

SOCRATES'S AVOWAL OF KNOWLEDGE REVISITED

The sense in which Socrates avows or disavows knowledge has been much debated in treatments of Plato's epistemology over the last couple of decades. This paper aims to outline a possible interpretation that scholars of Socrates have yet to elaborate fully; it seeks to shed light especially on the Socratic method of enquiry and on the nature of Socratic knowledge at 29 b in Plato's *Apology*, i. e. its shareability and the content- and context-dependent nature of his claim to it.

Introduction

Socrates's avowals have attracted a range of interpretations, including the theses that [1] Socrates's disavowal of knowledge is best understood as an expedient inviting his interlocutors to search with him jointly for the truth; [2] Socrates's repeated disavowal of knowledge should be taken seriously, and his avowals of knowledge regarded as exceptional; somewhere in between, [3] in avowing and disavowing knowledge, Socrates uses two senses of the word 'know'; [4] Socrates sometimes avows knowledge in Plato's earlier dialogues, but hardly at all in the middle or later dialogues, suggesting that we can read Plato's thought as developmentalist or revisionist in epistemic terms; and [5] there may be some reason that Socrates is inconsistent in his avowals and disavowals, e. g. he has some pedagogical purposes in mind. All of these interpretations have their own weaknesses – referring to the numbering above, I introduce my grounds for reservations at selected points in the body of my discussion. While engaging with these central readings, this essay primarily develops an independent line of argument concerned with the grounds for considering Socrates's avowals qualified.

1. The disavowal and avowal of knowledge

Plato's *Apology*, in common with other early Platonic dialogues, impressively describes what may be termed the negative side of Socrates's epistemic state, namely his disavowal of knowledge.¹ Socrates calls the

¹ It may be worth noting, with M. C. Stokes (ed.), *Plato, Apology* (Warminster 1997) 99, 195, that the *Apology* begins and ends with a statement of the negativity

pronouncement of the Delphic oracle that none is wiser than he an enigma, since he does not acknowledge himself to be wise in any matter, great or small (21 b). But Socrates does admit some light and shade in the question of his wisdom or ignorance; he is wiser at least than a politician who had professed knowledge, but who on examination turned out to know nothing fine and good (21 d 3–8).²

Some understand Socrates's disclaimer of knowledge as a mere tactic, encouraging his interlocutor to seek out the truth (interpretation [1]).³ Socrates, however, appears sincere in insisting upon his lack of knowledge at 23 a 3–7. In gesturing towards divine wisdom here, Socrates defers, in whatever human wisdom he may be supposed to have, to a greater authority.

But what if we still refuse to take this Socratic formulation at face value? The passage at 23 a cannot provide in its own right a full guarantee that Socrates is genuine in positing his own ignorance, as he does over the course of the *Apology*. That is, his explanation might again be taken to be question-begging in that it could be construed as merely a further expedient to secure some objective. We could doubt Socrates's genuineness in disavowing knowledge indefinitely in this way – always supposing that he has some reason to conceal a positive epistemic state.

My claim is that, in assessing the sincerity attaching to Socrates's statements, we should consider the immediate discursive context of the *Apology*, where Socrates is standing trial. This means giving due weight to a series of statements he makes in court. The courtroom context is not one where Socrates can say things lightly, both because of the gravity of the charges against him, and because he expects that the jury's verdict will conform to general standards of truth and justice (18 a 3–6). Importantly, Socrates claims at the beginning of the *Apology* that the case presented by his accusers is quite devoid of truth, whereas his will de-

of Socratic cognition (... οὐκ οἶδα, 17 a 1–2; ἄδηλον παντὶ πλὴν ἢ τῷ θεῷ, 42 a 3–5). This is especially striking when one considers the natural tendency of trials to urge their defendants to make positive statements. On the *Apology* as a historical document, see Guthrie's careful treatment (W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* IV [Cambridge 1975] 72–80). Guthrie attempts to reconstruct the historical Socrates, whose professions of ignorance he does not judge to be in any serious sense deceitful or “insincere” (*ibid.*, III [Cambridge 1969] 447). My concern is not with determining the pronouncements of a historical Socrates, but with considering the totality and the possible consistency of the statements regarding knowledge expressed by “Socrates” in Plato's *Apology*. My reference to the *Apology* is from the new *Oxford Classical Text (Platonis Opera* I [Oxford 1995]) edited by E. A. Duke et al.

² Cf. n. 24.

³ N. Gully, *The Philosophy of Socrates* (New York 1968) 64–69.

live up to the bystanders the truth in its entirety (17 b 7–8).⁴ Socrates's positioning of his denials of knowledge within the context of an evidently serious appeal to truth gives us good reason for supposing his disavowals to be literal.

Moreover, the characteristic procedure of Socratic dialogue itself provides a basis for acquitting Socrates of mere rhetoric in his disclaimers of knowledge. Let us accept the position suspicious of Socrates that it is not enough for him to keep pressing the truth of his assertions. In that case, the validity of both sides' arguments will depend on their having a solid foundation in fact (17 b 2, ἔργω; 32 a 5, ἔργα etc.). We must then examine how Socrates seeks to establish his proofs. He characteristically proceeds through refutation of the claims of his accusers, rather than through positive statements in their own right. This procedure describes the typical Socratic elenchus, a mode of argument which, I shall suggest, bears an essential relation to Socrates's epistemological claims. In court, Socrates tries to refute the problematic points of each charge in turn, just as he does in his ordinary discourse. Socrates takes care not to make one-sided statements, but rather, in response to persistent accusations, demands from his bystanders there and then a discussion of whether these are based on facts (19 d 1–7). Socrates's cross-examination of one of his accusers, Meletus, in dealing with the later allegations, offers an example of his argumentative style (24 c 10 – 28 a 2). Opening his defence in a style of homespun diction, after his accusers had warned the audience of the delusive persuasiveness of his skilful speech, Socrates bases his whole argument on a method of elenctic disproof which resorts to counter-evidence at every opportunity (cf. 19 d 1–2, 20 e 5 – 21 a 9, 24 a 7–8, 31 c 2–3, 32 a 4–5, 32 d 1, 32 e 1, 33 d – 34 a, etc.). Insofar as Socrates seems to depend for his argument on the consent he gains from the audience, we cannot then regard his repeated use of the word 'truth' as groundless.⁵

⁴ This strong contrast between Socrates and his accusers in terms of truthfulness is made in especially concentrated and vigorous fashion in the Προοίμιον (17 a 1 – 18 a 6), which ends with the phrases τᾶληθῆ λέγειν (cf. J. Burnet [ed.], *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates and Crito* [Oxford 1924] 153), and from then on appears repeatedly in the *Apology*. On the truthfulness of the case for Socrates, see 17 b 4–5, 8, 18 a 6, 20 d 5–6, 22 b 6, 24 a 5–8, 28 a 7, d 6, 29 a 2, d 8 – e 3, 31 c 2, e 2, 32 a 8, 33 c 2, 9, 34 b 6, 39 b 5, 41 c 9 etc. On the falsity of the indictment, see 17 a 3–5, b 7, 18 a 8, b 2, 20 e 3, 26 a 1, 27 e 5, 30 b 6, 33 b 8, 34 b 5, etc.

