

On the Alleged Historical Reliability of Plato's *Apology*

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Socrates is the patron saint of philosophy. He has functioned in our tradition as the paradigm philosopher, and his life has served as a model of a philosophical life. In some sense or other, he was the first philosopher; and so philosophy, whatever it is, is what Socrates did and what he started. Saints are often martyrs. Socrates, the patron saint of philosophy, gave his life rather than betray his calling.

Students of hagiography know that saints' lives tend to be legendary. So also in the case of Socrates. The Σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι, the 'Socratic discourses' produced by Socrates' friends and followers, contained a great deal that was fictional. The surviving Socratic writings, both whole works and fragments, contain enough anachronisms and inconsistencies and other sorts of historical implausibilities that we can be confident the constraints of this genre were rather loose, and authors were entitled and expected to put a great deal into the mouth of their character 'Socrates' which the historical Socrates never said and never would have said.¹

Sometimes our efforts to reconstruct the lives of saints are aided by the writings of the saints themselves (though of course these must be handled with care) and by contemporary documentary and other relatively neutral sources. Our efforts to reconstruct the life of Socrates cannot be so lucky. Socrates himself wrote nothing; and the contemporary or near-contemporary sources about him are all either hostile or friendly. Practically the only documentary evidence we have is the precise wording of the indictment against Socrates, available to us in a second-hand report in Diogenes Laertius (2.40).

Thus the problem of the historical Socrates is like the problem of the historical Jesus: it is vitally important to our sense of ourselves, as well as to our sense of the civilization to which we belong, that we obtain a historically reliable picture of who this man was and what he

¹ The best survey of these issues is now Kahn 1996, ch. 1.

was like. But this task is dismayingly difficult and perhaps impossible. 'The problem of the historical Socrates' has benefitted from the intelligence and labor of many fine scholars over more than two centuries. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they have arrived at depressingly diverse results.

But in recent decades a group of the most outstanding scholars of the subject, who disagree with each other about much else, have come to agree at least on this: that Plato's *Apology of Socrates* is a historically reliable source for the reconstruction of Socrates' character and opinions. The views of these scholars are subtle and nuanced, and they vary as to just how reliable the *Apology* is and in what aspects. These variations will concern us later. But the basic idea, that Plato's *Apology* is a reliable source for forming our picture of the historical Socrates, seems to have become the dominant view. It is what Aristotle might have called 'the most reputable opinion'.

The most recent defender of this view is Charles Kahn. In his magnificent new book *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* Kahn is sceptical of the historical value of the Socratic dialogues, on the grounds that the conventions of that genre allow great freedom for invention. But Kahn argues that the *Apology* belongs to a different genre, being a defense speech rather than a dialogue. At one point he sums up: "It is likely, then, that in the *Apology* Plato has given us a true picture of the man as he saw him."² For his own reconstruction of the historical Socrates' philosophy, therefore, Kahn relies almost exclusively on Plato's *Apology*.

The foremost German scholar of Socrates is Klaus Döring, author of the monograph on Socrates and the Socratics in the New Ueberweg-Flashar history of philosophy.³ Döring also bases his presentation of

² Kahn 1996, 97. Whether 'a true picture of Socrates as Plato saw him' is a reliable guide to the historical Socrates himself is of course a further question. (On this see pp. 1–12 below.) Concerning this question Kahn is cagey. He says that the *Apology* is "the most reliable guide of all our testimonies concerning Socrates" (79) and that "[i]nsofar, then, as we can know anything with reasonable probability concerning Socrates' own conception of philosophy, we must find this in the *Apology*" (79). These two statements are compatible with an admission that the *Apology* is not a reliable guide to the historical Socrates (the other testimonies are even worse), and that we cannot know anything at all with reasonable probability concerning Socrates' own conception of philosophy.

³ Döring 1998. This fine monograph reached me as I was making the last revisions to this paper, and so I have not been able to take full account of it here. Döring's basic position on the Socratic question remains unchanged from his earlier writings.

the historical Socrates “on the basis of the assumption, which I hold to be correct, that the picture of Socrates in the *Apology* is in its basic features authentic”.⁴ Like Kahn, though for partly different reasons, Döring holds that the other dialogues contain Platonic material and are therefore not as reliable as guides to the philosophy of the historical dialogues.

The most important and influential scholar of Socrates in the English-speaking world during the last several decades was Gregory Vlastos. He believed that all of the ‘early’ writings of Plato are, within certain limits, reliable evidence for the philosophy of the historical Socrates. This group includes the *Apology*. In his magisterial book on Socrates, Vlastos did not give special attention to the status of the *Apology*. But in an earlier, influential essay Vlastos gave a separate argument for “accepting the *Apology* as a reliable recreation of the thought and character of the man Plato knew so well”.⁵

Is Plato's *Apology* a reliable source for the philosophy of the historical Socrates? These three distinguished scholars, along with many others,⁶ argue ‘yes’. I shall argue ‘no’.

But before proceeding to detailed arguments, a few distinctions are in order. The *Apology* can be used as evidence for (1) certain events in Socrates' life; (2) certain features of Socrates' character and his characteristic activities; (3) Socrates' ‘philosophy’ in the modern sense: his beliefs and intellectual methods. Examples of these categories include: (1) Chaerephon's question to the oracle at Delphi and its answer; (2) Socrates' disdain for money and honor; (3) Socrates' profession of ignorance, and his quest for definitions. Those who regard the *Apology* as a reliable source of evidence for the historical Socrates employ it, reasonably enough, as evidence for all three categories. But what they – and we – as historians of philosophy are chiefly interested in is the third category, Socrates' philosophy.

My own scepticism about Socrates is a moderate one.⁷ I believe that we can have reasonable confidence about certain events in Socrates' life, and about certain general features of his character; and I believe that the *Apology* takes its place alongside other texts in providing evi-

⁴ Döring 1992, 3; cf. Döring 1987.

⁵ Vlastos 1971, 4 = Vlastos 1995, 6. The core of this argument is endorsed in a footnote to the book: Vlastos 1991, n. 5. See also Vlastos 1989, 1393 = Vlastos 1995, 25.

⁶ For a list of scholars on each side of this question, see Brickhouse and Smith 1989 n. 9 and n. 19.

⁷ For example it is not as extreme as that of Gigon 1947.

dence for these. But what I deny, and shall argue against here, is that Plato's *Apology* gives us grounds for confidence that we know anything very precise about what we most want to know, namely Socrates' philosophical views.

My discussion will be divided into two parts. The first part will consider arguments for the historicity of the *Apology* based on its special literary characteristics and circumstances. My primary focus in this part will be on Kahn's, and secondarily Vlastos's arguments. The second part will treat arguments based on a comparison between the *Apology* and other sources. Here I shall concentrate on Döring.

I. Arguments from Genre and the Special Circumstances of the Apology

I shall begin with Kahn's version of what has become a traditional argument:

... we are struck by the fundamental contrast between the *Apology* and the rest of Plato's work. There is first of all a sharp difference of literary form. The *Apology* belongs to a traditional genre, the courtroom speech revised for publication; the dialogues all belong to the new genre of "Conversations with Socrates". But underlying this literary contrast is a more fundamental difference. The *Apology* reflects a public event, the trial of Socrates, which actually took place, and at which Plato and hundreds of other Athenians were present. The dialogues represent private conversations, nearly all of them fictitious ...

