

Articles

Is the 'Socratic Fallacy' Socratic?¹

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In an earlier paper (Vlastos 1985), I argued for a hypothesis which, if true, would solve one of the standing puzzles in the history of Western philosophy: how a man who was anything but a sceptic—an earnest moralist, eager to propagate new, powerful moral doctrines of his own—betrayed no awareness of inconsistency in claiming that he had the strongest of reasons for those doctrines² and yet said he did not know if those doctrines were true. There is no inconsistency on the hypothesis that he is making a systematically dual use of his words for 'knowing', disavowing what philosophers had generally understood by 'knowledge' at the time, namely, what I have called 'knowledge_C', whose hallmark is infallible certainty, while avowing the highly fallible knowledge I have called 'knowledge_E', where Socrates' claim to know *p* is simply the claim that *p* is elenctically viable, i.e., that if he were to pit it against its contradictory in elenctic argument it would prevail.

To say that this has been a standing puzzle of philosophical historiography may seem surprising, for it has not been treated as such in the copious literature on the subject. The reason for this, I believe, is simple: the relevant textual evidence has not been confronted. The evidence for one horn of the dilemma—for Socrates' disavowal of knowledge—is spread out so abundantly on the surface of Plato's text that no one reading it even in a poor translation could miss it. But the evidence for the other horn surfaces explicitly only in that single text in the *Apology* (29b) whose singularity has damned it, as of course it would and should, were it not for that array of other texts³ where Socrates does claim unambiguously, though only by implication, that he does have moral knowledge of the right way to live—knowledge, not just true belief. Once those further texts are noticed and given their full weight the paradox of Socrates' epistemic stance—declaring that he has no moral knowledge but nonetheless maintaining that he does—cries aloud for resolution. The hypothesis I have offered does just that. It does so consistently with all the evidence. If true, it dissolves the puzzle. Nonetheless the solution is a chancy one, for in the nature of the case it is not susceptible of direct confirmation. Its credentials are its explanatory value. In the present essay I shall pursue the argument for it one step further by extending its explanatory scope. I shall

argue that if the hypothesis were true it would clear Socrates of a notorious fallacy⁴ which has been charged against him so confidently that it has come to be regarded as his personal property, made to carry his very name, as it does in the present essay's caption.

Let me begin with its appearance in the *Lysis*—its first in Plato's corpus, as I shall be arguing. At the dialogue's very end, when the search for 'What is the *philon* (dear)?' has dead-ended, Socrates remarks in the dialogue's last words:

T1 We have made ourselves ridiculous—both you and also I, an old man. For as these people go away from here they will be saying that we are each others' friends (*philoî*) . . . , yet what a friend (*philos*) is we have not proved able to discover. (*Lysis* 223b)

The relation of the boys to each other and of Socrates to each is so straightforward a case of what is commonly understood by *philos* that what Socrates has just said is tantamount to claiming that if we do not know what a 'friend' is, in the sense of possessing an elenctically viable definition of that term, we are not entitled to believe that anyone is anyone's friend.⁵ No extended argument should be needed to convince us that this view is false. Suppose we do not have, and never expect to have, a definition of 'friend' or, say, of 'beauty' or 'humor' that meets Socrates' exacting standards or even looser ones. Would we see in this a serious objection to claiming to know that someone whose affection and trust we have enjoyed over the years is our friend; that Elizabeth Taylor in her prime was a beauty, while Eleanor Roosevelt was not; that there is humor in abundance in *Huckleberry Finn* and the *Pickwick Papers*, while there is all too little of it in the works of Theodore Dreiser and other lugubrious novelists? It is, therefore, understandable that this notion should have been branded a 'fallacy' by Peter Geach in a famous paper.⁶ For economy of reference I shall call it simply 'proposition G' in Geach's honor, rephrasing it as follows:

G If you do not know what *F*⁷ is, you will not know if you are predicating '*F*' correctly about *anything* whatever—you will not know if *anything* is *F*.

I have underscored 'anything' because there lies the sting: the unqualified universality of the claim.⁸ If all it were saying is that in the absence of a definition of the *F* there would be *some* reputed cases of it where we would be uncertain whether or not '*F*' is being correctly applied, the claim, though still a substantial one, would by no means be the outrageous one it presently is: it would not imply that, pending discovery of a Socratic definition, *all* cases of the application of the concept, even perfectly straightforward, unproblematic ones, have been unsettled.