⁵ Socrates seems to pay special attention to his prosecutors' reactions over the course of his speech (e. g. 27 c 10). In contrast, his prosecutors submit neither evidence nor witnesses whose testimony may be confirmed by both sides, even

We can take his disavowals at face value, however, and be no further forward in understanding them. Socrates's *acknowledgment* of his lack of knowledge suggests that a certain cognitive state should be attributed to him.⁶ In practice, however, Socrates expresses a number of positive views, particularly with regard to morals.⁷ The question then becomes: does Socrates, in expressing some positive views, make some profession tantamount to an avowal of knowledge?

As commentary has acknowledged,⁸ Socrates makes assertions of knowledge a number of times in the *Apology*, especially perhaps in spheres other than moral philosophy.⁹ While not exactly numerous, these assertions are more than enough for us to show that Socrates avows knowledge at certain junctures. With regard to the possibility of moral knowledge, on the other hand, Socrates in Plato's early dialogues seems to lay down a stringent condition: in order for a person to avow knowledge of something, he needs to answer the Socratic question what it is.¹⁰ When examining his interlocutors, however, Socrates does not need to be able to answer this definitional question himself in order to

when Socrates encourages them to do so (cf. 31 b 8 – c 1, 34 a 3–7). The accusers' one-sided allegations turn out to lack substantial support and also to be riven with self-contradiction, e. g. Meletus (Μέλητος) – good and patriotic as he purports to be – turns out never to have cared (οὐδὲν μεμέληκεν, cf. 24 c 4–9, d 9–10, 25 c 1–4, 26 a 9 – b 2) about the education of the young.

⁶ On a potential problem in claiming to recognise one's own ignorance, see n. 28.

⁷ Socrates claims never to have yielded to anyone in anything contrary to justice (33 a) and intends never to do so (32 a, cf. 37 a, b). He posits that the greatest good for a human being consists in holding daily discussions about virtue and other topics; the unexamined life is not worth living (38 a). For Socrates, it is shameful to concern oneself with the acquisition of as much money, repute and honour as possible, instead of fixing one's mind on prudence, truth and the best possible condition of one's soul (29 e).

⁸ J. H. Leshner, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987) 280; C. D. C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology* (Indianapolis 1989) 54–55; H. Benson, *Socratic Wisdom* (Oxford 2000) 222–226, etc.

⁹ Cf. 21 b 5, 22 b 8, d 1, 24 a 6, 25 d 9 – e 4 (in the form of a rhetorical question), 37 b 7, d 6. What I am stressing here as "morals" are subjects which Socrates takes up as central issues in Plato's early dialogues (justice, temperance, courage, piety and wisdom). Despite the implication of several passages like *Euthphr.* 7 b–c or *Phdr.* 263 a–b, however, it is problematic – or at least difficult – stringently to demarcate the realm of morals and that of other topics (cf. *La.* 187 e – 188 a, *Grg.* 490 b – 491 a, 497 b–c; note the usage of τὰ μικρά for both 'the petty trifles' and 'the lesser mysteries'). At this point in our treatment of the *Apology*, what should be noted is how often Socrates avows knowledge. For qualifications of Socrates's claim to knowledge, see also 18 d 1, 20 e 8, etc.

¹⁰ Cf. *La.* 190 c 6, *Euthphr.* 5 c 4 – d 1, *Hp. Ma.* 286 c 8 – d 2.

expose his partner's avowal of knowledge as deluded. Thus Socrates's procedure entails no affirmation of positive knowledge. Even in the case of the oracle's endorsement of his wisdom, the conclusion advanced by Socrates was that the name "Socrates" was "additionally" used by the god to represent *anyone*, using the person Socrates as an example, *who recognises his own lack of knowledge* (23 a–b). Since Socrates in his interpretation of the oracle estimates human wisdom to be worth little or nothing, the context in which such wisdom is best deployed is one in which the subject of "knowledge" accepts its finitude or inadequacy.

This representation of Socratic ignorance follows the interpretation that attributes to Socrates a thoroughly negative epistemic attitude. Irwin, for instance, argues that Socrates disclaims all knowledge, appealing to a clear distinction between knowledge and the true belief which admits of positive conviction.¹¹ However, this line of interpretation appears irreconcilable with Socrates's definitive statement that he *knows* that "to do injustice, that is, to disobey the superior, god or man, is bad and shameful" (29 b 6–7).¹² The gravity of his insistence is unmissable. The word οἶδα here falls with especial emphasis at the end of a periodic sentence, insisting upon Socrates's claim to knowledge. Further, this avowal of knowledge is all the more striking, since it contrasts with Socrates's immediately preceding disclaimer of knowledge of life after death. Here, Socrates says that many people fear death wrongly, thinking that they know what they do not know; in summary this attitude is based on a blameworthy ignorance (ἀμαθία ... ἐπινειδιστος, 29 a–b), which has the same structure as that previously diagnosed in the politician by Socrates.¹³ While the English 'ignorance' may not convey the exact nuance of this Socratic use of the Greek ἀμαθία, Socrates's intention is clear: to point up people's *delusion* or *false conceit of knowledge*. Having traced the root of the fear of death in

¹¹ T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford 1977) 58 suggests that Socrates "exceptionally" claims knowledge at *Ap.* 29 b 6–7 (interpretation [2]). However, Irwin deals with 29 b a bit differently in *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford 1995) 27–29, where he sees οἶδα in question as Socrates's conviction, *not* knowledge. On this change, cf. G. Fine, "Nozick's Socrates", *Phronesis* 41 (1996) 234–235 n. 6.

¹² Cf. E. de Strycker, S. R. Slings, *Plato's Apology of Socrates* (Leiden 1994) 327 and οὐκ οἶδα in my n. 1.

¹³ On such delusion, often described as a peculiar type of ignorance by Plato, see *Lg.* 863 c. This type of cognitive state, distinguished from the empty form of not knowing, and often paraphrased as ἀμαθία, recurs throughout Plato's works, cf. *Ap.* 21 c–d, 22 b–e, 23 c–d, 29 a–b, e, 41 b, *Alc.* I. 117 d – 118 b, *Chrm.* 166 d 1–2, 167 a 4–5, *Ly.* 218 a–b, *Men.* 84 a–c, *Smp.* 204 a, *Phdr.* 275 b, *Tht.* 210 c, *Sph.* 229 c, *Plt.* 302 a–b, *Phlb.* 48 c – 49 a, *Lg.* 732 a–b, etc.

this way, he does not regard the knowledge expressed at 29 b as liable to such delusion.¹⁴ The knowledge at 29 b, rather, works as a guide for him in decision-making (29 b 8 – c 1).¹⁵

2. Knowledge at 29 b

At this point, it is necessary to seek further to characterise the nature of the knowledge that Socrates seems to claim. Vlastos distinguishes between two conceptions of knowledge: strong and weak (interpretation [3]).¹⁶ For Vlastos, the criterion distinguishing these different kinds of knowledge concerns the certainty with which they may be held. Strong knowledge is attributed only to the god and carries with it infallible certainty. Weak knowledge may, on the other hand, be arrived at through the Socratic method of elenchus, and remains fallible and uncertain. Agreements which have survived thousands of interrogatory and testing processes of elenchus may well be overturned at the next challenge. Indeed, the introduction of two types of knowledge seems

¹⁴ This line of argument concurs with R. Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton 1984) 275: “in the *Apology* he [Socrates] confidently and deliberately claims to know” at 29 b. Benson (n. 8) 238 confusingly describes Socrates’s assertion as a “misstatement made in the heat of the moment”, while also drawing attention to “a certain amount of deliberateness” in Socrates’s statement at 29 b (*ibid.*, 236).

