaios" about it.

As for Kraut, I think that given Socrates' ideas about the dangerously destructive effects of false opinions on the soul, it is a real mistake to say that the

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\(^{34}\) Irwin. 1995, 122.
dialogues "end in failure" just because a definition of the virtue in question is not reached! Certainly, although Socrates did not supply people with all sorts of specific moral rules, he did go to great lengths to show people that some of their beliefs, or belief-sets, weren’t very well thought-out; the elenchos is, in Neil Postman’s memorable phrase, “a very efficient crap detector.” By this process, Socrates provided people with an opportunity to get their souls into better condition.

In Socrates’ scheme, the most important ideas to dispel from the soul would be those held by the likes of Polus and Callicles: the belief that vice pays, and that using rhetoric, which is indifferent to truth, is a good way to achieve these profitable crimes. Socrates makes it clear that he has never met anyone who was able to maintain the thesis that doing wrong is better than suffering it “without appearing ridiculous.” This comment strongly suggests that Socrates never let anyone who held this opinion go until he had shamed or refuted him. He left them unable to defend their position which scorned the supremacy of virtue and truth. Another type of belief which Socrates spent much of his time dissecting and critiquing were specific moral principles that he believed were mistaken, including some of the central tenets of the traditional morality such as the maxim that justice entails “helping your friends and harming your enemies.” This was a normative theory of justice among Socrates’ contemporaries, and, under this rubric, retaliation was not only considered a defensible practice, but

35 Gorgias 509a.
was actually seen as obligatory, and the failure to retaliate seen as “unjust.”

But since Socrates was convinced that it is always wrong to do wrong, he thought it followed that it is also wrong to retaliate or harm your enemy, since to retaliate is to return a wrong for a wrong: that is, to do a wrong, which is wrong.

Socrates: “Is not wrongdoing inevitably an evil and a disgrace to the wrongdoer? Do we believe this or not?

Crito: We do.

Soc: Then we ought not to do wrong at all.

Crito: Why, no.

Soc: And we ought not even to requite wrong with wrong, as the world thinks, since we must not do wrong at all.

Crito: Apparently not.

Soc: What’s this? Ought one to do wrong or not, Crito?

Crito: Certainly not, Socrates.

Soc: Well then, is it right to requite evil with evil, as the world says it is, or not right?

Crito: Not right, certainly.

Soc: For doing evil to people is the same thing as wronging them.

Crito: That is true.

Soc: Then we ought neither to requite wrong with wrong nor to do evil to anyone, no matter what he may have done to us... [though] I know that there are few who believe or ever will believe this.”

A third type of problematic belief identified and criticized by Socrates were mistakes in applying moral principles. Suppose, for example, that someone

37 Crito 49b-d (Fowler, slightly modified).
didn’t agree with Socrates about the ethics of revenge. Such a person would continue to “apply to any situation or procedure the criterion, ‘Does it enable me to harm my enemies and help my friends?’”38 But if that’s your basis for decision, Socrates warns, you had better be very clear about who your friends and enemies really are. One may seem to be a friend and yet not really be. A friend, according to Socrates, is not someone who seems to be a good and worthy person but who actually is one.39 Yet it’s not uncommon to make mistakes about this, and when that happens, one may regard good people as enemies and wrong-doers as friends, and so may end up helping an enemy and harming a real friend. I believe that Kraut greatly underestimates this kind of problem, the difficulty of applying moral principles to concrete cases, when he supposes that an adequate virtue-definition would somehow enable its possessor to never err, even in difficult cases.

Another kind of false opinion which concerned Socrates was the unfounded rumour. These falsehoods can be dangerously detrimental. For example, those who claimed that Socrates was “a wise man, a ponderer of the things in the air and inquirer into the things beneath the earth, who takes weak arguments and re-works them to defeat stronger arguments”40 and who spread

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38 Dover, 1974, 180.
39 Republic 1335a.
40 Apology 18b.
this report around to people who associated such activities with atheism,\textsuperscript{41} seriously prejudiced Socrates' case at trial. As Socrates points out, such rumours easily entered the minds of many of his jurors when they were just boys or young men, at an age when people are especially credulous,\textsuperscript{42} and are particularly hard to dispel.