Now is it really true that Plato wants his readers to think that the philosopher whose thought he recreates in his earliest dialogues had believed this extraordinary proposition? Geach took it for granted that it is. The assump-

tion was challenged strongly by Gerasimos Santas (1972) and Myles Burnyeat (1979, but cf. n13 below). Absorbing what can be learned from their critiques of Geach, I now want to make a fresh start, reopening the problem from the bottom up. The bottom is the text I have just cited from the *Lysis* taken in conjunction with the next two I shall be citing directly, both of them from the *Hippias Major*, where the role of proposition **G** is much larger. Here, to come in view of it, we do not need, as in the *Lysis*, to await the dialogue's closing words. Here it serves to introduce, not just conclude, the fruitless search for the *F*:

T2 The other day, as I was faulting certain things in some speeches, praising some as fine (*kala*),⁹ censuring others as foul (*aischra*), someone threw me into a tizzy by questioning me most insolently, like this: 'Say, Socrates, how do you know which sort of things are fine or foul? For, come now, are you able to say what is the fine?' (*Hippias Major* 286c-d)

What Socrates' bullying critic is telling him is that if he has no answer to the question, 'What is the fine?' he has no business judging that *anything* is fine. After repeated efforts, harebrained ones by Hippias, plausible but ineffectual ones by himself, Socrates finally gives up, cringing at the thought of returning empty-handed to face his merciless super-ego:

T3 He will ask me if I am not ashamed to dare discuss fine practices when elenctic refutation makes it evident that I don't even know what on earth the fine itself is. 'So [**a**] how will you know', he will ask me, 'if anyone has produced a fine speech or any other fine performance whatever, when you do not know the fine? and [**b**] when this is your condition, do you think you are better off alive than dead?' (*Hip. Ma.* 304d-e)

At this last moment the comedy turns tragic. Socrates sees the failure of the definitional search as his personal disaster: if he has no viable answer to the question 'What is the fine?'—and the long preceding discussion has shown that he does not—his life has lost its value, he might as well be dead (see n11 below).

The first thing to notice here is something which passes completely unnoticed in published discussions of the 'fallacy' prior to 1985¹⁰: all three of the texts I have cited come from post-elenctic dialogues, the *Lysis* and *Hippias Major*, and have no clear precedent in any of the earlier dialogues.¹¹ In particular, there is no precedent for the alarmist view which proposition **G** leads Socrates to take of the failure of a search for the *F*. There is nothing remotely like this in preceding dialogues. There failure of a search for the *F* causes disappointment, not despair: Socrates gives no indication of regarding it as anything more than a temporary setback in an ongoing inquiry. In the *Euthyphro* (15e) he would have continued the search on the spot, were it not

that the interlocutor, hurrying off, had dashed his hope to ‘learn from him’ the nature of holiness. In the *Laches* Socrates makes an appointment to return bright and early the next day to resume the search (201b-c). In the *Charmides* he blames, as usual, himself (175b5-6) for the failure of the search, but with no indication that he could do no better if he tried again. He finishes on an upbeat note, salvaging a large positive result, namely, that whatever temperance itself may turn out to be, it has already been shown to be a sufficient condition of happiness: Charmides is assured, ‘the more wise and temperate you are, the happier you will be’ (176a).

The contrast with the state of mind depicted in T3 could hardly be stronger. There Socrates sees catastrophe.¹² He says that if this is to be his condition—that of not knowing what is the fine and, therefore, not knowing if any particular action whatsoever is fine—he might as well be dead: his life is worthless. We know what would make life worthless for Socrates: forfeiture of virtue (see *Crito* 47d-48a; *Gorgias* 521b1-2). Thus Socrates is implying that since he cannot know if any particular action is fine so long as he has no definition of the ‘fine’, he will be unable to tell if any action whatever, be it the noblest deed or the foulest crime, is fine or foul: all his practical moral judgments will be at sea; so he will be unable to make correct moral choices in his daily life and thus to act virtuously. He is morally bankrupt. Could Plato be telling us that this really happened to the Socrates of the elenctic dialogues—that this irrepressible gadfly, this mocking, taunting, aggressive, intrusive soul-saver, had believed a proposition that had crushed him? Surely that is the last thing Plato could be saying to us in those dialogues. There must be some way of blocking this impossible result.

The following, proposed and argued for by Irwin (1977, 40-41), has also been accepted (independently) without argument by Burnyeat,¹³ Santas,¹⁴ and is also accepted by Woodruff¹⁵: Although Socrates cannot *know* if anything is *F* so long as he does not know what the *F* is, he may still have *true beliefs* about it and may use these to guide his life; true beliefs *sans* knowledge will suffice. Let me call this the ‘sufficiency of true belief’ interpretation of the Socratic view (*‘STB’* for short). Will this solve the problem? It might *if* it squared with the textual evidence, as its sponsors have believed.¹⁶ Well, does it? Let us recall some passages I cited in Vlastos 1985:

T4 (= T9 in Vlastos 1985) I think we should be contentiously eager *to know* what is true and what is false about the things we discuss. (*Gorg.* 505e4-5)

T5 (= T10) For what we are debating are . . . things which *to know* is noblest, *not to know* most base. For their sum and substance is *to know and not to know* who is happy and who is not. (*Gorg.* 472c-d)

What do the sponsors of *STB* propose to do with these texts? They do not say, apparently unaware that Socrates makes it clear in T4 that what he is after is knowledge, not just true belief; and in T5, that if he did not have knowl-

edge, his condition would be 'most base': no indication that his plight would be alleviated by true belief. Moreover he makes it clear that he has already reached the thing he is searching for—knowledge, not just true belief. Let me quote again a crucial text from Vlastos 1985:

T6 (= T12) *I know* well that if you agree with me on those things which my soul believes, those things will be the very truth.