¹⁵ Socrates relates knowledge of such a kind at 37 b 7, with an emphatic form: εὖ οἶδα. This is possibly the passage to which Cicero refers by his term ‘ante’ at *Tusculanae disputationes* I 99, where Cicero highlights a knowledge on Socrates’s part that would allow him to choose between 1) pursuing an examined life even at risk of death, and 2) abandoning philosophy and begging for his life. Cicero had previously been summarizing 40 c – 42 a of Plato’s *Apology*. 29 b is another candidate for Cicero’s reference.

¹⁶ Cf. G. Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (Cambridge 1994) 39–66; idem, “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge”, *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985) 1–31. The introduction of determinately two different sorts of knowledge has no firm basis in Plato’s texts and further risks too much schematization, in a context where it is otherwise only natural to assume a range of differences in knowledge’s content as I will discuss in the body of this chapter.

I agree with T. C. Brickhouse & N. D. Smith, *Plato’s Socrates* (Oxford 1994) 38–45 that Socrates is interested in knowledge-how (or why) rather than knowledge-that: there is textual evidence for this distinction in ὅπως ἔχει at 509 a 5 in the *Gorgias*; and indeed other references, such as *Chrm.* 166 d 6 ὅπη ἔχει, *Euthd.* 278 b 5 τὰ πράγματα ... πῆ ἔχει, *Euthphr.* 4 a 12, e 5 ὅπη ἔχει, *Men.* 84 b 10 ὅπη ἔχει, *Cra.* 420 b 5 ὅπη ἔχει ... τὰ πράγματα etc., back up a distinction for Socrates in kinds of knowledge. But in my argument, this distinction between *knowledge-how* and *knowledge-that* is assimilated to the suggestion that the *content* of a knowledge-claim is of greater epistemological moment than the meaning of the word ‘knowledge’ that conveys it.

reasonable given that Socrates both denies and claims some knowledge. We are now in a position to enquire whether the avowal at 29 b, which Socrates notably contrasts with people's delusion or false conceit of knowledge, ἀμαθία, merely represents an assertion of this *fallible, uncertain* cognition.

For Socrates, any assertion of knowledge obliges speakers uncomplacently to articulate their thinking and to defend themselves in public. Knowledge must be capable of being shared and tested in the context of a dialogue between two interlocutors.¹⁷ To take the case of the knowledge asserted at 29 b, it is presumably crucial for Socrates's statement – “for one to do injustice, that is, to disobey his superior, god or man, is bad and shameful” – that it is clear and readily shareable with his accusers. In a pragmatic sense, the statement is shared in that it forms the foundation for the trial in which Socrates is being accused of impiety. Socrates appears to treat the content of his statement about injustice as uncontroversial in the courtroom context of his speech.

If so, is the claim of knowledge at 29 b by Socrates context-dependent? We may well say yes, so long as the question turns upon whether Socrates *claims* knowledge or not. By and large, the situations in which we claim to know something place large restrictions upon the nature of our claims. Within ordinary language, it is unusual for the content of our statements to be simply that *we know* something; this is only usually the case in junctures, such as Socrates's in the *Apology*, where a person's claims to knowledge are doubted. In other words, certain discursive contexts (say, when we are embattled) remove from us the precondition that our statements are the object of previous consent. Sometimes, when consent to specific assertions turns out to be controversial, the status of knowledge itself needs re-examining.¹⁸ This is *a fortiori* the case with Socrates, who is notably cautious and uncomplacent in argument. Socrates open-mindedly examines any issue from first principles when facing a proponent of an opposite value-judgment, who might contest a basic statement like 29 b.¹⁹ It should be noted here, though, that Socrates's willingness to examine without prejudice the

¹⁷ Cf. *Chrm.* 166 c 7– d 4.

¹⁸ Cf. *Euthphr.* 7 b–d. Usually, though, knowledge-claims about assertions, i. e. that in asserting x, we also assert “I know x”, are not something that need remarking on in Socrates's dialogues.

¹⁹ Socrates professes amazement when Thrasymachus counts injustice as a kind of excellence and wisdom and justice as defects (cf. *R. I.*, 348 c – 349 a). Although to some degree, Socrates understands Thrasymachus's contention that profit may flow from wrongdoing, Thrasymachus's strong position that injustice “is fine (καλόν) and strong” makes it difficult for Socrates to determine the

truth of any statement does not in itself undermine his conviction that previously built-up beliefs will again be accredited. Cross-examination and dialogue may bring about agreement between opposite positions. In principle, Socrates can commit himself to a certain content even while it is temporarily suspended under elenctic examination.²⁰

In this way, we can begin to appreciate that the attribution to Socrates of a total absence of belief is unsustainable in the light of his philosophical method. It would seem plausible thus far to equate any belief that Socrates might hold in the course of an elenctic dialogue with Vlastos's weak knowledge, characteristic of humans, not the gods. But the fact that Socrates may profess a form of "knowledge" admitting of a weaker degree of certainty says nothing of the strength that may attach to his convictions etc. of this kind; Socrates makes an evidently moral decision to lead his life in accordance with beliefs, judgments, interpretations, and not exclusively with knowledge. For example, he declares that he will never abandon positions he has taken up or has found assigned to him by his superior and which he *believes* (ἡγησάμενος) best (28 d). Socrates expresses this commitment to the consequences of his beliefs even in the face of death or any major uncertainty. The contrast here is between the certainty attaching to Socrates's interpretation (ᾧήθην τε καὶ ὑπέλαβον) of his philosophical task (28 e) and the opacity of what follows death; the former certainty obliges Socrates to direct his life as he does.²¹ His life is based upon the principle that a philosophical life in which one constantly examines oneself and others is enjoined by divine command.²²

Given Socrates's commitment to the philosophical life, what he is contrasting with *divine knowledge* in terms of the defining criterion of certainty must be *the whole range of human beliefs*, including but not

starting-point of any consensual discussion. This does not, however, deter Socrates from initiating a process of elenchus with his interlocutor.

²⁰ This principle depends on a distinction between the examination of a certain proposition and its endorsement as a position. See e. g. Socrates in Plato's *Grg.* 472 d – 475 e.

²¹ At the end of section 1 of this paper, we have seen the similar contrast between the certainty attaching to Socrates's knowledge and the opacity of what follows death at 29 a–b. As far as the strength or certainty is concerned, I think there is no clear distinction between knowledge and belief.

²² Note that these convictions of Socrates will hardly be verifiable. Neither will they be shared with his accusers. In my view, the absence of *shareability* in this sense determines Socrates's caution in avoiding the word 'know' here. But Socrates's cognitive terms – such as belief or conviction – may well admit of such strength as to be unwavering for Socrates. For Socrates's positive convictions, see further 30 a 6 (οἴομαι), 35 d 7 (νομίζω), etc. See n. 23.

limited to knowledge. Conversely, if we focus only on the conditions of knowledge (like Vlastos's two senses of knowledge), we miss the importance of other forms of human cognition that can make a Socratic life steadfast.²³

When Socrates makes definite assertions as to the value of living life in a particular way, he does not make any explicit distinction between what he claims to know and what he strongly believes. The problem of *knowledge* in these contexts necessarily concerns Socrates's affirmation to that effect – that is, that he knows. How do these assertions or denials proceed? Socrates makes a firm denial of the knowledge attributed to a caricatured version of himself in Aristophanes's play (19 c–d). He also disowns the form of pedagogical knowledge peddled by Sophists for cash (19 e – 20 e). Neither does Socrates profess the technical knowledge of craftsmen he met (22 c–e).²⁴ Whatever form of knowledge Socrates lays claim to, it differs from the supposed knowledge of these practitioners in content, scope, practicality and level of

²³ D. Wolfsdorf, "Socrates' Avowals of Knowledge", *Phronesis* 49 (2004) 89, 139–140 (cf. Benson [n. 8] 84 n. 115, 227 n. 17), correctly points out that the passage at 508 e 6 – 509 b 1 in Plato's *Gorgias* – on the matters bound with chains of iron and adamant, i. e. on the thesis that doing injustice is worse than suffering it – only insists on Socrates's *belief* that moral matters stand a certain way; that is, *contra* Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (n.16) 59 n. 47, and "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge" (n. 16) 21 n. 48, he does not avow ethical knowledge here. Thus, however certain a proposition seems to Socrates, he is well aware (as in this passage) of its disputable character when faced with those unsympathetic to him.