And finally, speaking at his trial, Socrates spoke of "the most reprehensible form of ignorance": "thinking one knows what one does not know."\textsuperscript{43} He does not qualify this claim, but judging from his overall orientation, he is probably confining this to those opinions which have moral implications, rather than to just any trivial mistake.\textsuperscript{44} This form of ignorance is very much like another kind of error Socrates admonished people for: "pretending to be more than they really are."\textsuperscript{45} What Socrates calls "reprehensible ignorance" is really a triple error: first, one has a problematic belief or pack of beliefs, but then, to make matters worse, one thinks them to be items of knowledge, or perhaps, just never thinks to question, doubt or scrutinize them. And finally, as a result of thinking that one knows what one does not, one gets a false, inflated opinion of oneself. Socrates referred to this cycle as "ugly and shameful."\textsuperscript{46}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} \textit{Apology} 18c.
\item \textsuperscript{42} \textit{Apology} 18c.
\item \textsuperscript{43} \textit{Apology} 29b (Fowler).
\item \textsuperscript{44} In contradistinction to something like W.K. Clifford’s view (in \textit{The Ethics of Belief}) that it is morally problematic for anyone to believe \textit{anything} on the basis of insufficient evidence.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Cf. \textit{Gorgias} 527d; \textit{Hippias Minor} 372d.
\item \textsuperscript{46} \textit{Gorgias} 527d.
\end{itemize}
soul which makes it extremely unlikely that one will expend any effort to rid oneself of their false beliefs, or change their conduct, since they don’t see any need to, unless the cycle is somehow broken, perhaps by an encounter with someone like Socrates.

I cannot emphasize enough, however, how much Socrates was not only concerned with breaking this cycle in others, but with studiously avoiding the two worst evils, his two worst fears, himself. Socrates may sometimes seem to have been a machine, with a heart that ticks rather than beats, but it isn’t so. He had doubts and he had fears. They were rational fears, but they were fears. What were they?

Iris Murdoch once remarked that “It is often revealing to ask of a philosopher, What is he afraid of?” Apparently, Socrates was not afraid in battle; was not afraid in court; was not afraid of death; and was not afraid to stand alone when seemingly everyone was against him. But there were two things that Socrates did fear, and avoided like the plague: wrong-doing and wrong-thinking.

47 At Laches 198b and at Protagoras 329c Socrates defines fear as the “expectation of evil,” a highly cognitivized, rationalistic account of fear.
48 Cf. Crito 47b-47d.
49 In B. Magee (1978), 233.
50 Apology 29b; Charmides 153b-c.
51 Apology 35e.
52 Apology 32d; Crito 43c, 48b; Gorgias 522d-e.
53 Apology 23, 32b, 32d.
Socrates was convinced that he never wronged anyone knowingly or intentionally. As he said:

"For my part, if I have been doing something incorrect in my life, be assured that I do not err willingly and wittingly but by reason of my ignorance."  

Similarly, in Republic I he assured the other people present that if he errs in his quest for the nature of goodness, he errs unwillingly. But this leaves open the possibility that he might have erred in his thinking, or done something wrong, unintentionally, through ignorance. As he said at trial:

"In various kinds of danger there are plenty of devices for avoiding death, if you are unscrupulous enough to stop at nothing. But I suggest... that the difficulty is not so much to escape death; the real difficulty is to escape from doing wrong."

Of course, one might be able to overcome the fear of unintentionally doing wrong if one could, like a god, totally expunge ignorance from their life and possess infallible, comprehensive knowledge. But this kind of thing is what Socrates calls "the real difficulty," and the fact that even he, after a lifetime committed to the earnest contemplation and discussion of moral issues, did not have anywhere near that amount and kind of knowledge sufficiently proves his point. So he was at risk of unintentionally erring and doing wrong, as (needless to say) are we all. What can be done about it? If there are plenty of devices for

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54 Apology 37.
55 Gorgias 488a.
56 Republic I 336e.
57 Apology 39 (Treddenick in Cairns and Hamilton).
avoiding death in various kinds of dangers, are there any devices to assist us in the avoidance of Socrates' two worst fears?