On this text too there is no comment from the sponsors of *STB*. They seem content to ignore evidence that tells flatly against their claim that Socrates avows no more than true belief.

The clincher is **T3** above. What Socrates' critic requires of him in part [a] is all too clearly moral *knowledge*: 'How will you *know* . . . when you don't *know* the fine?' Part [b] proceeds to spell out the dreadful consequence. On the *STB* interpretation, not knowing if any particular action is *F* would be innocuous, since one could still possess an ample stock of true beliefs. But in part [b] of **T3** Socrates' critic tells him that *not knowing* if any particular action is *F* would spell moral disaster: no room is left here for getting by with true beliefs.

Clearly then *STB* will not do. It is inconsistent with texts which its sponsors accept as genuinely representative of the views of Socrates as expounded in Plato's earlier dialogues. We must look elsewhere for a solution. The hypothesis of the dual use of *to know* opens the way to it. Alerting us to those two possible uses of this verb, it prompts us to ask what Socrates would have made of proposition **G** in the elenctic dialogues if he had disambiguated 'to know' in one or the other of those alternative ways. Suppose he had done so in the first way, understanding **G** to mean

G_C If you do not know_C what the *F* is, you will not know_C if anything is *F*.

If so, **G** would have struck him as *vacuous*: having renounced knowledge_C in the elenctic dialogues lock, stock, and barrel, he has no interest in knowing_C if anything is *F*. If, however, it were disambiguated in the alternative way, taken to mean,

G_E If you do not know_E what the *F* is, you will not know_E if anything is *F*,

he would have seen it as *false*. If this is not clear right off, let me take time to make it clear.

If **G_E** were true, it would have a most embarrassing consequence: It would mean that if you do not already have a true elenctic definition of *F* it would be hopeless to try to reach it by one of Socrates' favorite methods of searching for definitions, namely, by investigating examples. For if **G_E** is true, then so long as you do not know what the *F* is, you will not know if any proposed examples are genuine; if they were bogus, they would be epistemically worthless: no inferences from them would have cognitive value. But when we scrutinize Socrates at work, we see him doing systematically what he would not

be doing at all if he believed G_E : working towards the definition of the F from examples of it.¹⁷ So, for example, in the *Laches*. Asked to say what courage is, Laches responds with an example:

T7 By Zeus, Socrates, there is no difficulty in saying [what it is]. For if one is willing to stay in line to fight the enemy and does not run away, you know well that he is brave.
(*Laches* 190e)

Laches is making a logical error. Asked for a definition, he gives an example as though the example were a definition. Socrates takes pains to correct him. But in so doing he does not reject the example *qua* example. He agrees with it:

T8 The man you speak of, who stays in the line and fights the enemy, he is brave, I suppose.—Laches: That is what I would say.—Socrates: I too. (191a)

To the example given him by Laches Socrates then proceeds to add a flock of his own:

T9 For I wanted to ask you not only about those who are brave in the heavy infantry, but also about those in the cavalry and in every military formation; and also about those who are brave not only in perils of war but also in perils at sea, and those too who are brave in illness and in poverty and in politics; and, further, about those who are brave not only in pains and fears but are also tough in fighting desire or pleasure, firm in their ranks or turning against the enemy. There are people who are brave in these things too, Laches. (191c-e)

Flashing these motley cases before Laches, Socrates asks him to identify what it is to be brave by picking out their common feature. Could there be a more systematic violation of G_E ? Nor is this all. To give Laches a model of the procedure that should be followed Socrates shows him how a definition of 'quickness' might be reached. He puts up a slew of examples—quick running, quick strumming, quick talking, quick learning—hits on a neat little formula that captures what all these have in common ('doing much in little time'), holds up the formula as a paradigm and asks Laches to do the same in the case of courage.

But are those examples genuine? Does Socrates know_E that the ones he listed are bona fide cases of courage? He puts them forward in elenctic argument as his personal beliefs, confident that he can defend them *more elenctico*: and they pass unchallenged. This suffices for presumptive knowledge_E that they were unimpeachable, as they trivially are in plain common sense.

So once we apply the know_C/know_E ambiguity, proposition G turns out to be a paper tiger. If Socrates read it as G_C he would have thumbed his nose at it, for it would then be irrelevant to his search for moral knowledge: it may be true for all he knows or cares, but its truth would have no bearing on his

quest, since knowledge_C is none of his concern. If he had read it as **G_E**, on the other hand, he would reckon it patently false, posing no threat to his search for knowledge_E of the *F* by means of examples.