²⁴ Socrates disqualifies notable politicians and poets from almost any knowledge (21 c – 22 c). On the other hand, Socrates finds some knowledge in craftsmen, as expected (22 c–e); indeed, they are held to "know many fine things" (πολλὰ καὶ καλὰ ἐπισταμένους) of which he himself is ignorant (ἠπίσταντο ἃ ἐγὼ οὐκ ἠπιστάμην). In this respect, they are wiser than Socrates (μου ταύτη σοφώτεροι ἦσαν), without ceasing to be vulnerable to the error of poets when they claim wisdom in "other, supremely important matters" (τὰλλα τὰ μέγιστα). These statements offer another basis on which to take especial care in defining the content and context of Socrates's knowledge-claims; even the "ταύτη" above may suggest large divergences between forms of knowledge held by different parties. Woodruff (P. Woodruff, "Plato's early theory of knowledge", in: S. Everson [ed.], *Companions to Ancient Thought 1. Epistemology* [Cambridge 1990] 60–84) equates Socrates's avowal and disavowal of knowledge with a distinction between non-technical and technical knowledge. This seems inadequate; even if restricted to the field of non-technical knowledge or to ordinary language understandings, Socrates may avow some knowledge, as in the *Apology* (cf. also *Euthd.* 293 b–c, 296 e – 297 a, *Ion* 532 d–e), but disavow other knowledge (unless he is claiming to be a polymath). This makes it difficult to uphold Woodruff's distinction, especially when we come to consider Socrates's avowal, rather than disavowal, of knowledge. On a possible knowledge on Socrates's part, see also my nn. 35, 36, 56.

generality. Socrates's disavowal of knowledge, then, may not amount to a sweeping renunciation of any knowledge involved, e. g. in pragmatic or technical activities. If Socrates hedges his disavowal of knowledge in these terms, we may expect that he possesses some knowledge *on certain subjects* or will claim some knowledge *in a given respect*.²⁵

Socrates's position may be compared with a sceptic's more general disclaimer of knowledge. A sceptic like Arcesilaus would hesitate even to disavow knowledge for the same reason that he would be cautious about claiming it – he is reluctant to commit himself to any truth claim.²⁶ If so, a person's definite *disavowal* of knowledge may well be regarded as a sign that he is ready, in principle, to avow some other knowledge – in other words, that he credits the possibility of other determinate knowledges. As we saw previously, Socrates's position is not thoroughly sceptical;²⁷ even in the realm of morals, he is prepared definitely to disclaim some ethical knowledge. Given that his disavowals are not sweeping, it is reasonable to attribute to him a version of the *qualified* position suggested above: that he avows some knowledge in proportion to the strength of his other denials. Acceptance of this picture of Socrates as differentiated from a certain kind of sceptic leads to a re-examination of the question of what exactly Socrates means by saying that human wisdom, including his, is worth little or nothing. Does this apparently categorical statement about human cognition not conflict with the avowal of knowledge at 29 b describing his fortitude and way of life?

²⁵ Wolfsdorf (n. 23) 75–142 attempts to look beyond Socrates's evident inconsistencies to get at the core of what Socrates – and behind him, Plato – really believe about knowledge (interpretation [5]). But in Plato's *Gorgias* Socrates explicitly posits the consistency of an individual's belief-set as pertinent to the truthfulness or veridical nature of their assertions. Indeed, Socrates goes so far as to say that consistency is a distinctive feature of φιλοσοφία (482 a–c). It thus becomes problematic for Wolfsdorf to attribute Socrates's deliberate shifts of positions to a “dramaturgical” strategy on Plato's part, since by Socrates's own lights they would tend to make him unreliable, or a liar. For Wolfsdorf, Socrates changes his positions so frequently because he wants to stimulate his interlocutors to independent thought. The pedagogue Socrates, on this view, conceals his views from his interlocutors in order to educate them. But Socrates rather represents himself in his dialogues as a participant with his interlocutors in a search for truth, someone not already apprised of conclusions. If Socrates is genuinely using dialogues to get at the truth, it would seem reasonable for him to stick with roughly consistent positions approximating his current grasp on the matter while making adjustments e. g. for his interlocutor.

²⁶ Cic. *Ac.* I, 44–45, cf. Woodruff (n. 24) 62.

²⁷ Cf. nn. 7–9.

Socrates disclaims knowledge of the fine and good (21 b 4–5), and is well aware that he amounts to little or nothing in terms of wisdom (cf. 23 b 2).²⁸ However, these statements in themselves do not necessarily disbar specific or partial knowledge. One plausible reading would be as follows: because Socrates occupies a standpoint from which he can compare human and divine knowledge, he might well see that the difference is so great that he can declare the former practically nugatory. The wide gap between divine knowledge and characteristic human modes of cognition will prompt him to confess his ignorance without hesitation.²⁹ The possibility is, therefore, that his confession of ignorance is made with reference to some degree of partial knowledge which Socrates can claim, which is however patently incomplete or ungodlike. The knowledge attested at 29 b does not represent a goal in the quest for moral judgment, but rather the starting-point of a process of serious enquiry, for example, concerning the nature of justice. If this line of thought is possible, we may take Socrates's avowal and disavowal of knowledge consistently: that is to say, as content-dependent (and of course, context-dependent, cf. pp. 41–42) rather than general.³⁰ While Socrates cannot assert a synoptic and complete knowledge that will definitively answer the question what justice is (cf. *R. I.*, 354 b–c), at 29 b he avows knowledge relative to the question of justice or injustice. When Socrates thinks of a wise soul in relation to some important

²⁸ These passages (21 b 4–5, 23 b 2–4, 22 c 9 – d 1) might be thought problematic, in that if we provisionally take Socrates to be asserting “I know that I know nothing”, that would lead to the appearance of a logical paradox. On this point, some take the first “know” to refer to the comparatively weaker form of cognition than knowledge (Stokes [n. 1] 19, 53; H. Tredennick, H. Tarrant, *The Last Days of Socrates* [Harmondsworth 1993] 42, 44), while others suggest a strong epistemic claim as knowledge must be understood (Brickhouse & Smith [n. 16] 33 n. 11, Woodruff [n. 24] 62 n. 3). In my view, choosing the weaker interpretation of cognition in the principal clause would implausibly undermine Socrates's unwavering awareness of his own ignorance. As far as the strength of the first “know”, I agree with Brickhouse & Smith and Woodruff. As far as the possible logical paradox is concerned, on the other hand, I agree with M. F. Burnyeat, “Antipater and Self-Refutation: Elusive Arguments in Cicero's *Academica*”, in: B. Inwood, J. Mansfeld (eds.), *Assent and Argument: Studies in Cicero's Academic Books* (Leiden 1997) 291, that in the *Apology* what Socrates declares is more nuanced than “I know that I know nothing”. Cf. pp. 43–44.