As we have seen, both Vlastos and Kraut seem to think that there is such a device: the virtue definitions. As Kraut put it, "When Socrates asks, 'What is it that a virtuous person knows?' he is looking for these core statements [i.e. the definitions]," while Vlastos portrays them as what Socrates was primarily trying to teach others during his elenctic tutorials. What I find interesting about this is that the kind of knowledge which both Vlastos and Kraut emphasize as so important for Socratic-style virtue is the very kind of knowledge which Socrates professes to have lacked, rather than the "good judgment that he manifestly possesses." In some ways, of course, the emphasis on this sort of knowledge is understandable, since in (most of) the early dialogues, Socrates did, after all, search long and hard for adequate accounts of the virtues, and he seemed optimistic that if such accounts could be found and agreed upon, they would assist us greatly. I am not denying any of that. But, we must not forget that, after all, Socrates was able to be a very good human being in the absence of such knowledge.

Is it possible that, armed mainly with a small set of firmly-held moral beliefs of an extremely high level of generality, such as those that are expounded

58 Kraut. SS, 282.
59 Brickhouse and Smith. 1994, 23.
60 Unless we assume, as I have argued we should not, that Socrates had a secret stash of hidden knowledge.
in the *Gorgias*, Socrates was able to live as well as he did? Apparently so; I believe that this tells us something important about Socrates' moral philosophy, though what it tells us might be a disappointment to those who expect a moral theory to provide them with a set of "determining principles" or rules which tell them what to do in any moral situation – a kind of definitive guide for the morally perplexed – because that is not what Socrates had to offer in the way of positive contributions. What did he offer? It appears that an absolute abhorrence of wrong-doing and wrong-thinking was what Socrates tried to promote. Usually, he did not even have to explicitly persuade people of these core values, since the majority of people he encountered already "said they did care"\(^{61}\) about wisdom and the care of the soul, and they would not admit to putting their reputation, or wealth, or any other such valued items above their care for virtue and wisdom. In such cases he would merely discuss moral issues with them, to see if there was, perchance, anything he might learn from them, and to see how much they *really* did care about these things or whether they had, in fact, some overriding concerns and were neglecting what they say is their top priority. But occasionally Socrates would meet someone, like Polus, who needed a more full-scale conversion, and when he did, he would provide it with great gusto. However, in either of these two types of case, if Socrates' principles sunk in and were granted real (and not just superficial or hypocritical) assent, they are such that still require a lot of work on the part of the person who chooses to live

\(^{61}\) *Apology* 29e.
by them: serious Socratics must adopt particular practices and cultivate specific attitudes and commitments, very different than those of the general run of men. To this issue I now turn.

(B) PRACTICING SOCRATIC VIRTUE

Just as Socrates told Polus that if one has done wrong, one should voluntarily submit to punishment even though it is painful to the body, so too Socrates was as eager to be involved in a good, no-holds-barred elenchos as most other people were either indifferent to it (because they were, as Socrates called Euthyphro, "indolent on account of their surfeit of wisdom"), or feared and avoided it, finding the possibility of being exposed as anything less than brilliant too painful to their ego. As Dover points out, the society Socrates lived in was one

"addicted to comparison and competition... and this sensibility could have bad consequences. For one thing, issues were very readily translated into terms of 'face.'"  

The fear and pain of being publicly refuted and "losing face" seems to have really ruffled many of the people with whom Socrates conversed, and I don't suppose people are very different in that respect today. But Socrates was not afraid of being seen as perplexed and unknowing; these were not legitimate fears, according to him. On the contrary, by going through with his kind of examinations, even though one might be reduced to a embarrassing state of utter

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62 Which are assumed to be voluntary in at least a weak sense; cf. Hare in Honderich (1995), 901.
63 Dover. 1974, 237.
perplexity in front of one's confrères, one is at least trying, perhaps as efficiently as is humanly possible, to guard against what were for Socrates *very* legitimate fears. So the first device that Socrates could offer by way of protection against wrong-doing and wrong-thinking was to join a community of debaters who spend time together, daily, discussing moral issues and testing each other. Socrates referred to “letting no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others” as “really the best thing that a man can do.”