How is it then that **G** ever came to be pinned on him in the scholarly literature? The answer is that texts which prompted the imputation had been misread. Here is the most important of them, probably the very one which suggested **G** to Geach in his reading of the *Euthyphro*:¹⁸

T10 Explain this character (*idean*) to me—what on earth is it—so that by looking to it and using it as a standard (*paradeigma*) I shall say of whatever you or anyone else may do of that sort that it is holy, and if it is not of that sort I shall say that it is not. (6e3-6)

Is Socrates really implying here that he accepts proposition **G**? So Geach and others have thought—but only because they read the text with deplorable looseness.¹⁹ What **G** stipulates is that knowing what the *F* is constitutes a *necessary* condition of knowing if anything is *F*. What **T10** stipulates is that knowing what the *F* is constitutes a *sufficient* condition of knowing if anything is *F*. Stated formally, for comparison with **G**, the import of **T10** is

G* If you do know what the *F* is, you will know if you are predicating '*F*' correctly about anything whatever—you will know if anything is *F*.

Only if we were to confuse a sufficient with a necessary condition would we take Socrates' acceptance of **G*** as evidence of his acceptance of **G** in an elenctic dialogue.

If we did not make this mistake it would not occur to us to impute to the Socrates of this and other elenctic dialogues the catastrophic consequences of **G**. There is nothing in **G*** that Socrates would have found the least bit disturbing. In **G*** he voices the belief that if he were to find the thing he is looking for he would come into possession of a wonderful thing: a criterion for settling all those vexing disputes over controversial cases, like the one that sets the stage for Socrates' encounter with Euthyphro: A hired man on the paternal estate in Naxos kills, in a drunken fit, one of the slaves. The father ties up the killer hand and foot, lowers him into a ditch, and sends a messenger to the exegetes, asking for advice on what he ought to do; by the time the word comes back the hired man has died from hypothermia, dehydration, and lack of food. The father is clearly responsible for the man's death. Is Euthyphro acting piously in prosecuting his own father for killing a hired man who is himself a killer?²⁰ Euthyphro says that he 'knows [this] exactly (*ἀκριβῶς*)' (5a1-2; cf. n22 below). But it is indignantly rejected by the father and all his kin: the family consider it downright impious of Euthyphro to initiate prosecution which, if successful, would have terrible consequences—exile or death—for his own father.²¹ What Socrates is saying in **G*** is that if one did have the definition of 'piety', one would be able to resolve this nasty dispute: one would know clearly²² if Euthyphro's prosecution of his father is or is not pious.

This is as far as Socrates ever moves in the direction of **G** in an elenctic dialogue. Let us reflect on how far this still leaves him from it. Acceptance of **G** would have been paralyzing for a search like the one in the *Laches*: if he had conceded **G** he would have lost his start in that search, for according to **G** there is *no* case he could count as *bona fide* courage without prior knowledge of its definition. His search would have been doomed to failure before it started. Not so if all he accepted were **G***: nothing in this to tell him that if he does not already have the answer to ‘What is the *F*?’ he cannot count on any of those ordinary, utterly uncontroversial cases, as examples of the *F* from which he could reason to new ones by analogy. Only if he had believed in the truth of **G**, as he does in the *Lysis* and the *Hippias Major*, would he have found himself in that predicament.

At this juncture I must point out that a parallel difference between elenctic and post-elenctic dialogues obtains in the case of what Richard Robinson had termed ‘the priority of definition’. This is the logical twin of **G**, which I shall call ‘proposition **R**’²³ in his honor.²⁴

R If you do not know what the *F* is, you will not know if you are predicating correctly anything about the ‘*F*’—you will not know anything about the *F*.

As Robinson noted, this proposition plays a great role in the *Meno*. The dialogue begins with it. Asked if virtue is teachable, Socrates replies (I omit the preliminary palaver):

T11 I am so far from knowing whether or not it is teachable, that I do not even know in the least what virtue itself is. . . . Of that which I do not know what it is (τί ἐστιν), how could I know of what sort it is (ὁποῖόν τι [ἐστιν])? (71a)

Going through the motions of pursuing the original question in the first third of the dialogue, Socrates does not waive his initial objection. He reinstates it when the search gets stuck at 80a-b and Meno brings up the ‘eristic paradox’ to crow over the mishap (80d5-8). Socrates does not reject the paradox. He uses it (80e1-5) *in propria persona* to show the disastrous consequence of **R**. Let me fill out his reasoning:

If you don’t have prior knowledge of what virtue is, you will not know anything about virtue.

If you don’t know anything about it, you will not know what you are looking for in searching for it.

If you don’t know what you are looking for, it is futile to search for it.

Ergo, if you don’t have prior knowledge of what virtue is, it is futile to search for it.