²⁹ Cf. Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (n. 16) 62; idem, “Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge” (n. 16) 28; idem, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge 1991) 221 n. 76; idem, “Happiness and Virtue in Socrates' Moral Theory”, *Topoi* 4 (1985) 19 n. 69; I. Park, “Inner Action”, *Bulletin of Kansai Philosophical Association* 24 (1989) 81, Kraut (n. 14) 272–274.

³⁰ Cf. Park (n. 29) 81; Nozick (n. 46) 143–145. Cf. also Guthrie (n. 1) 88.

matter, he accesses some concept of the former knowledge, and so is compelled to profess his ignorance. It could be tentatively concluded that for Socrates to avow partial knowledge is one thing and to claim complete or synoptic knowledge quite another. In other words, the assertion of knowledge at 29 b is far from answering the question what justice is.³¹

In conclusion, I will briefly summarise the chief points made in this section. Vlastos's weak knowledge characterised as *fallible* and *uncertain* does not explain 29 b well. This is because the knowledge in question rather seems strong and secure especially because of the striking contrast between Socrates's avowal of knowledge at 29 b and people's *delusion*, ἀμαθία. Further, Vlastos's two senses of knowledge say nothing of Socrates's strong conviction. What should be compared with divine knowledge in the light of certainty in Vlastos's sense is probably the whole range of human cognition, not restrictively human knowledge (*pace* Vlastos). This is because Socrates appeals to both knowledge and beliefs to lead his unwavering philosophical life. (We should take both knowledge and beliefs as they are in the texts: it is unnecessary to assimilate some beliefs with knowledge, or some knowledge with beliefs.) My alternative interpretation is that Socrates can avow or dis-

³¹ It would be natural at this point to open out the argument into a consideration of the so-called Socratic fallacy, referring to Socrates's supposed insistence on the priority of the definition of objects to any attestation of knowledge concerning them. Let me just say for now that I do not judge Socrates's reasoning to be fallacious. As I understand it, Socrates does not demand for objects of knowledge to be defined in anything other than a context-dependent way (cf. A. Nehamas, "Socratic Intellectualism", *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 2 [1986] 285–293 and idem, *The Art of Living* [Berkeley etc. 1998] 217–218 n. 61); indeed, he tends to ask his interlocutors to define terms about which they have previously professed some especial competence e. g. as a teacher. Moreover, it is often indicated that the priority of definition at 6 d–e in the *Euthyphro* may represent for Socrates a sufficient, or completely satisfactory, rather than a necessary condition for the judging of examples (*pace* P. T. Geach, "Plato's *Euthyphro*: Analysis and Commentary", *Monist* 50 [1966] 370–372. On how to read this passage of *Euthyphro*, I agree with Nehamas, "Socratic Intellectualism", 275–293, and Brickhouse & Smith [n. 16] esp. p. 49. Incidentally Benson [n. 8] 120 n. 33 puts aside Nehamas's interpretation): cf. G. X. Santas, "The Socratic Fallacy", *Journal of History of Philosophy* 10 (1972) 136; idem, *Socrates* (London 1979) 116; Kraut (n. 14) 209 n. 38; Vlastos, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge" (n. 16) 23 n. 54; idem, "Is the 'Socratic Fallacy' Socratic?", *Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1990) 7; J. Beversluis, "Does Socrates Commit the Socratic Fallacy?", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1987) 211–223; M. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (Pennsylvania 1996) 180 n. 11; Ch. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogues* (Cambridge 1996) 157, 181–182. Cf. Benson (n. 8) 144–147.

avow knowledge in a *content- and context dependent* manner. For example, Socrates avows knowledge at 29 b, but he might well refrain from claiming it at certain junctures, e. g. in front of Thrasymachus, who would contest 29 b. Finally we saw that Socrates's disavowal of knowledge is not sweeping. Thus it can reasonably be expected that he claims some qualified knowledge, e. g. on a certain subject or in a given respect. Then the problem would be how we should interpret the seemingly categorical disavowals of knowledge that Socrates sometimes made. Actually this is where we should appeal to the distinction between human and divine *knowledge*, not regarding certainty/uncertainty as Vlastos did. Since Socrates occupies a standpoint from which he can compare human and divine knowledge, he can declare his partial knowledge practically nugatory. However, this is compatible with Socrates having some knowledge.

3. The scope of Socratic knowledge

Socrates sets great store by the elenchus as a method of arriving at truths upon which he and his interlocutors can agree. The elenchus in itself, as he understands it, partakes of the character of a search for truth. Socrates expresses delight with his encounter with Callicles, comparing him to an excellent touchstone (*Grg.* 486 e 5–6). Why is Socrates so sure about the truth-value of an agreement? Generally, agreements seem subject to instability: they depend on whether the interlocutors are skilled, whether the procedure of a dialogue is suitably carried out, etc. Socrates pays close attention to these issues in attributing truth to agreement.³² Callicles is praised for those qualities that are conducive to his reliability as a discussant: knowledge, goodwill and frankness (487 a 2–3 ἐπιστήμην τε καὶ εὐνοίαν καὶ παρρησίαν). These three credentials are taken to be necessary for the elenchus to orient itself effectively towards the truth. Socrates thus addresses Callicles (487 e 6–7): “In reality, then, agreement between you and me

³² Socrates sometimes doubts his own qualifications as a searcher for truth (*Chrm.* 175 e 5 – 176 a 1, *R. I.* 336 e 10) and frequently refers to the tentativeness of his conclusions (*Grg.* 480 a 1, 480 b 3, 480 e 3–4 etc.). The elenchus affords its participants freedom to take back their assent to any previous proposition (*Chrm.* 164 d, 165 a–b, *Grg.* 462 c 4, 464 a 1, 506 a 4–5, cf. ἀναθέσθαι at 461 d 3 and 462 a 3. Cf. I. Park, “Rhetoric, Persuasion, and Dialectic”, *Journal of Classical Studies* 47 [1999] 105–106; Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* [n. 16] 17 n. 51; idem, “The Socratic Elenchus”, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 [1983] 44–45 n. 47 *contra* T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* [n. 11] 39).

(ἡ ἐμὴ καὶ ἡ σὴ ὁμολογία) will then obtain the goal of the truth (τέλος ... τῆς ἀληθείας)”.

On the other hand, Socrates converses with anyone, young or old (*Ap.* 30 a 3, 9) who is willing (*Ap.* 33 a 7, b 3). He even indicates that the solution of the matter under examination will be a common good for *all* (cf. *Chrm.* 166 d 5, *Grg.* 505 e 6). Socrates would seem to postulate that no controversy over truth obtains among people at the deepest level.³³ When Polus, in the *Gorgias*, laughs in Socrates’s face, Socrates returns to first principles in the belief that his views and those of his interlocutor will ultimately be found to coincide:

For I think that you and I – and also the other people – believe that doing injustice is worse than suffering it, and that not paying justice is worse than paying it (*Grg.* 474 b 2–5).