I want to argue that participation in this kind of discussion was, in Socrates' eyes, an indispensable part of the virtuous life, even though the kind of knowledge Vlastos and Kraut make much of may never be uncovered by such discussions. Why? Because, for one thing, of course, there is always the hope of learning something useful about good and evil, or unlearning something which is harmful to the soul, from such a discussion. But there was another kind of “result” which Socrates sought as well: the Socratic moral test was not only designed to reveal problems with the propositions that were offered and, hopefully, to reach better ones, but also to reveal problems with the people offering the propositions, perchance to make better people out of them. I believe that a reading of the early dialogues that is not unduly constrained by current scholarly inclinations shows this clearly. I would suggest that the main reason why this aspect of Socrates' mission has

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64 *Apology* 38a (Tredennick in Cairns and Hamilton).
been widely overlooked in recent scholarly works\textsuperscript{65} is because of what’s known as Socratic intellectualism, or the Socratic suggestion that \textit{aretê is epistêmê}. Although some commentators see this curious equation as “less a conclusion at which discussion can rest than a starting-point for a new approach”\textsuperscript{66} to thinking about morality, many others take it to be a firm, fixed, obvious Socratic thesis which automatically rules out of court as irrelevant to Socrates any aspect of the moral life other than the purely “intellectual,” as very narrowly construed. Hugh Benson\textsuperscript{67} presents the typical argument for summarily dismissing any personal side to the Socratic elenchos. He argues that since Socrates thought that virtue is knowledge, he must also have thought that to examine a man’s knowledge is to examine a man’s virtue.\textsuperscript{68} And since a man’s knowledge is exhibited by nothing else than the propositions he puts forth as his moral beliefs and his ability to justify them, or at least to hold them all together coherently, without stumbling into contradiction, there’s nothing more to test than that, if one wants to test a man’s virtue. Now, to be sure, the idea of virtue as knowledge attests to the fact that, for Socrates, the ethical and the epistemic were tightly interwoven. When Xenophon described the three types of people whom

\textsuperscript{65} With exceptions such as Brickhouse and Smith; Kahn; Seeskin, and some of the contributors to Scott (2002).

\textsuperscript{66} Such as Burnyeat in Vlastos (PS), 213.

\textsuperscript{67} Benson. 2000, 22.

\textsuperscript{68} Vlastos makes the same point when he states (PLS, 207) that “the elenchus tests statements, \textit{not} actions. . . Socrates feels no need to inspect the speaker’s actions or to refer to them in any way.”
Socrates considered to be particularly deluded, two of these were people who thought they had *aretê* by nature and people who thought that wealth made them good. In other words, they thought that virtue could be inherited or bought,\(^{69}\) rather than earned, possibly, through the struggle of living an examined life. And such things as "knowledge," "wisdom," and "ignorance" undeniably play a massive role in Plato’s early portrait of Socrates’ moral philosophy as well, as opposed to other themes which might dominate a moral outlook, such as goodwill, fellow feeling, duty, love. But, one must be careful about the interpretation one puts on such things as the Socratic conception of "knowledge," "wisdom," and "ignorance": about exactly what that "knowledge" is, which, in Socrates’ eyes, was so vital to the health of the soul. For it is not always, as Nehamas notes, profitable to read Plato’s dialogues "in those terms that are readiest to hand and most familiar to us in our own thought and language."\(^{70}\) For example, consider the extremely idiosyncratic way in which Socrates measured his own epistemic superiority: it was his patented Socratic *ignorance* that, he felt, made him a paradigm of human wisdom, his rare and refreshing awareness and admission that he did not know what he did not know.\(^{71}\) And so it seems that Socrates may have had some unusual (contra-

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\(^{69}\) As Cephalus (*Republic* I 331b) believes; he approaches death comforted by his belief that he’ll be able to purchase a pleasant afterlife — usually thought to be reserved as a reward for the virtuous — in the underworld.

\(^{70}\) Nehamas. 1999, xxix. This is good advice when dealing with the ancient Greeks generally.