The situation is quite different for the *Apology*. As the literary version of a public speech, composed not by the speaker but by a member of the audience, the *Apology* can properly be regarded as a quasi-historical document, like Thucydides' version of Pericles' Funeral Oration. We cannot be sure how much of the speech as we have it reflects what Socrates actually said, how much has been added or altered by Plato. But if, as we imagine, Plato composed the speech to defend Socrates' memory and to show to the world that he was unjustly condemned, it was essential to present a picture of Socrates in court that could be recognized as authentic.⁸

Kahn is a sophisticated intellectual historian. One reason why he disagrees with e. g. Vlastos on the historical reliability of the early Pla-

⁸ Kahn 1996, 88–89.

tonic dialogues is that the conventions of the genre 'the Socratic dialogue' permitted authors to put their own views into Socrates' mouth. Kahn argues that Plato made use of these liberties throughout his career, even in the earliest dialogues.

But the *Apology*, Kahn argues, belongs to a different genre. Does it? Let us leave aside the important question whether and to what extent the notion of 'genre' can validly be applied to the literary productions of classical Greece. Kahn's claim still faces the problem that we have no other surviving text which belongs to *precisely* the same type as Plato's *Apology*. We know that there was a 'genre' of defenses and accusations of Socrates in antiquity, and we have one other example, Xenophon's *Apology of Socrates*. But Plato's *Apology* does not have precisely the same literary form as Xenophon's, because Plato's *Apology* is in direct speech. It pretends to be the speech which Socrates himself gave. By contrast, Xenophon's *Apology* does not pretend to be Socrates' own words. Instead it presents Xenophon's defense of Socrates: Xenophon's account of why Socrates spoke as he did, and Xenophon's account of why Socrates was not guilty.

It is hard to know what exactly the conventions were which governed Plato's *Apology*, since we have no precisely comparable surviving text. We do not even know that there were any such conventions, since for all we know Plato's may have been the first defense of Socrates which took the literary form of a direct speech. Kahn claims that because the *Apology* is a speech and not a dialogue, it is not governed by the conventions of the genre, the Socratic dialogue.

But we do not know that the Σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι which are spoken of by Aristotle⁹ were not understood to include the *Apologies* of Plato and Xenophon, as well as the various dialogues. Σωκρατικὸς λόγος just means 'Socratic discourse'; and this label applies to the apologies just as well as to the dialogues. So we do not have good grounds for thinking that fourth-century Athenian authors and readers would have regarded Socratic 'apologies' as belonging to a genre distinct from Socratic 'dialogues'.

⁹ *Poetics* 1447b11. One textual complication deserves mention. A report in Athenaeus regarding Aristotle's lost work *On the Poets* uses the phrase 'Socratic dialogues' (διάλογοι) rather than 'Socratic discourses' (λόγοι) (*De Poet.* fr. 3 Ross = Rose³ 72 = Ath. 505c). But the word διάλογος might easily have been introduced by Athenaeus or his source, so this parallel by itself is not good evidence that Aristotle recognized a genre which included Socratic dialogues but not Socratic speeches.

The genre in which Kahn places Plato's *Apology* is anyway mistaken. He claims that the *Apology* belongs to the genre of courtroom speeches revised for publication. But this traditional genre is one in which the author writes a speech which he either delivers himself, or gives to another to deliver, before a court, and then revises later for publication. Unless one believes that Plato actually ghostwrote Socrates' speech for him — which so far as I am aware no scholar has claimed — then Plato's defense speech is of a different type. The gap between a speech that is actually delivered in a courtroom, and the revised version which a proud and creative author might eventually publish, can of course be great. The published version may contain arguments and appeals which the author did not include at the time, but later comes to think he should have. But there is a natural and organic relation between the original speech and the published version in such a case, which there is not between a literary version written by one person of a speech which was originally composed and delivered by someone else.

Thucydides' version of Pericles' funeral oration is an interesting parallel, because there is a narrow 'genre' into which both it and Plato's *Apology* might fit: "the literary version of a public speech, composed not by the speaker but by a member of the audience".¹⁰ This genre is narrower than the category 'forensic speech, revised for publication', since it excludes both speeches written to be delivered at a particular occasion, and entirely fictive speeches, written for a nonexistent occasion. *If* we were in a position to be confident that literate Athenians of the classical period recognized this type of literary production as a genre to itself with conventions of its own; and *if* we were in a position to know what those conventions were, in particular what amount of historical license was expected or allowed; *then* the argument for the historicity of the *Apology* on the grounds of genre might be sustainable. But unfortunately, the evidence to support this argument is lacking. We know very little about the circumstances of composition of most surviving speeches from classical Greece, so as to know which of them belong to this narrow genre; and we have very little independent evidence with which to compare them.

Kahn seems confident that the funeral oration is a "quasi-historical document". Among scholars of Thucydides, this is controversial. And those who doubt, as I do, that we have good grounds for believing in the historicity of the funeral oration, will also doubt that the parallel between it and the *Apology* does anything to help establish the historicity of the latter.

Like other scholars before him, Kahn stresses the public and prominent character of the historical event, Socrates' trial, as a ground for believing that Plato's version of Socrates' speech is historically faithful. There are in fact several different reasons why the public character of the event might be thought to be relevant, which Kahn

¹⁰ Kahn 1996, 88.

does not explicitly distinguish. The argument most clearly suggested by his remarks is that Plato observed a genre distinction between Socratic writings which depict well-known historical events, and those which do not. For fictitious events, one is free to invent fictitious views and arguments, but for historical events, one is tied to history. As Kahn recognizes, this principle falls foul of the *Phaedo*, which depicts the death of Socrates, yet contains what most scholars agree is mature Platonic philosophy. Kahn suggests that the *Phaedo* is exempt because Plato makes clear in the dialogue that he was not present.¹¹ But the resultant literary convention, "Feel free to put your own ideas into the main character's mouth, unless you are portraying a prominent historical event (unless you make clear that you weren't an eyewitness, in which case it doesn't matter)", is implausibly cumbersome.

Before looking at further reasons why the historical character of the trial might be relevant to the *Apology's* historicity, it is important to distinguish three basic views of the relation between Plato's *Apology* and Socrates' actual speech. (Each of these types could be further subdivided; and there are other possibilities. But this tripartite distinction will suffice for my purposes.) One view is that Plato's *Apology* is an attempt to reproduce faithfully the speech which Socrates gave. According to this view Plato intends his *Apology* to differ from the actual speech only insofar as he 'cleans up' Socrates' expression and exposition. According to a second view, Plato does not intend his *Apology* to be a faithful, albeit more polished, representation of the speech that Socrates gave. Rather, he intends it to present the substance of the defense which Socrates actually gave, though presented in language and organization different from Socrates' own. A third view is that Plato is not attempting to reproduce Socrates' actual speech at all. He is putting into Socrates' mouth the defense which he, Plato, thinks is best. On this view Plato's *Apology* aims to present, not Socrates' actual speech, but the speech which Socrates ought to have given. It aims to be faithful to the historical Socrates, but to Socrates the man, and not to his speech.