In highlighting such passages, Vlastos suggests that some version of the theory of recollection might be supposed in the Socratic elenchus, though in the end these represent distinct methods for Vlastos.³⁴ In the present case, Socrates attributes to Polus beliefs that are the opposite of Polus’s current assertions on the basis that these beliefs are implicitly entailed by other of Polus’s beliefs. In my view, a similarly structured assertion is made by Socrates in the *Apology*, a work generally held to be no chronologically closer to the *Meno* than the *Gorgias*.³⁵ When

³³ Cf. Woodruff (n. 24) 79–80.

³⁴ Throughout his Socratic studies, Vlastos understands the elenchus, in its proper usage, as a procedure used by Socrates to refute his interlocutors’ statements or to correct such in the light of his interlocutors’ other beliefs. It is not until the introduction of a positive theory of recollection that Socrates finds a method capable of adducing proofs. Socrates’s attestation of having proved the truth in the *Gorgias* is thus extraordinary for Vlastos, meriting close examination. Vlastos provocatively refuses to accept the famous passages of geometrical demonstration in the *Meno* as examples of the elenchus: *Socratic Studies* (n. 16) 5 and “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge” (n. 16) 32; for Vlastos, Plato retrenches from the elenchus when the theory of recollection is introduced. This developmental line of reading has attracted the support of a number of scholars, from whom I dissent. Cf. also Vlastos (n. 29) 118–119; idem, “Elenchus and Mathematics: A Turning-Point in Plato’s Philosophical Development”, *AJPh* 109 (1988) 373.

³⁵ I elsewhere suggest my grounds for reservation from scholars who distinguish Plato’s earlier and middle dialogues according to the strictness with which they apply the priority of knowledge-what, representatively found clearly in Kraut (n. 14) 274–277 (interpretation [4]), and also in Vlastos “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge” (n. 16) 26 n. 65; idem, *Socratic Studies* (n. 16) 71 n. 14; Beversluis (n. 31) 218, 221 n. 4, etc. This interpretation both over-schematizes Plato and finds some difficulties in the texts: in the *Meno*, Socrates may possess some knowledge

Meletus's criticisms of Socrates converge in an accusation that Socrates does not admit the existence of god at all, Socrates says (*Ap.* 26 e 6–7):

You are not credible, Meletus, and that, it seems to me, not even to yourself.

Again Socrates denies that Meletus can plausibly hold views contrary to his own.

In either case, Socrates's comment seems to suggest that people can hold some ideas latently which contradict their own statements (cf. *Grg.* 495 e 1–2).³⁶ On this point, Vlastos attributes the following assumption to Socrates: anyone who ever has a false belief will always have at the same time true beliefs entailing its negation³⁷ (I call this Vlastos's assumption A). Thus anyone who bears false ideas will tacitly accept the negation of their original opinion.³⁸ I agree with Vlastos that Socrates's elenctic procedures are predicated on Socrates subscribing to his assumption A. Even when Socrates initially seems to dismiss an inter-

as implied at 75 d 5–7 (προομολογῆ, ἐρωτῶν in my reading, following R. S. Bluck and E. S. Thompson respectively), 85 d 9–10, 98 b 1–5 etc.

³⁶ Another early passage with possible affinities with the so-called theory of recollection is the miscommunication between Socrates and Gorgias at 459 c – 460 a in Plato's *Gorgias* – miscommunication because Socrates's formulation here, in a wording possibly reminiscent of recollection, i. e. προεπιστάμενον (459 e 1–2), προειδῆ (459 e 7), does not for a moment consider that Gorgias could teach his pupils the nature of e. g. the good, bad, beautiful, ugly, just, unjust etc.; Gorgias himself maintains that his pupils will pick these up as readily as they absorb his lessons in rhetoric (460 a 3–4). In asking how Gorgias's pupils could come to knowledge of these subjects, Socrates appears to rule out a normal learning process of knowledge passing from a teacher to a pupil, instead apparently resting on an idea of introspection closer to recollection. If we limit ourselves, however, to observing the content- and context-dependent nature of Socrates's assertions of knowledge, we will not have to reckon with the same difficulties as developmentalist accounts.

³⁷ Perhaps worrying over whether the beliefs in question can be accounted 'true', Vlastos drops the predicative adjective 'true' (*Socratic Studies* [n. 16] 56 and "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge" [n. 16] 18), adopting elsewhere the expression 'true beliefs' (Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* [n. 16] 25; [n. 32] 52; *Socrates* [n. 29] 114; [n. 34] 369).

³⁸ Cf. Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (n. 16) 23–24; idem (n. 32) 51. On tacit (covert) beliefs, Vlastos has recourse to this example: one can tacitly believe that triangles' interior angles sum to two right angles without necessarily having formed (in childhood, for instance) any explicit (overt) idea on the matter. Vlastos describes Socrates's belief concerning the implicit relationship of negation between people's false and true opinions as constituting a "tremendous assumption" on Socrates's part (Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* [n. 16] 25; [n. 32] 52).

locutor's case out of hand like those passages above, which are unusual,³⁹ he remains concerned to evaluate which side of the argument – his or his opponent's – appears more persuasive to both parties: “Then you'll answer?” (*Grg.* 474 c 1) “Enquire, then, along with me, gentlemen ...” (*Ap.* 27 a 9). In these cases, his expectation is that his interlocutor's stated view will fail to be reasonable in that it will prove inconsistent with his other avowed beliefs. In teasing these out, Socrates can thus obtain a series of agreements on a number of successive matters (*Grg.* 474 c – 475 e, *Ap.* 27 a – 28 a). Socrates needs to turn his interlocutors into witnesses of the successive phases of his arguments' proof so long as their assent remains essential to him in the establishment of the truth.⁴⁰ Socrates's deployment of the elenchus as an effective method of ascertaining truth would seem to depend on his endowing his interlocutors with some knowledge or understanding, in the sense that they are discerning enough to judge what is true and what is false.

Nevertheless, for Vlastos, there remain philosophical problems in Socrates's positing of elenctic dialogues as a mechanism for determining truths. This is because dialogues cannot by themselves supply any criterion for determining whether a belief is true; rather, they merely demonstrate the incoherence of interlocutor's belief-sets. But if Vlastos is correct in attributing his assumption A to Socrates, there is a basis on which Socrates becomes entitled to treat the agreed propositions emerging from dialogues as having a certain truth-value. This is because Socrates is seen as proposing true statements and his interlocutors, whatever their earlier assertions or other beliefs, as being competent to endorse them. In other words, in conversation, Socrates is likely to steer his discussions in the direction of shared truth, through examining the entirety of the beliefs of his interlocutors. According to Vlastos, Socrates places a greater degree of faith in the elenchus than is warranted by its

³⁹ These passages seem exceptional against the backdrop of Socrates's character (as indicated in p. 41 and n. 19).