\(^{71}\) *Apology* 22e, 23b.
endoxic) ideas about what human wisdom or knowledge is or can amount to,\textsuperscript{72} in which case it might be misleading to equate that knowledge or wisdom which is said to be virtue with a person's propositions about the virtues and nothing else. Indeed, one of Vlastos' most unequivocal theses is that Socrates was "no epistemologist."\textsuperscript{73} He categorically claims that Socrates was "exclusively a moral philosopher,"\textsuperscript{74} and Kraut concurs, asserting that Socrates "had no interest in epistemology."\textsuperscript{75} Given this characterization, one would not expect to find in their accounts of Socrates' philosophy that much of what is taken to be "distinctively Socratic is steeped in epistemological content,"\textsuperscript{76} but, on the contrary, what one finds is that questions of knowledge - its nature, its types, what is known, and its origin - predominate their discussions, and Socratic virtue-knowledge is given a very narrow reading. This narrow reading of what Socrates examined when examining a person's level of virtue ignores the fact that Socrates describes his mission as scrutinizing "people" and "lives."\textsuperscript{77} It also plays down the fact that when Plato presents us with how, in his eyes, Socrates went about his philosophical investigations, we are not only shown what happens to bold assertions and arguments in Socrates' presence, but Plato also

\textsuperscript{72} Cf. Apology 23b. \\
\textsuperscript{73} Vlastos. VSS, 63. \\
\textsuperscript{74} Vlastos. SIMP, 48. \\
\textsuperscript{75} Kraut. SS, 273. \\
\textsuperscript{76} Benson. 2000, 4. \\
"hangs a series of moral portraits on the wall and forces us to look at them," meticulously showcasing many of the defense mechanisms, walls of obdurate resistance to refutation, and associated doxastic vices that people use to try to avoid the "punishment" of being questioned, refuted, and possibly corrected and improved. I believe that battling with these kinds of barriers to reasonableness, which might be described as Socrates' battle with the bloated ego, was also an important part of Socrates' philosophical practices.

Let us look at one such example. In the Charmides, when Socrates is pursuing his usual "What is X?" question, in this case about sōphrosunē ("temperance"), he asks Critias whether he believes it is for the common good that the state of each existing thing should become clear, and Critias answers "Very much so, Socrates." So far, so promising. Critias appears to be endorsing one of Socrates' core beliefs, that the pursuit of wisdom and the avoidance of error and confusion are very valuable human enterprises. But then, when the search for a clear account of temperance begins to head towards "aporia city," Plato points out, with merciless accuracy, how

"as Critias had a reputation to maintain, he was ashamed to admit before the company that he could not answer my challenge or

78 As Peter Green wrote of Juvenal's Satires.

79 Although occasionally there is an interlocutor, like Charmides, who is too timid and self-effacing, rather than too confident and overbearing, to properly participate in an elenctic discussion.

80 Also sometimes translated as "soundness of mind," "moderation," "discretion," "self-control," and so forth.

81 Charmides 166d.
determine the question at issue, and he made an unintelligible attempt to hide his perplexity.”

Clearly, Critias is letting his ego stand in the way of the discussion, and revealing that its importance, to him, actually trumps the pursuit of wisdom. In actual practice, he puts his own vainglorious personal interests above the common good. So surely Critias’ problem or virtue-deficiency goes far beyond being unable to say what exactly temperance is. In fact, insofar as he is not able to give a good account of that virtue, Critias is actually in the same boat as Socrates. And thus it seems to me that to focus all our attention on the importance of this kind of knowledge for virtue, would, in this case, have the absurd consequence of lumping Critias and Socrates into the same moral boat, when Socrates is manifestly, I think it’s safe to say, Critias’ “beltion.” For one thing, Critias originally thought he knew what he did not know, so he was not only ignorant, but also ignorant of his ignorance, and arrogant. In addition, even when, thanks to Socratic therapy, his ignorance finally begins to dawn on him, Critias still, apparently, deems it better to try to “conceal his predicament” by obfuscating than to be seen for who he really is. He certainly does not want to be refuted, just as most wrong-doers wish to evade punishment. But actually, if Critias were willing to come clean and confess his perplexity, he would undergo a valuable cathartic experience, and be able to join in the discussion in earnest,