All three types of view have been defended.¹² Yet scholars are not always careful to distinguish sharply between them. It is important to keep them separate, because the further one moves from the first view,

¹¹ Kahn 1996, 88.

¹² (1) This view is not popular; A. Patzer goes so far as to say that no one believes it nowadays (1984a, 442). But W. D. Ross seems to have endorsed it: he claims that it is improbable that Plato would have much altered the "main lines" of Socrates' actual speech (1933, 23 = Patzer 1984b, 238). (2) Vlastos 1971, 3. (3) A. Patzer 1984a, in Patzer 1984b.

the less reliable the *Apology* becomes as evidence for the historical Socrates.

One argument contained in Kahn's remarks which might be thought to rely, in part, on the public nature of the trial, is this. Since Plato wrote the *Apology* to defend Socrates' memory and to show that he was unjustly condemned, it is essential that the picture of Socrates contained in the *Apology* be recognized as authentic. This argument depends, however, not on the fact that many people were present at the trial, but that many people who would be reading Plato's *Apology* knew Socrates personally, or were otherwise well-informed about his character and opinions. What this argument implies is not that the *Apology* must be faithful to Socrates' speech, but that it must to some degree be faithful to the character and attitudes of Socrates the man. This argument is therefore naturally suited to the third view. Even if Plato's purpose was to give the 'true' defense of Socrates, the defense which Socrates should have given of himself but did not, to be effective this defense must still have been recognizably a defense of the historical Socrates. It must have been faithful enough to the beliefs and character of the historical Socrates to have been convincing to a large number of readers who knew him well.

However, the accumulated experience of more than two thousand years of political propaganda and criminal defense practice shows that this argument is very weak. Dramatic misrepresentation of the facts and of one's client's character can be extremely helpful in public exoneration, even if one's client is a celebrity. Let us assume, plausibly, that prominent among Plato's aims in writing the *Apology* was to acquit Socrates in the court of public opinion. This aim, taken by itself, is compatible with very great historical misrepresentation.¹³

If one assumes, more strongly, that Plato's aim was a rhetorically effective public defense of Socrates' character and opinions *as he, Plato, remembered them*, then a much stronger conclusion of historical reliability is warranted. But Kahn and the other defenders of the historicity of the *Apology* are trying to argue to the conclusion that Plato was aiming at historical faithfulness in the *Apology*, and to base their argument on this stronger assumption would be question-begging.

Another reason why the public and prominent character of the trial might be thought to ground the historicity of the *Apology* is not explicit in Kahn's account, and I hesitate to attribute it to him. This justifica-

¹³ An argument similar to Kahn's (though less cautiously expressed), which fails for this same reason, can be found in H. Patzer 1965, 26.

tion is more clearly present in Gregory Vlastos' argument in his famous essay "The Paradox of Socrates":

Plato's *Apology* has for its *mise en scene* an all-too-public occasion. The jury alone numbered 501 Athenians. And since the town was so gregarious and Socrates a notorious public character, there would have been many more in the audience. So when Plato was writing the *Apology*, he knew that hundreds of those who might read the speech he puts into the mouth of Socrates had heard the historic original. And since his purpose in writing it was to clear his master's name and indict his judges, it would have been most inept to make Socrates talk out of character.¹⁴

Vlastos stresses that the trial was a public event, which hundreds of Athenians attended. What would make this fact relevant is the thought that the *Apology* aimed, or would have been expected to aim, at reproducing the essence of the speech given at the trial, so that if Plato had deviated very far from this, his audience would have recognized the deviation, and the *Apology* would have been a failure. This is an argument *for* the second type of view that I have distinguished, and *against* the third type of view.¹⁵ The availability of hundreds of witnesses to the trial is a constraint on the historicity of the *Apology* only if it was expected to reproduce at least the gist of what was actually said. If not, if the 'rules of the game' were that authors of Socratic apologies were entitled to present the defense speech which Socrates ought to have given but did not, then widely recognized divergences between the actual speech and Plato's *Apology* would be irrelevant.

Both Kahn and Vlastos are careful to dissociate themselves from the first view, that in writing the *Apology* Plato is functioning as a combination reporter and vigorous editor. Certainly this view is not popular nowadays: most people who defend the historical reliability of the *Apology* acknowledge that Plato is not reproducing Socrates' actual speech, but somehow re-creating it. But this is a dangerous admission, since the more creativity one attributes to Plato in writing the speech, the less valuable it is as historical evidence.

One widely recognized reason for admitting that Plato is not merely reporting Socrates' speech has, I believe, stronger implications than are usually noticed. Plato's *Apology* is a literary masterpiece. This literary excellence is often recognized to be the result of Plato's extraordinary talent, rather than Socrates'. But the point can be

¹⁴ I quote the version reprinted in Vlastos 1971, 3. The original 1957–58 publication differs slightly: see the bracketed phrases in Vlastos 1995, 6.

¹⁵ As Ross realized (1933, 23 = Patzer 1984b, 238).

pressed further. As Reginald Allen has shown, the *Apology* is not merely a masterful piece of writing. It is a quietly ironical parody of the standard defense speech of its day. Socrates' speech contains an exordium, prosthesis, statement of the case, refutation, digression, and peroration, the same formal parts which a student of rhetoric would have been taught to produce.¹⁶ This is a highly literary device. It fits Plato's massive literary talent and carefully developed skill at imitating many different styles. It does not very well fit Socrates the oral philosopher.

Of course we are not in a position to know that Socrates did not use such a complex literary form for his speech. The judgement that this is unlikely is based on commonsense psychological probabilities, nothing more. Still, if we accept that the structure and organization of Socrates' speech in the *Apology* is probably not true to the original, but is rather due to Plato, then we must accept that the *Apology* will immediately have struck a contemporary reader who had been present at the trial, or who knew Socrates well, as very different from the original speech. Just from its literary form, the *Apology* will have appeared as Plato's complex rhetorical project, and not as Socrates'. This runs counter to Vlastos's suggestion that Plato aimed to make Socrates talk in character. 'Talking in character' includes both style and content. If Plato's intention had been to present the gist (though not the exact language) of Socrates' speech, in such a way that readers who had been present at the trial would recognize the Socrates they heard in his words, then it would have been rhetorically counterproductive for him to have chosen a literary form and organization which was so obviously different from the one which Socrates actually used.¹⁷

The literary form of the *Apology* gives us reason, therefore, to reject not only the first of the three views which I have distinguished, but also the second. Plato seems — characteristically — to have been driving his own agenda when he wrote the *Apology*. He was aiming to defend his beloved friend and mentor Socrates, to be sure. But he chose literary means which made it clear to his contemporary audience, and also clear upon reflection to us, that he is defending Socrates in his own way.

Perhaps one reason why some scholars might think that it is not necessary to distinguish between arguments why Plato would have made the *Apology* faithful to Socrates' actual speech, and arguments

¹⁶ Allen 1980, 5–6. See also Lezl 1992, 82.