⁴⁰ On this point, see Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (n. 16) 20–21; (n. 32) 48, 53. Vlastos states that Socrates typically makes his partners witnesses of his *own* views; the textual evidence he cites, though, shows something else: the fact that the elenchus typically proceeds through Socrates's gaining the assent of one interlocutor alone (*Grg.* 474 a 5–6). Moreover, it is clear that Socrates judges the elenchus worthwhile even should he fail to carry his interlocutors – that is, both his refutations of others and crucially their refutation of him yield a cognitive benefit (*Ap.* 22 a 7–8, *Grg.* 458 a 1–b 1, 470 c 6–7, 506 c 1–3). Vlastos's quotations (Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* [n. 16] 21–27, T 21–24; [n. 32] 48–54, T 22–25) tend to illustrate, *pace* Vlastos, Socrates's confidence in the elenctic method, rather than showing that dialectical situations as such are advantageous to Socrates.

merely serving as the formal guarantor of its conclusions. The criterion of truthfulness of a conclusion, though, is not that it is finally subject to agreement, but that it is Socrates who proposed it. Vlastos argues that Socrates's experience of debating, in other words, inductive evidence, leads him to the position that his own belief-set consists *exclusively* of true beliefs.⁴¹ Socrates therefore becomes confident in his own abilities as an arguer to determine the truth. It follows for Vlastos's line of thought that such a formidable debater might be in no need of further enquiry, obviating the need for any interlocutor or even dialogue.⁴²

So, for Vlastos, Socrates must be apprised of the truth of those assertions he submits to elenctic conversation. For Irwin, however, Socrates's title to this kind of knowledge comes into doubt, as Socrates, like anyone else, lacks a criterion by which he might account his true beliefs concerning any object to be "knowledge". Now, as Irwin suggests, Socrates may remain convinced of the truth of his beliefs on any subject of discussion, without attaching to them any explicit claim to knowledge.⁴³ Yet Irwin may be hasty in having Socrates separate truth and knowledge so readily; since when Socrates says that he cannot attend a claim with knowledge, he surely means that he is unable to answer disputes as to its *truth*. Whether Socrates has true beliefs or not, and which these are, must remain a matter for independent examination.

The prevailing literature on this topic would accept as uncontentious the idea that the Platonic Socrates holds some true beliefs. But which? For Nozick, Socrates, in disavowing knowledge of F, necessarily holds himself to lack *true belief* in the matter of F. Yet without claiming to define F, it may still be possible, via the process of an elenchus, to begin considering, and to seek to know, any topic insofar as it can be identified as pertaining to the nature of F.⁴⁴ For both Vlastos and Irwin, the elenchus is a negative procedure resting on Socrates's convictions and concerned to expose falsehoods.⁴⁵ But rather

⁴¹ Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (n. 16) 28; (n. 32) 55.

⁴² In my view, Vlastos here goes too far in failing to capture the extent to which Socrates's discussions represent to him genuine opportunities to thrash out unsuspected and unformulated truths.

⁴³ Irwin (n. 11) 40–41.

⁴⁴ This would understand the so-called priority of definition as applying less restrictively than it is sometimes imagined. On the context-dependency of the priority of definition, see n. 31. On this point, M. F. Burnyeat, "Examples in epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus and G. E. Moore", *Philosophy* 52 (1976) 389; Nehamas, "Socratic Intellectualism" (n. 31) esp. p. 290, would seem to hold a context-dependent interpretation. Cf. n. 31.

⁴⁵ For those writers, Plato's positive philosophical contributions may be found in or extrapolated from statements he arrived at independently of dialogue.

than understanding Socrates as directing discussions on the basis of principles not subject to examination (like Irwin), we can see Socrates as moving from point to point guaranteed by agreement between himself and *some* expression of his interlocutors' minds. In putting this point, Nozick modifies Vlastos's assumption A as to the latency of true beliefs for Socrates in human cognition.⁴⁶ Ceasing to view the elenchus as a demonstration, Nozick's new assumption is that Socrates⁴⁷ and his interlocutor are on a par, in the sense that some knowledge is attributed to both parties.⁴⁸ In order to endorse the Socratic emphasis on the value of mutual agreement, so that the elenchus may be regarded as a search for truth, we will then admit the substantial importance, not of those argumentative phases in which Socrates professes *his* true beliefs, but of those in which *both parties* come to believe something true or know something to be true.⁴⁹

While Socrates strictly denies knowledge to himself and others, he nonetheless engages in dialogues which he is willing to construe as the pursuit of truth; moreover, he tries his utmost to offer himself and others the possibility of knowledge. Callicles's personal qualities were admitted as factors potentially orienting the elenchus towards truth.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ R. Nozick, "Socratic Puzzles", *Phronesis* 40 (1995) 149–150.

⁴⁷ According to Nozick, the excellence of Socratic knowledge is that he knows that he does not know (what F is). Nozick describes what are elsewhere called Socratic doctrines (fragmentary statements of Socrates's seeming to attest to consistent positions e. g. it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it) as Socrates's knowledge. At this point Nozick also takes care to limit the scope of Socratic ignorance. Not knowing what F is is for Nozick compatible with knowing other things about F. Cf. n. 30.

⁴⁸ Nozick's modification concerns only this point; what Vlastos calls people's 'true beliefs' i. e. the beliefs that they will hold onto when confronted with a choice in the course of the elenchus, Nozick calls 'knowledge'. This modification suggests that both Socrates and his interlocutors have some tacit knowledge (cf. n. 38). Indeed, for Nozick, many of people's beliefs are likely to be true, because 'knowledge' has more stability (tenacity, stickiness) than false beliefs, which tend to be rejected after reflection or experience. Nozick's argument also admits the possibility of people's arriving at knowledge other than through the elenchus (cf. Nozick [n. 46] 151).

⁴⁹ The implication here would be that, in principle, the truth of the conclusion of an elenctic discussion does not entail the truth or reliability of elenctic premises. In other words, the elenchus does not comprise a method of logical induction. It is possible on a case-by-case basis for Socrates to rid himself of a commitment to his premises – this is a point on which I agree with Benson (n. 8) 47–52 and M. Nakahata, "Truth in Dialogues – A Note on the Socratic Elenchus (II)", *Methodos* 29 (1997) 11–20.

⁵⁰ Socrates later suggests that Callicles's goodwill was lacking over the course of their discussion (*Grg.* 499 c).

Socrates is presumably willing to posit those three qualities in everyone, at least at the latent level. If the elenchus is to work well, it rests on the assumption that interlocutors have some prior beliefs or knowledge in an implicit or explicit form, which will be adopted as a common ground of truth and tested over the course of time.⁵¹ Indeed, this must be a necessary, considering, with Vlastos, that the elenchus, in point of logic, can be said at most to indicate inconsistencies of beliefs.⁵² So some postulate of people's capacity for forming true concepts would appear a prerequisite of constructing the elenchus as a search for truth.⁵³ As long as what Socrates is searching for is not true belief but knowledge,⁵⁴ his dialogical procedure must be premised on the assumption that speakers (including himself) possess some ethical knowledge.

In the conversation with Callicles, Socrates allegorically represents a person's awareness of his own ignorance through the figure of a sea-pilot. The sea-pilot is a man of modesty and humility despite saving

⁵¹ In recent Stoic studies, Anthony Long upholds a version of Vlastos's assumption A as underlying not only Socratic but also Epictetan dialogical strategy (A. A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* [Oxford 2002] 82–83).

⁵² In my view, it is only when some truth is attributed to us in advance – whether in tacit or explicit form – that we can justifiably infer from the 'consistency' of our beliefs to their "truth". This postulation of latent truth goes some way to explaining why Socrates associates a person's consistency with the truth of their professions. He responds to Callicles's changes of position in argument by predicting that Callicles will be at discord with himself throughout his whole life (*Grg.* 482 b–c) – implicitly using consistency as a measure of truth and falsehood. It is important to note that Socrates characteristically examines the truth of propositions not in isolation or according to their purely formal aspect (as p, q, r, etc.), but insofar as they fit or not with the rest of a person's belief-set, as evidenced by the entirety of his person. Indeed, for Socrates, it would be hopelessly arbitrary to select one of his interlocutors' propositions as preferable to any other without pursuing further substantial indications as to propositions' truth-value. Socrates's bias in favour of personal and argumentative consistency partly solves the structural "problem of the elenchus" as set out by Vlastos: that is, why Socrates seems to believe that he has refuted a proposition (p) as false when logically he has done no more than demonstrate its incompatibility with other propositions (q, r, s, etc.).