82 Charmides 169c-d (Jowett in Cairns and Hamilton).
83 If we take Socrates at his word; see Charmides 165c.
84 Charmides 169 (Sprague in Cooper).
without having to hide behind a mask his whole life, and might be able to gain additional benefits, both intellectual, psychological, and in terms of making deep friendships from this open and honest communication with fellow dialoguers. But, instead, Critias’ actions reveal that he does not care nearly so much for wisdom and the care of the soul as for maintaining a reputation for wisdom and the preservation of his ego in its current, pleasantly-deluded, but unhealthy, state. This kind of revelation of a person’s moral character and values as brought to light by what they do during an elenchos, as distinct to what they say, is so prevalent in Plato’s early Socratic dialogues, it can hardly have been unimportant to Plato or to Socrates, nor should it be to us. For what is the upshot of this kind of self-revelation? They provide you with a stimulus to change in ways that are conducive to living up to values which, after all, you claim to espouse. But it would be a mistake to think that these personal changes would be merely instrumental; developing your personality to become more reasonable, honest, open and “examinative” are themselves part of the Socratic good life, and, I would opine that even a moral expert, should such a thing exist, without these traits, would hardly merit the title. Of course, there is no guarantee that Socratic-style examinations would be successful at effecting any sort of beneficial change at all in someone who is hopelessly dogmatic, vain, or otherwise incorrigible. In fact, as Socrates was well aware, a standard reaction to his questioning was that

85 On the hypothesis that, as Vlastos puts it (SIGP, 5), the Socrates of Plato’s early dialogues is “not Platonic fiction but historic fact.”
people would become "angry towards me, instead of being angry with
themselves." But see for example the *Laches* for a much more positive reaction
to the elenctic experience, and consider also Plato’s observation at *Sophist* 230b
that being refuted can cause someone to "be angry with himself, and become
more gentle towards others." Socrates is famous for making people feel ashamed
of what they see as their personal shortcomings that they could change about
themselves – intellectual laziness, hypocrisy, shallow values, lack of integrity,
etc. – and shame (which is actually the primary meaning of the verb *elenchô*) is a
powerful motivator to change. It may be, however, that there is a kind of
"Socratic circle" involved here, whereby those who will make some changes to
themselves and their routines and continue on with Socratic-style discussions
will be those who least need to make such changes, while those who, bloated
with alazony, or really indifferent to Socratic values, could badly use some
personal development, either fail to recognize this need, or choose to forget or
hide it. But be that as it may, I believe that Socratic-style confrontations do have
a powerful potential for waking someone up to the need for certain types of
personal and lifestyle transformations: observe Polus’ metamorphosis in the
*Gorgias*. Although at first this kind of shame-and-refutation based therapy might
seem more like a punishment than a benefit, when one has emerged from that
zetetic tunnel once, having survived the ordeal and been given much that is new

86 *Apology* 23c.

87 See Woodruff’s article, “Socrates and the Irrational,” in Smith and Woodruff (2000) for a
discussion of the role of shame in Socratic therapy.
and provocative to think about, a reasonably thoughtful person might well feel
disposed to try it again, to see if s/he can do better next time. And even if one
does not do better, one might say that such a person is showing some slight
improvement, just for trying, just for examining. After the first time, the elenctic
experience would probably seem like less of an ordeal, especially if one's
interlocutors, in good Socratic form, are not gloating about their own amassed
knowledge, but openly admit to being perplexed by the issues – as moral issues
are, notoriously, vexed – and willing to have their own views subjected to
rational criticism and to do the same for yours, and, in short, wanting to be
fellow learners. A little like the old Sicilian custom of deliberately spilling some
red wine on the table linen at the start of a meal to make the guests feel at ease,
good members of a Socratic-style commune of debaters do not emit a too-high
opinion of their own moral knowledge, or try to pass themselves off as experts
when they are not, but should engage with their fellow dialoguers in a spirit of
mutual equality. If one person should happen to know more, or less, than their
interlocutor about some particular topic, or think s/he does, that person should
seek to persuade or be persuaded, but not in an overbearing or an obsequious
way: the two extremes of either depending uncritically on so-called moral
authorities or passing oneself off as such an authority oneself without making an
effort to persuade the other, are both to be avoided as a general rule. In either
case, one risks damage to the soul, just as if one were to actually do some
wrongful deed. On the other hand, the Vlastonian image of a Socrates who
deliberately conceals his thought and intentionally uses ambiguity does not seem true to the repeated Socratic request to “say what you believe”\textsuperscript{88} in discussions. In short, if you are serious about the core Socratic values, you must try to see yourself for who you really are, and work on your problem areas in the sphere of your personality, ego, and communicative ethics as much as on your doctrines. Socrates spoke of the importance of such things as friendly regard and frankness in debate,\textsuperscript{89} but at the same time of being careful not to pass along soul-harming moral misinformation. Although this type of thing may not be regarded as a philosophical goal in the modern sense, or is at best regarded as an instrumental good, I believe that to Socrates, it was of paramount importance. Perhaps the answer to the question “Who are you?”, as Socrates asks Gorgias,\textsuperscript{90} is as important as the answer to the “What is X?” question.