Socrates does not try to break through this impasse. He breaks away from it by the wildest flight on which Plato’s metaphysical imagination ever took off, the theory of ‘recollection’: he has learned from priests and priestesses that the soul has a prenatal history reaching far into the primordial past where

it once had learned *everything*²⁵ and henceforth carries this marvellous cargo of omniscience deep in its unconscious, whence pieces of it can be dredged up to yield what Plato has come to regard as real knowledge—not knowledge_E, but knowledge_C. To explore the import of this new doctrine would take us into the darkest strata of Plato's thought. All that is profound and obscure in his epistemology and metaphysics is rooted there. Since I must stay close to the topic of the present essay, all I need remark about his new doctrine is that it is as far as anything we could associate with the Socrates of the elenctic dialogues. This, if anything, is what Socrates would have called 'more than human knowledge' in the elenctic dialogues (*Apol.* 23a-b4, quoted as T32 in Vlastos 1985). If it had crossed his mind at all he would have left it for the gods and for those of his fellow-mortals whose folly, venal or sublime, beguiles them into violating the pious precept that 'mortals must think mortal'.²⁶ When Plato puts this new doctrine into the mouth of Socrates we know that the protagonist of the elenctic dialogues has achieved euthanasia in a genius greater than his own—Plato's.

When Socrates is made to embrace this new doctrine in the *Meno*, he is not allowed to forget proposition **R**. He recalls it twice. He does so first when he resumes, with the aid of the method of 'hypothesis', borrowed from the mathematicians,²⁷ the inquiry into whether virtue is or is not teachable. Just before reopening the search on these new terms Socrates warns Meno

T12 If I had you, no less than myself, under control, we would not investigate whether or not virtue is teachable, before inquiring first what it is. (86d-e)

Then, at the dialogue's very end, Socrates reiterates the objection to searching for the answer to some question about the *F* without prior knowledge of what the *F* itself is. The dialogue closes on that note:

T13 Clear knowledge of [this]²⁸ we shall reach [only] when we shall undertake to inquire what virtue is itself by itself, before [inquiring] how it comes to be present in men. (100b)

So in this post-elenctic dialogue, later than the *Lysis* and the *Hippias Major*,²⁹ commitment to proposition **R** is as clear as is the commitment to proposition **G** in these. But if it had occurred to Socrates earlier on in the elenctic dialogues, it would have had no terrors for him. He would only have needed to apply to it the same disambiguation that disarms **G**. If 'know' in **R** is read as 'know_C', the proposition becomes

R_C If you don't know_C what the *F* is, you will not know_C anything about the *F*.

In the elenctic dialogues **R_C**, would not have caused Socrates to turn a hair: at that time, having no interest in knowing_C anything at all, he has no interest in knowing_C anything about the *F*. Alternatively, if he had read its 'know' as 'know_E', it would turn into **R_E**,

R_E If you don't know_E what the *F* is, you will not know_E anything about the *F*,

and this would have struck him as patently false. Thus the Socrates of the *Gorgias* has plenty of knowledge_E about justice—for example, he knows_E³⁰ that those who stick by it regardless of cost to any and all of their other interests, are always happier than those who do not. Yet he had not assayed any definition of 'justice' and there is no indication that, if he had tried, he would have been able to produce an elenctically viable answer to the 'What is *F*?' question for *F* = 'justice'. And so it would be throughout the elenctic dialogues. Socrates' knowledge_E about the *F* whose definition he does not manage to discover is what guides him through his searches for it and enables him to make very substantial progress in insight into the *F* in spite of failing to reach the answer to 'What is the *F*?' which is the formal end of those inquiries. Thus in the *Euthyphro* Socrates establishes by elenctic argument, hence knows_E, that the nature of holiness does not depend on whether or not the gods happen to like it, but that their liking it is determined by its own nature. This proposition, which may be hailed as the foundation of a rational religion, is established securely at *Euthyphro* 11a, and stands untouched by the *aporia* which besets Socrates later on, when the dialogue winds up without having discovered the answer to the question 'What is holiness?' The same would be true in the case of the *F* searched for in the *Laches*, the *Charmides*, and *Republic* I.³¹ In none of the elenctic dialogues does the unavailability of knowledge_E of the definition of the *F* keep Socrates from knowing_E a great deal about it and using that partial knowledge_E to search for the knowledge of the nature of the *F* which still eludes him.

What reason then could there be for imputing to him acceptance of **R** in those dialogues? None. It was only because of the unwarranted assumption that what Socrates believes in a transitional dialogue like the *Meno* he must also have believed in the elenctic dialogues which precede it that he was saddled with the acceptance of **R** in these. When Robinson cited **R**, documenting it, correctly enough, extensively from the *Meno*,³² he adds a reference to the *Protagoras*,³³ without the least suspicion that what is all too true in a late transitional dialogue might not hold true at all in an earlier one, like the *Protagoras*. Here is the text to which he refers:

T14 I ask all those questions only because I want to investigate how matters stand with regard to virtue (πῶς ποτ' ἔχει τὰ περὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς and what on earth virtue itself is (τί ποτ' ἔστιν αὐτό, ἡ ἀρετή). For I know that when this has been brought to light the thing on which you and I have, each of us, spun out such long arguments, will become perfectly clear (κατάδηλον)—I maintaining that virtue is not teachable, you maintaining that it is. (*Prot.* 360e6-361a3)