⁵³ In this way, the refusal of Socrates's adversaries Meletus and Callicles to answer his questions suggests that to some degree they are persuaded of the truth of Socrates's arguments (*Grg.* 513 c 4–6, 517 c 7 – d 5, 518 a 5–7, *Ap.* 24 d 7, 27 c 10). This raises the question of why Socrates does not always carry his interlocutors (e. g. in the *Apology* acquit himself). Socrates himself explains this, especially pointing to their love of demos (*Grg.* 481 d 5, 513 c 7), their slander, grudge, anger, stubbornness (*Ap.* 31 a 3–5, 34 c 7 – d 1), the time restrictions imposed on him (*Grg.* 455 a 2–7, 513 c 8 – d 1, *Ap.* 19 a 2, 36 d 5–6, 37 a 8 – b 2, 38 c 1), etc.

⁵⁴ Cf. *Grg.* 472 c 6 – d 1, 505 e 4–5.

people's "bodies and property" as well as their "lives" from perils. He never assumes an air of importance by conceiving his work to be special. Socrates says of him (*Grg.* 511 e 6 – 512 a 2):

For I suppose he knows (ἐπίσταται) how to reason (λογίζεσθαι) that it's unclear (ἄδηλον) which passengers he has benefited by not letting them drown, and which ones he has harmed;⁵⁵ he knows (εἰδώς) he has put them ashore no better than they were when they boarded, either in body or in soul.

It is possible that such a fine description and appreciation of the sea-pilot is available only to one who grasps the nature and scope of knowledge as subtly as Socrates himself.⁵⁶ Socrates posits a limit to what the sea-pilot knows – and to that extent, his emphasis falls on the negative side of the sea-pilot's cognition.⁵⁷ At the same time he suggests, however, that the sea-pilot is both skilful and acute in grasping the moral consequences of his actions. Socrates depicts the sea-pilot as knowing "how to reason" and as having formed ideas of various subjects. This cognitive attainment represents a form of knowledge. By being aware of one's own ignorance, like the sea-pilot, a person positions himself as oriented towards truth – for example, towards the horizon of the signifi-

⁵⁵ Similarly, in the *Apology*, Socrates claims that he cannot know which of his discussants he has helped or strengthened, and which he has harmed, through engaging them in elenctic dialogue (cf. *Ap.* 30 b 4–6, 33 b 3–6).

⁵⁶ Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (n. 16) 47, 59 n. 47, and "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge" (n. 16) 10, 21 n. 48, also adduces a different passage about the sea-pilot (*Grg.* 512 b 1–2) to a consideration of the basis for Socrates's avowal of knowledge. The analogy of the sea-pilot itself does not support Socrates's knowledge-claim, but rather suggests a possible prototype for a form of knowledge. See R. Bambrough, "Plato's Political Analogies" (1971), reprint. in: G. Vlastos (ed.), *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays II* (Notre Dame 1978) 187–205, for the importance of the sea-pilot analogy to the *Republic*. It is also worth remembering that Socrates prides himself on his expertise on politics in its proper sense at 521 d in the *Gorgias*.

⁵⁷ Wolfsdorf and I differ considerably in our readings of Socrates's analogy between the philosopher and a sea-pilot. For Wolfsdorf, the sea-pilot stands as one of a series of figures, including Socrates's interlocutors Callicles, Euthyphro, Hippias, and so on, whose views are ultimately refuted and whose claims to knowledge shown to be illegitimate. In my reading, the sea-pilot is a figure of Socratic knowledge (especially in the sense that his knowledge is related to a consciousness of his own ignorance). In Plato's dialogues, philosophers are compared to sea-pilots in a positive sense: while both may be caricatured as star-gazing babblers, both train their faculties on abstract objects of contemplation (compare *R.* VI 488 d – 489 a with *Phdr.* 269 e – 270 a, especially with regard to ἀδολεσχία καὶ μετεωρολογία).

cance of the pilot's rescues as such ("which passengers he has benefited, and which he has harmed"). Socrates's, and the sea-pilot's, questions paradoxically arise out of their scrupulously envisaged, or delimited, understanding of a world of which they disclaim knowledge.

Socrates always envisions the fine and good in every dialogue, and it is this viewpoint that stimulates him to ask the question what *x* is. Socrates then searches for a complete and synoptic knowledge capable of answering that enquiry. The question is predicated on his having already obtained some degree of conviction, or possibly partial knowledge, such that he may require a complete and synoptic account of the conditions by which his cognition may be accounted knowledge in a full sense.⁵⁸ Socrates's whole manner of life is already supported by his broad vision before he initiates an elenchus with any interlocutor. In this sense, his life appears consistent with itself, and his words and behaviour stable. Socrates's careful delimitation of his knowledge in the midst of his wider ignorance is comparable to the modest claims of the good sea-pilot. It would be natural and reasonable to assume something parallel here: Socrates's broadly-conceived cognition is likewise so rich that he can avow knowledge clearly, at 29 b in the *Apology*, while at the same time remaining deeply conscious of his own ignorance in the moral sphere.*

Terumasa Ohkusa
Kyoto University

В течение нескольких последних десятилетий исследователи платоновской эпистемологии ведут дискуссии о том, в каком смысле Сократ признает и в каком не признает за собой обладание знанием. В статье,

⁵⁸ On the relation between "what is *x*?" question and its synoptic character, see esp. *Euthphr.* 6 d 9 – e 7, *R. I.*, 354 b 9 – c 1, *Men.* 71 b 3–4. Socrates considers that the answer to "what is *x*?" should cover all its instances without exception, coextensively.

* This paper is a revised version of "Socrates' Avowal of Knowledge", published in *Methodos* 32 (2000) 21–32 and written in Japanese. I wish to make grateful acknowledgement of a generous grant from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science which enabled a prolonged stay in Cambridge during which I prepared the paper. I am very much indebted to David Sedley, Geoffrey Lloyd and Robert Wardy for their constructive comments and suggestions on an earlier draft. I also owe special thanks to the thorough review by Alexander Verlinsky, which prompted revision of this paper.

наряду с критикой прежних интерпретаций (Г. Властоса, Т. Ирвина, Г. Бенсона и др.), предлагается решение этой проблемы, основывающееся в первую очередь на интерпретации пассажа из платоновской *Апологии Сократа* (29 b), а также на анализе сократовского метода исследования (ἔλεγχος). Автор доказывает, что следует принимать всерьез как утверждения Сократа в “Апологии”, что он обладает знанием, так и отрицания этого, кажущееся же противоречие между ними решается в том смысле, что подобные утверждения зависят всякий раз от контекста и от содержания знания, которое Сократ имеет в виду. Уточнения, относящиеся к эленктическому методу, позволяют далее определить, в каком смысле Сократ признает, а в каком не признает за собой обладание знанием. В заключение выдвигается предположение, что фигура кормчего в “Горгии” (511 e – 512 a), обладающего знанием, которое строго ограничено определенной сферой, но в ней безусловно надежно, служит аналогией, проясняющей тонко дифференцированную позицию платоновского Сократа в эпистемологических вопросах.