¹⁷ In the Introduction to his study and commentary to Plato's *Apology* (edited and completed by S. Slings), Father E. de Strycker, S. J. argues that Plato's aim cannot have been to reproduce Socrates' actual speech, since the elaborate literary character of the *Apology* can only be Platonic (1994, 6–7). Yet de Strycker concludes by expressing his faith in the Socratic content within the Platonic form: "For the rest, I would dare to assert that there is, on the one hand, no single sentence in the Platonic *Apology* that Socrates could not actually have pronounced, and on the other, that the published work contains no passage so specifically un-Platonic that it cannot be Plato's work." (1994, 8) It is a sign of de Strycker's meticulous scholarly honesty that he marks this assertion as 'daring'. (Wilamowitz expressed basically the same view [1919, II, 52–53] in vastly more confident tones.)

why he would have been faithful to Socrates' character, is that this difference might seem to make no difference to the historicity issue. Since what we are interested in is Socrates' philosophy (and not the details of his speech), Plato's *Apology* will be good evidence either way.

But that is not right. One thing we can be sure of about Socrates is that he was a deep and mysterious and utterly extraordinary man. Socrates was a puzzle: Vlastos rightly put that fact at the center of *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. What follows from this is that, even if we could be sure that Plato in the *Apology* intended to give the best defense of Socrates as he saw him, and even if Plato is a strong and insightful judge of character, nonetheless Plato's Socrates may not be what a sober historian would judge to be a historically accurate version of Socrates. Plato's 'take' on Socrates will certainly be a profoundly interesting version of Socrates. But it may differ quite a bit from Antisthenes' view of what was essential to Socrates' character and philosophy, or Aeschines', or Xenophon's. And a careful historian of today who was able (*per impossibile*) to interview extensively everyone who knew Socrates well, would very likely come up with a version which differs significantly from each of theirs.

By contrast, if Plato's *Apology* were a sincere attempt to re-create the speech which Socrates actually gave, that would give us good evidence about Socrates' self-presentation at that crucial moment. And Socrates' self-presentation at his trial is excellent evidence concerning his character, for two reasons. First, it was likely to be sincere. (Socrates was not courting favor.) Second, while Socrates' self-presentation should not be accepted at face value as good evidence for what his character was actually like (no one knows himself that well); still, the fact that Socrates would present himself in this way is a very important and revealing fact about his character. Thus, whether Plato aims in the *Apology* to reproduce Socrates' self-presentation at the trial, or to give his own defense of Socrates against the charges, makes a large difference to its status as historical evidence for Socrates' character.

The gap is even greater when evaluating the *Apology's* value as evidence for Socrates' philosophy. Socrates' 'philosophy' in the modern sense consists in the general propositions he believed in and in the intellectual methods he employed. ('Philosophy' in Socrates' and Plato's sense was a way of life. So much the better for them, and worse for us.) Now a person can easily be badly mistaken about his own character; but it is less easy to be mistaken about which philosophical propositions one holds true. If Socrates said in his speech, "Neither I, nor any other mortal I am acquainted with, knows anything impor-

tant", that statement could be taken over pretty straightforwardly onto the list of Socrates' epistemological opinions. So, on the assumption that Socrates did make philosophical remarks at his trial, a reliable report of Socrates' defense speech would be even better evidence for Socrates' philosophy than for his character.

In philosophy, the precise wording matters enormously. It matters a great deal whether Socrates said, "I know that I know nothing" (the legendary misconstrual of Plato's version) or "I do not think that I know anything fine and good" (Plato's version) or "I do not know anything divine" (Xenophon's version). In writing the *Apology*, the more Plato re-created Socrates' speech, as opposed to merely reporting it, the less valuable it is as evidence for Socrates' philosophy. Further, the more Plato gives his own defense of Socrates, instead of reproducing the essence of Socrates' own self-defense, the worse still. Plato was a great and perceptive and creative philosopher who had the ability to see potentialities in the views of his predecessors and contemporaries to which they themselves were blind. Plato's estimate of the essence of a person's outlook, whether that person be Parmenides or Hippias or Socrates, is certain to be very interesting philosophy. But there is no reason to think that it will be a historically reliable account of the views that the person actually held.

Once again, in philosophy the precise wording matters. And the deeper and more penetrating the diagnosis of someone's philosophical position, the less likely it is to be verbally faithful. The truth in the traditional objection against Plato as a source of evidence that "Plato is too creative a philosopher to be historically reliable" is not that Plato was so creative that he would have irresistibly put his own views into Socrates' mouth (though that may also be right); it is that Plato's sincere efforts to present the essence of Socrates' views are likely to be so philosophically penetrating as to be unreliable guides to the views which Socrates actually expressed and would assent to.

If we assume that Plato's goal was to give the best defense possible for the Socrates that he knew, then what he was trying to do was to defend the character and activities of the historical Socrates, and not to reproduce his philosophical views. This is important, because these two goals can easily conflict. Suppose that Socrates did think that he had a certain amount of important moral knowledge. But suppose further that Plato thought that Socrates was wrong about this, that (judged by proper standards, which may have been implicit in Socrates' activity but were not properly appreciated by him) what Socrates had was not knowledge after all. In that case, Plato may well have thought

that the best defense of Socrates would involve having him point out that he knows nothing important. Plato could have thought this, even while being aware that Socrates himself thought that he did have some moral knowledge.

II. Arguments Based on a Comparison of the Apology with Other Sources

A very different type of argument has recently been used by Klaus Döring and others to demonstrate the special historical reliability of Plato's *Apology*. These scholars employ the resources of traditional 'source-criticism', comparing the reliability and doctrinal content of the various ancient sources concerning Socrates.¹⁸ In this section I shall focus my attention on Döring's version of the argument, since it is the most fully developed and presented.

Before beginning, I must issue both an apology and a warning. Arguments based on a comparison of sources by their nature depend on the details. In order to refute Döring's case, I shall have to examine various parallels he puts forward, one by one. This will make the exposition more complicated than I would like, and I beg reader's patience.

Next a warning: the failure of Döring's parallels to establish the historicity of the *Apology* does not by itself prove that no such parallels exist. Other scholars have put forward other examples, and no argument of principle can establish that no convincing set of parallels could be discovered. Since Döring is an outstanding scholar, and his effort to employ source-critical methods to establish the historicity of the *Apology* is the best one so far, the failure of his argument (if I do succeed in refuting it) is indicative. But it is not conclusive.

Methodological Preliminaries

Döring calls his version of the method (following H. Maier): "historical inference from effect to cause".¹⁹ The idea is that Socrates is the prime intellectual influence on the Socratic movement. Socrates himself did not write anything. But his followers did. We possess numerous complete writings by two of his followers, Plato and Xenophon, along with some fragments and testimony of others. If a certain view is shown by

¹⁸ Kahn employs these methods to argue against the historical reliability of "early Plato" apart from the *Apology*, and thus uses them in an indirect way to argue for the historicity of the *Apology*.