Is Socrates evidencing here acceptance of proposition **R**? So it looks superficially. But let us look again. What he is saying in **T14** is that if he did find

the thing he is looking for—the answer to ‘what virtue itself is’—then the answer to the question he and Protagoras have been debating, ‘Is virtue teachable?’, would ‘become perfectly clear’, i.e., that knowledge of what virtue is would be a *sufficient* condition for knowing this particular thing about it. This is altogether different from claiming that knowing what the *F* is is a *necessary* condition for knowing *anything whatever* about it. Once alerted to that difference we can see that in taking **T14** as evidence of **R** Robinson made the same mistake that Geach must have made in taking **T10** above as evidence of **G**. Once the mistake is corrected we can see that the true import of **T14** when it is correctly read is not **R**, but

R* If you do know what the *F* is, you will know whether or not you are predicating correctly anything about the *F*—
you will know whether or not the *F* is anything—

for example, in the case of *F* = ‘virtue’, you will know whether or not virtue is teachable. So too in what he proceeds to state when he reiterates, a few lines later, the point made in **T14**:

T15 Seeing these things in utter confusion I have the greatest desire to clear them up and would wish that having got through them we should come to the question of what virtue is. Then we could return to figure out if virtue is or is not teachable. (*Prot.* 361c2-6)

When the answer to the question ‘What is virtue?’ has been reached—and no doubt of the possibility of reaching it is voiced either here or previously in **T14**—then we would have the ground on which we could answer the question, ‘Is it teachable?’

If Robinson had distinguished **R** from **R*** he would have realized that proposition **R** has entered the Platonic corpus no earlier than the *Meno* and that what we find in lieu of it in the earliest dialogues is a proposition easily mistakeable for it that has radically different import for Socrates’ elenctic searches. The import of **R** for these would have been paralyzingly defeatist: **R** would have told him that it is folly to embark on searches for knowledge about the *F* if he does not already have an answer to ‘What is the *F*?’ **R***, on the other hand, instead of discouraging Socrates from embarking on those searches, would offer him a powerful lure for pursuing them, holding out the promise of a wonderful illumination if they were to succeed, *without saying anything whatever to imply that they could not succeed*. **R*** tells him that the things he wants to know about courage, temperance, justice, piety, virtue would become clear to him if he could but reach that longed-for result. And since there is nothing but his own sloth to keep him from trying, try he would, as we see him doing in the elenctic dialogues regardless of setbacks, for nothing is said or implied in **R*** to dampen his hopes of reaching that objective if he keeps trying again and again.

But why should it be, it may be asked, that **R** (and, for that matter, **G** too) should have remained sleepers in Plato’s elenctic dialogues, waking up to

plague Socrates only in the transitionals? Why did the alarm clock go off then, and not before? Readers of my essay, 'Elenchus and Mathematics' (1988, 362ff.), would know my answer to the question. The grand hypothesis I defend there collects the evidence that it is only in transitional dialogues that knowledge of advanced mathematics becomes a vital force in Plato's thought, and it is *there* that **G** and **R** show up, as they never did before. So long as your inquiries concern exclusively moral questions, as they do for Socrates throughout the elenctic dialogues, it makes perfect sense to say that you do know examples of the *F* without having come to know what the *F* is (i.e., that **G** is false) and that you similarly know many propositions about the *F* while still lacking a definition of the *F* (i.e., that **R** is false). For moral terms hail from common speech, where their meaning is established long before you could undertake to encapsulate it in a Socratic definition. Not so if the terms you are investigating are going to range over geometrical entities—squares, circles, lines, points, and the like. The method now established so firmly in geometry that only cranks feel free to deviate from it requires you to put into your axiom-set, *in advance of the proof of any theorem*, definitions of every *F* whose properties are determinable by geometrical reasoning. In geometry, whose domain is that of knowledge_C, not knowledge_E, propositions **G** and **R** *must* be read as **G**_C and **R**_C, and then they will be true, non-vacuously so.

Just think of the truth discovered in the interrogation of the slave-boy in the *Meno*. If what you are after is geometrical proof, the crucial lemma at 84e4-85a1, that the diagonal bisects its square³⁴ (whose intuitive grasp suffices for heuristic purposes in leading the boy to the discovery of the theorem), would be useless *unless* your terms had been correctly defined, beginning with 'square', where you might think a definition is superfluous, since, after all, 'square' is a term in common speech: everyone uses it all the time, so no one needs a definition to know what it means. But look at what happens in the interrogation of the boy. There (82b9-c3) 'square' is identified by pointing to the figure 'like this', 'with four equal sides', i.e., as an equilateral [rectilinear quadrilateral]. But, as everyone would know who had even the rudiments of geometry, to fix only in this way the meaning of 'square' would be to court disaster. For this would not distinguish the figure from a rhombus, which is also an equilateral [rectilinear quadrilateral], but has other properties radically different from a square's. So if you had not made sure that what you are talking about is uniquely and exclusively a square, everything could go wrong after that: if the bisected figure had been a rhombus the lemma would still be true, but the theorem would not follow from the lemma; the square on the diagonal of the rhombus does *not* duplicate its area. So in geometry what Geach had stigmatized as a 'fallacy' would be no fallacy, but the plain truth: to know that you are predicating 'square' of anything in a demonstration you would have to know the definition of that term. So **G** would be true. And so would **R**: knowing the definition of 'square' would be a necessary condition of knowing that the square on a square's diagonal duplicates its area.

