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ABSTRACT

My central thesis is that Socrates of Plato’s “early” dialogues believes he has the very wisdom he famously disavows. Eschewing the usual tack of analyzing his various avowals and disavowals of knowledge, I focus on other claims which entail a belief that he has wisdom par excellence—not just self-awareness of ignorance and not just so-called elenctic wisdom. First, I correct the common misimpression that Socrates is willing only to ask but not to answer questions. Indeed, he describes his own answers as a crucial part of his exhortative message, which, I show, involves not just an exhortation to participate in “elenctic” discussion; his exhortation to virtue is not aimed just at getting his interlocutors to understand that virtue—whatever it is!—must be pursued first and foremost. The elenchus, I argue, is only a prerequisite for understanding the much more substantive lessons of his exhortative practice, which produces “the greatest good”—indeed “happiness” itself. This interpretation, I explain, goes hand in hand with Socrates’ belief that he is a “good man”, invulnerable to injury, who rationally and independently always makes unerring decisions aimed at justice. In light of such beliefs, as well as his fearless claims about others’ injustices, I offer a plausible explanation of why Socrates denies having bona fide wisdom and being a “teacher” of it.
PROTARCHUS: Why, then, did you yourself not give an answer to yourself, Socrates? SOCRATES: No [reason] why not. Do, however, have a part of the logos with [me]. (Philebus 54b)²

SOCRATES: If you don’t wish to answer, then I’ll answer for you…. (Apology 27b8-9)

Three decades ago, when Gregory Vlastos wrote his paper titled “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge”, he could claim (1994, 39)³ that “the standard view” of such disavowals was that Socrates does not mean by them what he says.⁴ Today, due in no small measure to Vlastos’s work, it might well be said that the standard view has been reversed.⁵ I shall argue in this paper, however, that there are important passages in Plato’s early dialogues that are familiar enough but have unfortunately been discounted or misinterpreted by Vlastos and many of those who have followed his lead. Careful reexamination of these passages strongly suggests that we ought to consider a return to the formerly “standard view”. Besides discounting or misinterpreting crucial evidence, one factor that led to the abandonment of that view was its being virtually identified with what was in fact only one possible version of the view: viz., that of Norman Gulley (1968, 64ff.). After marshalling all the evidence which suggests that Plato’s Socrates⁶ cannot in his familiar disavowals mean what he says, I shall suggest some plausible reasons for the frequent disavowals that avoid the problems found in Gulley’s particular interpretation of them.

The “paradox” in Socrates’ alleged ignorance is familiar enough, so I shall not bother to start with reviewing the interpretive problem in detail. Let me instead begin by highlighting one feature of the typical way in which the “paradox” has been presented in scholarship over the past couple decades: the scholarship is not of course monolithic, but there is a discernable tendency to fetishize knowledge-claims: in recent decades, the “paradox” of Socrates’ ignorance has often been presented as an at least prima facie incongruity between Socrates’ claims of ignorance versus his claims of knowledge.⁸ I, however, want to argue that, in order to get a full appreciation of what and how much Socrates thinks he knows, we need to pay more attention, than is now usually given, to other kinds of evidence. Vlastos’s observations in a 1957 address are, in this connection, worth reviewing: “…[N]o man ever breathed greater assurance that his feet were planted firmly on the path of right. He never voices a doubt of the moral rightness of any of his acts or decisions, never betrays a sense of sin. He goes to his death confident that ‘no evil thing can happen to a good man’ (Apology 41D)—that ‘good man’ is himself.” (1971, 7).⁹ Such observations are crucial in my own attempt to revive the formerly “standard view”.

SECTION 1). READINESS TO ANSWER QUESTIONS.

This brings me to the first familiar passage that I want to reconsider. Let me introduce it by noting how remarkable it is that Vlastos—in “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge”, published three decades after the address from which I just quoted—can so confidently cite (1994, 40) Aristotle in support of his view that Socrates’ disavowals are sincere: so Vlastos explains that “…for Aristotle the reason why Socrates ‘asked questions, but did not answer them’ is that
he confessed he had no knowledge’ (Soph. El. 183b7-8)...” (1994, 16 n. 47).10 “Socrates”, Vlastos tell us, “does not answer questions, does not expound his ‘wisdom’. Pieces of it spill out in elenctic arguments, leaving the interlocutor wondering how much is being held back” (1991, 35).11

Rather than simply taking Aristotle’s word for it that Socrates “asked questions but did not answer them”, one might well stop to consider—or reconsider—whether it was actually the case. A close look will show that it was not true of at least Plato’s Socrates (even though Plato does make it clear8 that it was indeed an impression some had of the man). But it is not Socrates’ (or Plato’s) failure to be clear about the matter. It is of course true that in Plato’s dialogues Socrates happens oftener to be the questioner than the respondent.13 But there are more than just a couple instances where Socrates expresses his willingness to answer as well as ask.14 Unfortunately, one of the most relevant instances is a very familiar passage indeed, but the passage is all too often either overlooked or obscured (unintentionally), mainly (I suspect) because of how it is usually translated and interpreted. The passage is Apology 33b1-3.

Below is, first, the Oxford Classical Text of the passage, followed by a couple widely-read English translations; lastly, I submit my own suggestion.

“<33b1-2> ὁ μοῖχος καὶ πλουσίων καὶ πέντε παρέχω ἐμαυτὸν ἐρωτᾶν, καὶ ἐάν τις βούληται ἀποκρινόμενος ἀκούειν ὧν ἂν λέγω.” (Duke et al. 1995)

“<33b1-2> I am ready to answer questions for rich and poor alike, <33b2-3> and I am equally ready if anyone prefers to listen to what I have to say and answer my questions.” (Tredennick/Tarrant 2003)

“The accuracy of mine and Tredennick/Tarrant’s translation of the first clause (33b1-2) is well-confirmed by a number of venerable commentators,15 and so it is a little surprising to see it still so often mistranslated in the manner of Grube/Cooper.6 The second clause (33b2-3), however, is trickier. According to John Burnet, there is a hyperbaton here: he says the “answering (apokrinomenos)” belongs with Socrates’ “I say (legō)”, not with the “any (tis)” interlocutor (1924, 138-139). So Burnet would hold that our popular translators have got 33b2-3 wrong—that Tredennick/Tarrant and Grube/Cooper’s “answer my questions” should rather be “hear what I say in reply” (sc., to their questions, the ones mentioned in 33b1-2). But Emile de Strycker and Simon Slings maintain that the transposition Burnet attributes to the clause “would be contorted and misleading”, so they suggest that the “answering” there is the interlocutor’s rather than Socrates’ (1994, 350). Since contorted hyperbatons do occasionally occur in the language, for my own part I do not believe the Greek by itself is clear enough to adjudicate the issue, which is why I have above translated 33b2-3 so that it is as ambiguous as, I believe, the Greek itself is.17