¹⁹ Döring 1992, 2; Maier 1913, 153.

a comparison of all of the surviving sources to be characteristically 'Socratic' in the sense of being characteristic of the Socratic circle, then we are entitled to attribute it to Socrates. Where the sources conflict with each other, perhaps further consideration will allow us to reject one as unreliable and accept the other as reflecting the historical Socrates. (Thus Vlastos argues against Xenophon in favor of early Plato in cases of conflict, and Kahn argues against the early Plato in favor of the *Apology*). Where such conflicts cannot be resolved, we must suspend judgement.

This method is both sound and appropriate. But as any scientist or engineer will testify, reasoning from effect to cause within a complex, uncontrolled system can be rather difficult. The case of Socrates and his followers is a case of intellectual influence, during a period of remarkable ferment and creativity. If all of the Socratics believe X or are preoccupied with Y, does this show that Socrates himself believed X and was preoccupied with Y, or only that Socrates had certain beliefs and preoccupations which, when reflected upon and further developed by his companions, led them to believe X and concern themselves with Y? Which of these one thinks is most plausible will depend on the details of the example, but the latter cannot be ruled out *a priori*.

Recall the special difficulty of establishing through indirect means a person's philosophical views, given the importance of the precise verbal formulation in what constitutes those views. Socrates and his followers clearly were, and saw themselves as, a distinctive moral community, which dissented from the dominant surrounding culture in important values. Socrates and his followers thought that most people value money and fame much more highly than they should, and that they value virtue and good character much too little. Socrates and his followers believed that mere reliance on tradition for one's most important beliefs is wrong. Instead, one ought to subject one's own beliefs, and those which are prominent in one's culture, to searching examination. These characteristically Socratic values are important values, and the propositions which express them are philosophical propositions. But as philosophical theses go, they are vague.

Example: Attitude toward Physics

The case of Socrates's attitude toward natural philosophy is instructive. A great historian of Athenian democracy, M. Hansen, has recently argued that Socrates' denial that he takes any serious interest in natural philosophy must have been an ingredient in the historical

trial.²⁰ Hansen bases his argument on similarities between Plato's and Xenophon's defenses of Socrates, which he believes were written independently.

Even if Hansen (following von Arnim 1923) is correct that Plato's and Xenophon's accounts of the trial are independent, any attempt to use that independence to establish Socrates' attitude toward natural philosophy at the time of his trial faces two (by now familiar) problems.

First, Plato's and Xenophon's testimonies count as independent witnesses to the actual trial only if their aims were to be faithful to the trial, or at least to present some of its essential features. If their goal was instead to present the best defense of Socrates they could (regardless of what defense Socrates actually presented), then the fact that they both make Socrates repudiate natural philosophy is evidence of what they both thought about the historical Socrates' philosophical activity and attitudes. It is not good evidence for what went on at the actual trial.

The second problem is that 'denies any serious interest in natural philosophy' is a phrase too vague to be useful in writing the history of philosophy.²¹ Plato and Xenophon put very different content into their denials. Plato has Socrates say (in the *Phaedo*) that he used to study physics, but then gave it up completely. Xenophon has Socrates deny that an interest in physics for its own sake is sensible (*Mem.* I.i.11–15). But Xenophon's Socrates takes cosmology seriously enough to deploy it for ethical purposes in an argument from design.

The commonality between Plato's and Xenophon's accounts is perhaps sufficient for us to say that some sort of disdain or contempt for physics, or for the physicists, was part of the image of the historical Socrates. But what precise philosophical views justified or generated that negative attitude, we cannot know.

Example: Choosing the Good

Consider a series of four propositions:

- (1) A person should not be frightened by death or loss of fortune, but should rather only be concerned with doing what is right.
- (2) In acting, a person should always choose the good, i. e. what is most in his or her own interest, properly understood.
- (3) In acting, a person should always choose the good, i. e. what is morally right.

²⁰ 1995, 6. Hansen traces ten items back to Socrates' trial, based on similarities between Plato's and Xenophon's accounts. Of these only one concerns Socrates' philosophy: his denial of any serious interest in natural philosophy (Hansen cites *Pl. Ap.* 26D and *Xen. Mem.* 1.1.11–15; *Ap.* 19C–D should be added).

²¹ Of course, writing the history of philosophy was not Hansen's aim; his prime interest is the history of Athenian democracy.

- (4) In acting, a person should always choose the good, i. e. what will bring about the best consequences for everyone, all things considered.

Socrates was a person of great moral courage and astonishing self-control. But these are traits of character, and not philosophical opinions. Nonetheless, the method of reasoning from effect to cause, applied to the surviving texts, does suggest that Socrates probably did say things like, "One should always do what is right", and "One should always choose the good". The problem comes in deciding what, if anything, more philosophically precise the historical Socrates had in mind when he made such remarks. On the basis of Plato's texts, scholars have often attributed to the historical Socrates thesis (2), the attitude of ethical egoism. Also on the basis of Plato's texts, scholars have often attributed to the historical Socrates thesis (3), a kind of moral absolutism. Those who have been inclined to find both positions implied by the texts have struggled mightily to show how the two positions can be reconciled within a consistent view. Xenophon's portrait of Socrates suggests position (4), a kind of consequentialism or utilitarianism.

A suitably cautious application of the method of reasoning from effect to cause relieves one of the need to choose between these alternatives. For it is perfectly easy to imagine that Socrates was convinced, and often said, that it is always right to do right, and always good to choose the good, without himself ever having a clear idea about how these apparent truisms should be interpreted and applied. A variety of scenarios are plausible, and we have no grounds to choose between them. Socrates himself may have stuck to the truisms, and it was left to various of his followers to work out one or another version and run with it. Or Socrates may have settled on one version, leaving others for others to explore. Or Socrates may have subscribed to one version during one phase of his philosophical activity, and another version during another phase.

Why Believe in a Unitary Socratic Philosophy?

This last possibility has not been adequately attended to in the literature on the historical Socrates. There is a large body of scholarship on Plato's development, and a large body of scholarship asserting the lack thereof. But the literature on the historical Socrates typically assumes that there is a single, uniform philosophical personality there to be discovered. Yet there is no good reason to make that assumption.

The tradition of scholarship does make two main exceptions to this assumption, but these exceptions do not go far enough. There is first

the notorious question whether Socrates experienced an intellectual revolution, abandoning the study of physics for an exclusive concern with values, and with what we would call moral philosophy. I have already expressed scepticism about this. But even if Socrates at some point turned from physics to moral philosophy, there is no reason to suppose that his views in moral philosophy became fully formed and as precise as they would ever be, within a few months of his conversion.

The other exception to the general tendency to ignore questions of Socrates' development belongs to an earlier stratum of scholarship on Socrates. Antisthenes was older than Plato, and attained philosophical prominence sooner. It used to be thought by some that Antisthenes was a better witness to the historical Socrates, in part because he knew Socrates and began his literary production earlier than Plato. (It was also thought that Xenophon was therefore a better witness than Plato, because of Xenophon's presumed borrowings from Antisthenes.)