On the hypothesis I defended in 1988 and now again in the present paper, it was Plato, under the spell of his own deepening mathematical interests, who realized how crucial was definition for success in the search for knowledge_C, and therefore moved R_C into the center of his representation of the Socratic profession of ignorance when he came to write the *Meno*. Thus had it not been for Plato's mathematical studies which had become so absorbing as to dominate the exposition of the two great novelties of the *Meno*—the doctrine of 'recollection' and 'investigating by hypothesis'—we would have heard nothing of the 'Socratic fallacy'. We hear nothing of it even as late as the *Gorgias*, where Socrates' disclaimer of knowledge_C is still as forceful as ever yet so vague in content as to express no more than the conviction that the elenctic method was powerless to yield the iron-clad certainty traditionally expected of all knowledge worthy of the name. Ascription to him of the 'Socratic fallacy' is a retrojection of a feature of transitional dialogues, the *Lysis*, *Hippias Major*, and *Meno*, upon dialogues which precede them—an accident of Geach's and Robinson's failure to perceive the radical difference in outlook between the period in which Plato was advancing in mathematical studies, and that of his earlier period, when he was still a faithful Socratic, and his 'Socrates' was the moralist, pure and simple, who knew nothing and cared nothing about current developments in mathematical science,³⁵ all of his energies absorbed in investigating exclusively moral topics and practicing faithfully the elenctic method. From the 'fallacy', of which Socrates has been convicted by a loose reading of Platonic texts,³⁶ more exact reading of those same texts acquits him.

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NOTES

¹ This is, in substance, a lecture with the same title delivered at St. Andrews under the Gifford Trust in 1981 and at Berkeley as a Howison Lecture in 1984. I have made a number of changes in response to searching questions by the editor, whose help I acknowledge with thanks. It is a pleasure to refer to the paper by John Beversluis (1987). Finding myself in close agreement with its views, I shall forgo cross-references to it.

² 'Arguments of iron and adamant', *Gorgias* 508e.

³ T13-T17 in Vlastos 1985, 6-11.

⁴ Stretching 'fallacy' to cover the 'style of mistaken thinking' which Geach attributed to Socrates in 1966: cf. the next note.

⁵ This is how I understand the import of this text: For $F = \textit{philos}$, coming to know the answer to 'What is the F ?' is a necessary condition of being in a position to assert that the relation of X to Y is an instance of F ; making this assertion without having fulfilled that condition makes one 'ridiculous'.

⁶ 1966 (reprinted 1972). Though, as I shall be arguing, its main thesis is decidedly wrong, it has had a bracing effect on Socratic studies, having proved powerfully and fruitfully provocative. Much earlier Richard Robinson (1953, 51) had charged Socrates with a parallel error (the 'priority of definition': to be discussed as 'proposition R ' below) but so indecisively that the charge elicited little response in the scholarly literature.

⁷ The range of this variable is implicitly restricted to the moral predicates which are foci of Socratic investigation in Plato's earlier dialogues. Cf. note 9 below.

⁸ This should immediately disqualify as evidence of Socrates' acceptance of **G** certain texts in Plato's elenctic dialogues which have been mistakenly cited as evidence of it, in particular *Charmides* 176a-b (that it is nothing of the kind is clearly explained by Santas 1972, 138) and *Laches* 190c6 (cited as such by Irwin 1977, 40, without comment and with no explanation of why we should take what Socrates says here—if we know virtue we should be able to tell what virtue is—as evidence that he accepts **G**).

⁹ Following Woodruff (1982) and others, I settle reluctantly on 'fine' to English *καλόν* (admittedly lame, but the best we can do), asking the reader to bear constantly in mind that, quite unlike 'fine', *καλόν* is the fundamental moral (as well as aesthetic) predicate in Greek discourse; the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of 'foul' for *αἰσχροπν*.

¹⁰ The date of Vlastos 1985, where I give an abbreviated account of the dissolution of the 'fallacy' on the terms I shall be expounding here.

¹¹ I count as elenctic dialogues all and only those in which the elenchus, as defined in my paper Vlastos 1983, 30ff., is Socrates' method of philosophical investigation. (Though the views I express there are in need of revision at certain points, I stand by its description of the elenchus). By that criterion the elenctic dialogues consist of *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic* 327a-354a11. The quartet composed of *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*, *Hippias Major*, and *Meno* is transitional to Plato's middle period, hence post-elenctic. No attention has been paid in the scholarly literature to the fact that **T1**, **T2**, and **T3** all come from this latter group and cannot be presumed, in the absence of critical argument *ad hoc*, to voice views identical with those expressed in the former group, as is done, e.g., by Santas (1972, 134ff.), Irwin (1977, 40), Burnyeat (1977, 384 *et passim*), and Woodruff (1982, 138-139).