\textsuperscript{88} See \textit{Gorgias} 500b, \textit{Republic} 346a, for example.

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Gorgias} 487a.

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Gorgias} 447d. Actually, Socrates suggests that Chaerephon ask Gorgias this.
VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

"Potential ethical issues are inherent in any instance of communication between humans to the degree that the communication can be judged on a right-wrong dimension, involves possible significant influence on other humans, and to the degree that the communicator consciously chooses specific ends sought and communicative means to achieve those ends."

Clearly, Gregory Vlastos was aware of the inherent ethicality of human communication, and was struck by Socrates' strange way of conversing with others, and wondered to what end it was directed. The oddity of Socratic communication is amplified if one considers that, in Amélie Rorty's words, "philosophers... have always taken themselves to be the ultimate educators of mankind," and if, like Vlastos, one believes Socrates in particular to have had great truths to teach. As Vlastos put it:

"Well, what would you expect of such a man? To propagate his message, to disseminate the knowledge which is itself the elixir of life. But is this what he does?"

At times it seemed to Vlastos unethical for Socrates to withhold this information, perhaps revealing a "failure of love" for his interlocutors, while at other times it just seemed pointless to have all this "winding and unwinding of argument with no positive results" announced. However, in the end Vlastos

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1 R.L. Johannesen. 1990, 2.
3 Vlastos. SIGP, 8.
4 Cf. Vlastos (PS), 13.
5 Vlastos. PS, 16; SIMP, 44 n.82.
6 Vlastos. PS, 12.
concluded that what Socrates was really doing during his elenctic examinations was neither unethical nor pointless, but rather trying to facilitate independent decision in his interlocutors, trying to promote “autonomous discovery” of the “truths” he “held back” from them.

Recognizing this feature of Socratic pedagogy provides, according to Vlastos, more than just a glimpse into Socrates’ motives and methods, but goes straight to the heart of what it means to be a moral philosopher. For Vlastos, the role of the specialist in matters moral is only to raise questions, provoke reasoned consideration of the issues at stake, and perhaps to subtly gesture towards the truth, while leaving the final decision up to the individual, not to impose his or her program onto others. To borrow a succinct formulation of this distinction from Bryan Magee, Vlastos’ image of a genuine moral philosopher is of someone who, like Socrates, “can make a practical contribution to the solution of actual moral dilemmas” but not by “telling people what to do, which is what the moralist does.”

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7 This is premised on the assumption that Socrates is himself a kind of moral exemplar, and exemplary moral philosopher. To the extent that these views about Socrates are not shared, these views will seem less acceptable.

8 B. Magee. 1978, 126. Compare Vlastos (SIGP), 18. At the same time, however, as I have suggested throughout this work, Vlastos’ imagery of a Socrates who invites “every man to do his own examining,” and to “make his own choice between right and wrong” is wedded in a somewhat uneasy union with another strand of his interpretation, according to which Socrates was secretly striving to impart his views, his “truths” to others via circuitous means such as asking leading questions and planting suggestions.
Richard Kraut, on the other hand, is of the opinion that a *moralist* would be, in Socrates' eyes and also in his own,⁹ preferable to a moral philosopher à la Vlastos, provided, of course, that the moralist in question is a "stage four moral expert," that is, someone who is morally infallible. Even though, as R.M. Hare quipped, it makes it "sound a bit as if we were all in the army,"¹⁰ Kraut believes that simply being told what to do by a moral expert would be a vast improvement over Socrates' aporematic elenctic procedure, which doesn't provide anywhere near the level of protection against wrong-doing and wrong-thinking required to lead a truly virtuous life.