If Socrates' philosophical views developed significantly, either through changing his mind, or by adding precision and elaboration to views which were already present *in nuce*, it is perfectly possible for different Socratics, even if they *were* all aiming at reliable portraits, to present different images of Socrates. Many of the alleged 'incompatibilities' between Plato's Socrates and Xenophon's of which Vlastos made so much²² could be reconciled in this way. Any inconsistencies within Xenophon's portrait might also be reconciled on the assumption that Xenophon was drawing on his own memories and on reports of conversations with Socrates which occurred at various times and with varying interlocutors. (As all philosophers know from personal experience, conversations with different interlocutors tend to bring out different aspects of one's views. And there is no guarantee that these different aspects are mutually consistent!).

A cautious and sophisticated application of the method of inference from effect to cause to the case of Socrates must allow for the possibility that the cause in question — Socrates' philosophical personality — may have changed its character over time.

On the other hand, one might argue that this complication does not much affect the question of the reliability of Plato's *Apology*. First, the thought that Socrates' philosophical personality may have changed over time expands the range of possibly historical material in the writings of the Socratics, rather than reducing it. Where the *Apology* contradicts Xenophon or Aeschines or other Platonic writings, the explanation may be, not that the *Apology* is unhistorical or that both conflicting sources are, but rather that both portrayals reflect the historical Socrates, but in

²² Vlastos 1971, 1–2; Vlastos 1991, 99–106, 288–300.

different moods or moments. Where the *Apology* agrees with all of our sources, then, we have more reason to suppose that it reflects a strong and enduring trait of the historical Socrates.

Second, if Plato intended his *Apology* to portray Socrates as he really was, Plato will have intended it to portray Socrates at one stage of his life and intellectual development, namely at or near the very end. The whole question of Socrates' philosophical development can be avoided if we take the question of the 'historical Socrates' to be a question about the fully mature Socrates, i. e. the Socrates who stood on trial for his life.

These two arguments have weight. However, the second argument is undermined if one supposes that Plato intended to present the defense speech that Socrates ought to have given rather than to represent the one which Socrates actually gave. Plato was a powerful intellectual personality, surely capable of independent judgment from an early age. What if in his view Socrates' recent changes of mind and revisions in the formulation of his beliefs were mistaken? What if Plato thought that the way Socrates put his moral principles five years before his death was best, though the way he formulated his sense of his own ignorance was better two years later, after his moral views had already changed? If Plato were aiming to present the best defense of Socrates he could, using only formulations which Socrates himself had actually uttered, nonetheless Plato may have given us a portrait which is not a reliable portrait of any one 'Socrates-stage', i. e. of Socrates at any one stage.

The reader may feel that the speculations in the last paragraph are too complicated and elaborate, and have gone too far afield, for us to have good reasons for giving them substantial weight. I agree; that is part of my point. The idea that Socrates changed his mind frequently concerning the precise formulation of his views, and that Plato picked and chose among them for his portrayal of Socrates, is speculative and we have no good grounds for assigning it a particular probability of being correct. But the reverse idea, that Socrates did not change his mind in philosophically crucial respects, is equally speculative and we have no good grounds for assigning it a particular probability either.

The Comparison of Sources on Care of the Soul

The more precisely a statement of Socratic philosophy is formulated, the more difficult it is to attribute it with confidence to the historical Socrates.

Consider this series of propositions:

- (1) Most people value money too much, and the state of their souls too little.
- (2) Money is intrinsically neither good nor bad for a person.
- (3) Only states of the soul are intrinsically either good or bad for a person.
- (4) The soul is a person's true self.
- (5) Moral perfection is the only important value.

Döring attributes (4) and (5) to the historical Socrates, on the strength of passages like 29d7–e3, 31b5, and 36c5–d1 in the *Apology*, together with similar expressions elsewhere in Plato and in the other Socratics.²³ These are rather strong and precise philosophical theses. (4) is also a metaphysical thesis, and not (or not merely) a moral one.

The method of reasoning from effect to cause entitles us to conclude that the historical Socrates held thesis (1). Part of what made the Socratic circle different from the rest of society was that they valued money much less and spiritual improvement much more than the dominant culture did.

The possibility of historical development undermines the argument that the historical Socrates held (4) and (5), or even (2) and (3). The process by which Plato and other Socratics came to hold (4) and (5) might have been that they took them over from Socrates. But it equally well might have been that Socrates himself believed something vaguer and weaker, and the stronger theses are a further development by his followers.

Consider an example. If only states of the soul are intrinsically good or bad for a person, and moral perfection is the only important value, then physical health is not an intrinsic or significant good for a human being. Plato and Aristippus and perhaps some other Socratics seem to have deprived physical health of the value given to it by common-sense.²⁴ In order to explain the origin of their views, do we need to assume that Socrates himself thought that physical health is of no significant value? No we do not. It is enough that Socrates insisted that the state of one's soul is much more important than most people consciously realize. If Socrates also thought, reasonably enough, that physical health is also a significant good, then what may have happened was that Plato and others thought that Socrates did not go far enough, and in depriving physical health of any significant value they further radicalized his thought.

That the historical Socrates attempted to convince the gifted young men whom he met that they were leading thoughtless lives, and that

²³ Döring 1987, 77, 84–87.

²⁴ Xenophon presents an argument according to which nothing is good simpliciter, but only good *for something* (*Mem.* III.viii; cf. IV.ii.35–36). This passage in Xenophon is evidence that the Socratic circle was actively exploring the question of what is or is not intrinsically valuable. The method of reasoning from effect to cause can allow us to conclude that Socrates' philosophizing was of such a sort as to provoke this topic of investigation, but it cannot allow us to infer that he personally subscribed to one or another answer.

they ought to devote themselves to philosophy and the quest for virtue, is probable. This image of Socrates is conveyed by both Plato and Xenophon, as well as by fragments from the other Socratics, above all Aeschines.²⁵ But any effort to attribute philosophically precise theses to Socrates is frustrated by the scarcity of sources and the difficulty of inferring a certain precisely formulated doctrine from a biographical anecdote or differently worded expression.

Döring is well aware of these dangers. Yet the evidence he relies upon does not escape them. Döring cites the *Gorgias* (468a ff.) and the *Phaedo* (64a ff.) to supplement the *Apology*.²⁶ But these dialogues are usually thought to contain a great deal of Plato himself. The motto in the *Phaedo*, 'philosophy is practice for death', can perhaps be used, by reasoning from effect to cause, to confirm that Socrates was concerned with the health of the soul. But we have no particular reason to attribute this motto to the historical Socrates. And if we cannot attribute these words to Socrates, we cannot attribute the confidence in immortality and the exclusive emphasis on the soul which they imply to him either.

In Aeschines' *Alcibiades*, Socrates praises the virtue and foresight of the great leader Themistocles. He humbles Alcibiades, convincing him that he has a great deal to learn before he could hope to match the wisdom of someone like Themistocles.²⁷ Döring cites the dialogue — rightly — as evidence of Socrates' concern for 'care of the self'.²⁸ Ample evidence from many sources suggests that Socrates believed that many people think they know things that they do not know, and that realizing their ignorance is a first step toward learning what they need to learn.