¹² The gravity of the denouement at **T3[b]** has never been properly appreciated in the scholarly literature.

¹³ 1977, 384ff. But the powerful polemical thrust of Burnyeat's paper has an altogether different target, demonstrating convincingly that Socrates does not treat examples as 'little hard rocks of certainty' à-la-G.E. Moore (like 'here is a hand' in Moore's famous refutation of idealism). Burnyeat (384) shows that the test of the acceptability of Socratic examples is not brute common-sense, but their ability to survive in a process of inquiry which is 'typically the examination of the internal coherence of the views of Socrates' interlocutors'.

¹⁴ 1979, 119ff. and 311n26. (Here it appears as a belated after-thought to his previously expressed views on the 'fallacy': no trace of it in his original response to Geach in 1972).

¹⁵ 1982, 140, who, however, seems to qualify his adherence to the view, substituting 'tested opinion' for 'belief'.

¹⁶ Without ever confronting the strict implications of (*inter alia*) **T3[b]**: there is no discussion of these by any of the sponsors of *STB*.

¹⁷ Santas in 1972 was the first to point this out, thereby taking the decisive step in the refutation of Geach's claim that Socrates thought **G** true.

¹⁸ I say 'probably' because Geach does not refer to **T10** as such. There are precious few references to texts in his paper, leaving us to guess what it was that led him to charge Socrates so confidently with the 'Socratic fallacy'.

¹⁹ As Santas was the first to point out (1972, 136).

²⁰ Under Athenian law there is no prosecution of homicide except by members of the victim's kin.

²¹ Contemporary sentiment reckons injuries to parents as cases of impiety no less than offences to the gods. In Andocides (*Myst.* 19) it is taken for granted that it would be *ἀνοσιώτατον* to give damaging information about one's own father.

²² As Euthyphro had claimed he did: Asked if he did have 'exact' knowledge of divine things which enabled him to know that he was acting piously in prosecuting his father (4e4-8), he had assured Socrates that he did (4e9-5a2). At the close of the dialogue, when it has become all too

clear that Euthyphro's claim to have such knowledge was bogus, Socrates reminds him mockingly of it and challenges him to make it good (15e4-e1).

²³ Cf. n6 above.

²⁴ Since he did more than anyone else to bring it under scrutiny. It is under his influence that Ross comes upon it (1951, 12n4), and he does nothing to advance its discussion beyond the point where Robinson had left it.

²⁵ 'The soul being immortal and having had many births and seen both the things in this world and those in Hades and everything, there is nothing it has not come to know' (81c).

²⁶ *θητὰ φρονεῖν*: Euripides, *Ba.* 395-397; Sophocles, *Trach.* 473; Aristotle, *NE* 1177b31-34.

²⁷ *ἐξ ὑποθέσεως σκοπεῖσθαι*, 86e. This method enables Socrates to search for the *F* without violation of *R*: hypothesizing that the *F* is *K* and that *K* is *L* he reaches the *hypothetical* result that the *F* is *L*, which will not constitute knowledge_c of the *F* until it has been 'bound by reasoning out the *aitia*' (*Meno* 98a), i.e., integrated in systematized knowledge predicated on the definition of the *F*.

²⁸ Sc. on whether virtue may come by 'divine dispensation' in those who not have knowledge.

²⁹ Since it contains, as they do not, the doctrine of the transmigrating, 'recollecting' soul which characterizes the middle dialogues.

³⁰ I.e., is in a position to show that the thesis that to commit injustice is worse than to suffer it is elenctically viable: *Gorg.* 509a, 'of all those I have encountered no one has been able to hold otherwise and fail to come off covered with ridicule [in elenctic argument].'

³¹ It remains true all through *Republic* i until 354a11, which I take to be the whole of the original dialogue to which 354a12-c3 is tacked on as a graceful bridge to *Rep.* ii when Plato makes this dialogue the prelude to *Rep.* ii-x; cf. Vlastos 1985, 26n65. That this closing paragraph could not have belonged to the original dialogue is shown by the contradiction between Socrates' saying at 354c1-2 that, since he does not know what justice is, he cannot know whether or not it is a virtue, and his earlier claim to have shown that no one could fail to know (hence Socrates could not) that justice is a virtue (351a3-6).

³² His first three references (1953, 50) are to **T11**, **T12**, and **T13**.

³³ And he is not the only one. **T14** is regularly cited in the scholarly literature as evidence of the presence of the 'Socratic Fallacy' in the form of *R* in elenctic dialogues.

³⁴ 'Now does this line from corner to corner cut each of these figures [squares] in half?'

³⁵ The exploration of irrationals and the development of the axiomatic method. We have evidence that Plato had caught up with the first when he wrote the *Hippias Major* (303b-c: cf. Vlastos 1988, 383-385) and with the second when he wrote the *Meno* (76a: cf. *ibid.* 376-379).

³⁶ Not only of **T10** and **T14** above, but of much else as well that might have alerted scholars to the large differences between elenctic and post-elenctic dialogues.

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