We may well agree with Kraut that the truth isn't only worth knowing when one discovers it on one's own, and also find his literal approach to Socrates' declarations of ignorance a refreshing change from the usual "Oh, he was just being ironic" interpretation,¹¹ but, unfortunately, what begins as an exciting experiment in taking Socrates at his word ends up (or so I have argued) as a cautionary tale about what can happen when one reads the Socratic dialogues as if they were mere "treatises doused in drama sauce."¹² Moreover, although Kraut (based on his misreading of *Apology* 29b) describes the (alleged) Socratic vision of a moral expert as "godlike" in terms of possessing infallible moral knowledge, he also describes this mythological creature as justified in

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⁹ See Kraut (SS), 252 n.15.
¹⁰ In Magee (1978), 127.
¹¹ Or, as Vlastos has it, "complexly ironic" or deliberately ambiguous.
taking what might be called an “unethical monological attitude”\textsuperscript{13} towards those who are less knowledgeable, by simply telling them what to do, and expecting compliance (since \textit{not} to obey would be perceived as both bad and shameful), rather than being able to rationally persuade them. But Socrates never advocates giving assent to someone else’s moral views based on the presumed authority and prestige of the speaker;\textsuperscript{14} even in his advice about heeding the advice about “the one who knows” in the \textit{Crito}, there is no suggestion that one ought to simply trust the so-called expert. One still needs to mix their own intellectual labor in determining whether the expert’s advice is really the best available. And last but not least, regarding the Krautian conception of a “godlike moral expert” who never errs and is never even perplexed because he is equipped with the all-sufficient virtue-definitions, we might say, as Socrates said to the sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus,\textsuperscript{15} who claimed to know virtue and to be able to teach it better and more quickly than anyone else (after only a quick study of it themselves): “the magnitude of your claim certainly gives me some cause for disbelief.”

At first, the contentious issues between Vlastos and Kraut seemed like a battleground between two antithetical approaches to learning virtue: can one

\textsuperscript{13} Johannesen. 1990, 58.

\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, this actually served as grounds for Socrates to target that speaker for refutation and exposure as ignorant via the elenchos.

\textsuperscript{15} In the \textit{Euthydemus} (274a, as translated by Sprague in Cooper), which is not one of the early Socratic dialogues discussed throughout this work, but is nonetheless also quite free from un-Socratic Platonic doctrine.
safely and healthily rely on expert-testimony for one's moral beliefs, or would one do better to only permit those moral beliefs into one's head that emanate from that same head? I believe that both Vlastos and Kraut exaggerate the Socratic position on this issue. Moreover, although there are differences between them, there are also fundamental similarities which are also problematic.

Although Socrates asked "What is X?" questions, the answers to which are depicted by Vlastos and Kraut as fantastic blueprints for leading the perfectly good life, the example of Socrates himself seems to show that, even without such answers, those rare and much-desired pithy recipes for areté, one can live relatively well\(^\text{16}\) by taking seriously Socrates' two very general but poignant core injunctions, profound values which are easy to praise but harder to actually pursue doggedly in the face of competing goods that might attract us. But, although Socrates' fundamental principles do not tell us exactly what to do in each moral situation, they are not entirely silent either. They offer a general orientation to life, and, like the little inner voice or sign, the daimonion, that is said to have warned Socrates when he was about to do or say something wrong, they steer us away from certain paths and choices, and guide us towards others. In particular, they require us to take up certain practices, such as dedicating some time each day to the examination of moral issues in elenctic-style discussions. And in these discussions, as Socrates said to Protagoras,

\(^{16}\) Even if not amounting to a genuine moral expert.
"It is the argument itself that I probe, but it may turn out that both I who question and you who answer are equally under scrutiny."\textsuperscript{17}

Hence, although it may not be philosophically fashionable at present to focus on self-improvement as much as on the building up of moral theory which leaves the theorist essentially free to remain as he is in terms of how he actually lives his life, that may not be the Socratic way, or the right way.

\textsuperscript{17} Protagoras 333c (Guthrie in Cairns and Hamilton).
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