But the *Alcibiades* does not support Döring's stronger claim that Socrates thought that moral perfection is the only important thing, and that a person's highest task is the improvement of his soul. To the contrary: as Döring recognizes²⁹, Themistocles' 'virtue' is conventional Greek virtue. What Socrates praises and Alcibiades envies is the clever-

²⁵ For Xenophon, see above all his conversations with Euthydemus in Book IV; for Aeschines, the *Alcibiades*. A fragment of Euclides (fr. 14D) cited by Döring (1987, p. 86) implies that most men care too much about food and clothing, and too little about their attitudes. It does *not* imply that food and clothing are unimportant.

²⁶ Döring 1987, 85.

²⁷ Fr. 8 Dittmar; 50 Giannantoni.

²⁸ Döring 1987, 85; see esp. fr. 8, l. 52 Dittmar; 50, l. 42 Giannantoni.

²⁹ 1984, 20–21.

ness and prudence which make one an effective leader and promote worldly success. Perhaps Socrates does tacitly disagree with Themistocles' values, but there is no direct evidence of that in what survives of the text.

Alcibiades thinks that worldly success is the most important value, and Socrates convinces him that a devotion to education and self-improvement is a necessary means to that end. Recognition of one's own ignorance is a doubly instrumental value: it is necessary in order to acquire the devotion to self-improvement which is necessary for success. By helping Alcibiades to realize his own ignorance, Socrates makes him better. But this is because recognition of one's own ignorance is instrumentally valuable, not because it is 'the most important thing', or even just intrinsically good.

Döring cites a scene at the beginning of Phaedo's *Zopyrus* as evidence that care of the soul played a central role for Socrates.³⁰ This is a scene in which Socrates admits that he has a violently passionate nature, which he has overcome by insight and discipline. This passage confirms ample other evidence that Socrates was renowned for his self-control. But self-control is a feature of Socrates' character, not his doctrines. It is somehow psychologically probable that a person who had Socrates' level of self-control also thought that self-control is a valuable trait. But exactly what place Socrates thought self-control to have in the spectrum of human values is left open by this story in the *Zopyrus*.

According to Döring, Aristippus constitutes an exception among the Socratics.³¹ What Aristippus believes is the most important goal in life is not virtue, but pleasure. Döring explains that Aristippus' difference from the others is due to his epistemological doctrine that all we can know are our private sensations.

If we state the characteristically Socratic attitude more vaguely and generally than Döring does, we can see that Aristippus is not an exception. If what Socrates held and passed on to his companions is a conviction that care of the soul is much more important than most people think it is, and money and fame much less important, then Aristippus fits right in. Pleasure is after all a soul-state. Neither money nor the good opinion of others are intrinsically valuable, on Aristippus' view. Of course pleasure is a popular value: both ordinary people and tyrants were thought to seek pleasure. But Aristippus' view need not have been a popular, non-Socratic view. He may well have thought that a great deal of virtue, including self-control, were needed in order to maximize pleasure. The *Protagoras* and the *Philebus* suggest that Plato thought this.

Socrates held that virtue is more valuable and worthy of more attention than most people thought. Did he also hold that virtue is the most valuable good and

³⁰ Döring 1987, 85. The evidence for the *Zopyrus* is presented and discussed in Rossetti 1980.

³¹ 1987, 86–87.

the only thing good in itself; or did he hold that virtue is valuable instrumentally, e.g. for its help in maximizing pleasure? The mixed and fragmentary state of the evidence does not allow us to decide.

Finally, the case of Antisthenes. Döring cites the statement by Antisthenes in Xenophon's *Symposium*: "I believe that men have their wealth and poverty, not in their homes but in their souls." (IV, 34) There is the problem how much of this statement should be attributed to the historical Antisthenes, or rather to Xenophon. But for the method of working back from effect to cause, this is a subtlety we can hope to leave aside. What is important for us is whether the character Antisthenes implies here that virtue is the only or the most important good.

In the remainder of his speech Antisthenes defends his claim by pointing out that many people who have great quantities of material goods do not have enough to satisfy their desires, whereas he, who has little, has enough. Antisthenes does not explicitly define what he means by 'wealth' or what he understands to be 'good'. But what his remarks imply is an instrumental view of wealth, according to which wealth is what enables one to satisfy one's desires. Antisthenes' wealth is in his soul, because what enables him to satisfy his desires is the fact that his desires are few and rationally controllable. The view of the good which is suggested by his remarks is that the good, for human beings, is desire-satisfaction. Desire-satisfaction is the goal for which wealth, whether material or spiritual, is instrumental. Yet desire-satisfaction is not virtue; it is not even (usually) a state of the soul. Desire-satisfaction is a relational complex involving a state of the soul (the desire) and another state-of-affairs which satisfies it. Of course, what precise view (if any) Antisthenes had about the metaphysics of desire-satisfaction is hidden by the mists of time. But the view of virtue which is implied by this passage is that virtue is an instrumental good. The idea that virtue is the most important instrumental good was clearly circulating in the Socratic movement. Whether the historical Socrates himself thought that virtue is the most important instrumental good, or something weaker or stronger, is impossible to tell.

Socratic Ignorance

In the *Apology* Socrates denies that he has wisdom, and that he knows anything fine and good (21c–d). Most recent interpreters put Socratic ignorance at the center of their portraits.³² Döring lists Socratic igno-

³² See e.g. Nehamas 1985 and 1986, reprinted in Nehamas 1999.

rance as the second of the "main ideas" which the *Apology* allows us to attribute to the historical Socrates. According to Döring, Socrates is convinced that "since it is impossible for a human being to attain secure knowledge of what the good is, he must continually strive afresh to clarify, insofar as he can, what the good is here and now".³³

The historical evidence concerning Socrates' ignorance is similar to the evidence for his emphasis on moral perfection. We have good reason to attribute certain characteristic activities and intellectual interests to the historical Socrates, but no grounds for confidence in attributing to him anything like a precise philosophical thesis.

Socrates' claims of ignorance in the *Apology* are notoriously unclear. What he says is that, in contrast to a certain politician, he knows that he knows nothing fine and good (21d). And unlike craftsmen, who know many fine things, he knows almost nothing (22d–e). What kinds of knowledge count as 'fine and good'? What little bit of knowledge is left open by the phrase 'almost nothing'? The answers to these questions are far from obvious.

Döring's version of Socratic ignorance is far more precise than the text of the *Apology*. Socrates says nothing about 'knowledge of the good' (as opposed to 'knowing good things'), and he says nothing about 'secure knowledge' (as opposed to mere 'knowledge'). According to Socrates, neither he nor anyone he has yet encountered know these 'fine and good things'. He does not say that knowledge of them is impossible for human beings, as Döring's interpretation requires.³⁴ Whether the Socratic search for wisdom was viewed by him (or Plato) and in principle completable or not, is an enormous question which is not settled by the text of the *Apology*.

Moreover, what can be clearly inferred from Socrates' claims does not quite support Döring's account. The fine and good things of which Socrates disclaims knowledge at 21d are things which some politician has claimed to know. But politicians do not characteristically claim to know what 'the good' is, in the sense of being able to answer the general Socratic question, 'What is the good?'. They characteristically claim to know whether it is good to go to war or make a treaty or impose a tax, or to prosecute and convict someone for a crime. Some politicians may claim certainly for their opinions, but they need not.

³³ 1987, 84.

³⁴ Döring cites 20c1–3, d6–e3, 23a5–6, and b3–4 as evidence. But in these texts Socrates says only that no one (or no one whom he has met) has this sort of wisdom, not that in principle no human being could ever have it. At 20d6–e3 he even holds out the possibility that some people might have it! (of course, how ironically to take this statement is a delicate matter.)

There is a distinction between having great confidence in one's opinions, and claiming certainty (though many politicians will not be sophisticated enough to make that distinction). In at least some cases, Socrates has great confidence in his own evaluative views: e. g. that he, Socrates, deserves to be acquitted. Would Socrates claim to know this with certainty? The text does not yield an answer to this question.

The craftsmen know something 'fine'. Socrates does not say that they know something 'good', and perhaps this omission is significant. In any case, what craftsmen know is how to make certain things or produce certain results. Socrates claims to have little or no knowledge of that kind. But this sort of ignorance is very different from a lack of certain knowledge of what the good is.

Döring's interpretation of Socratic ignorance is, therefore, not supported by the text of the *Apology* taken by itself. But the question remains whether his interpretation, or some other reasonably precise interpretation, is supported by the *Apology* and the surviving evidence from the minor Socratics taken together.

Socrates went around questioning peoples' claims to knowledge, and showing those claims to be unfounded. This aspect of Socrates' activity stands out in our sources. From this it follows that Socrates probably thought that rhetors and rhapsodes and maybe even Homer did not know what they claimed to know. This is one important epistemological opinion which we can attribute to the historical Socrates.

If the rhetors and even the poets do not know what they claim to know, then knowledge and expertise must be harder to acquire than most Athenians recognize. One natural effect of Socrates' activity would be to raise the standards for knowledge, and also to raise, in a pressing way, the question what the proper standards are. Thus one effect of Socrates' philosophizing would naturally be that his followers were concerned with epistemological issues, including scepticism. But here as elsewhere the method of inferring from effect to cause yields imprecise results. Socrates cast the standards for knowledge that were dominant in his culture into question, in such a way that his followers were still discussing and disagreeing about these standards for decades after his death. But what Socrates himself actually thought the proper standards were; and whether or to what extent he thought he met them; or even whether Socrates had clear and consistent views on this question over time, the evidence of his followers does not permit us to decide.

Döring argues that the minor Socratics generally agreed with the Socrates of the *Apology* that knowledge about moral concepts is impossible. Furthermore, they went beyond him in advocating a global scepticism: we cannot have certain knowledge about what anything is. This interpretation of the Socratics' attitude toward knowledge permits two

slightly different arguments for the historical faithfulness of the *Apology*.

(1) Since scepticism about moral concepts is common to all, this must be the historical core which we should attribute to Socrates himself.³⁵

(2) Since the global scepticism of the Socratics is a generalization of the moral scepticism of the *Apology*, the former is probably a historical development of the latter. This suggests that the moral scepticism portrayed in the *Apology* belonged to the historical Socrates.³⁶

But the various negative attitudes towards knowledge on the part of the minor Socratics are generally not good evidence that they denied anyone can have 'wisdom concerning the greatest matters', as Socrates puts it in the *Apology*. The evidence Döring cites from the other Socratics as confirmation of Socratic ignorance is really just evidence of a pervasive concern among the Socratics with epistemological questions.

Antisthenes is said to have denied that we can have knowledge of essences (frags. 50,44A Caizzi). This is a denial that we can have knowledge of the sort of thing which Plato thought we needed to know in order to have wisdom. This is evidence – however, shaky, as later testimony about earlier philosophers always is – of a philosophical disagreement about knowledge between Plato and Antisthenes.

But how and whether these fragments bear on Socratic moral ignorance is not at all clear. These fragments do not mention moral concepts at all. They do not say or imply that Antisthenes thought that knowledge of essences was necessary for wisdom; or that Socrates thought so; or that either Antisthenes or Socrates thought that they knew nothing fine.

Antisthenes is portrayed as a sceptic only about essences. He could recognize things when he saw them (fr. 44), and he could explain what things are *like*, even if not what they *are*. There is no evidence, either here or in the ethical fragments, that Antisthenes saw himself as lacking in wisdom. (Recall that the Socrates of Plato's *Republic* cannot say what the good *is*, but only what it is *like*!)

When asked what one must do to become good, Antisthenes is said to have replied, "Learn from those who know that your faults are to be avoided" (fr. 175). This advice implies that there are those who know, from whom one can learn. This is not the advice of a moral sceptic.

Aristippus is said to have held that we can only know our private sensations. If we can only know our private sensations, then there is a lot we cannot know. Aristippus' view is scepticism of a kind. But Aristippus apparently thought that his view does allow us to know what

³⁵ This is the argument stressed in Döring 1987 (see esp. p. 90).

³⁶ This argument is more explicitly present in Döring 1998 (156).

the good is, namely pleasure.³⁷ Therefore Aristippus' scepticism seemed to him compatible with knowledge of the good, and even wisdom.

If the Socratics, though disagreeing with each other about other matters, all agreed that no one knows anything fine and good, one might suppose that they got this latter view from Socrates. But despite certain elements of scepticism, neither Antisthenes or Aristippus – nor of course Plato – have inherited from Socrates the kind of scepticism which the Socratic ignorance of the *Apology* seems to represent.

Döring also cites the case of Euclides. Euclides is said to have attacked the method of reasoning by analogy. What this shows is that Euclides concerned himself with epistemology. If, as seems plausible, the historical Socrates characteristically reasoned by analogy, this may also show that Euclides had reason to think that Socrates was more poorly off, epistemologically, than Socrates himself realized. But it is no evidence at all that Socrates thought himself to be ignorant.

A fragment of Aeschines provides the strongest confirmation in the surviving Socratic literature of the *Apology's* Socratic ignorance:

Through the love I felt for Alcibiades I experienced a kind of Bacchic inspiration. When the Bacchantes are filled with the god's power they draw milk and honey from wells which do not even yield water to others. I have no learning to teach anyone and help him in that way, but I thought that through just being with him my love for him might make him better. (fr. 11 Dittmar)

Döring rightly argues that Aeschines' Socrates is especially similar to the Socrates of the *Apology*.³⁸ Of course two out of seven are a weak consensus. A clear parallel between three or four sources would make a stronger case; and it would help if the remaining sources were silent on the issue rather than conflicting with the first group. Aeschines' Socrates says that he has nothing to teach. But Antisthenes and Aristippus and Xenophon's Socrates all *do* seem to think that they have something to teach.³⁹

But the important difficulty is that, even if we assume that Aeschines and Plato meant their portraits to capture the truth about Socrates, we have no way to decide between two alternatives. Do Plato and Aeschines make Socrates declare his ignorance because the historical

³⁷ D.L. II, 87–88. Attributing this view to Aristippus himself requires that we accept, as Döring does, later reports concerning the Cyrenaics as evidence for the view of Aristippus. Thus Döring also thinks that Aristippus' scepticism was combined with the claim to have a criterion of truth (1987, 89).

³⁸ 1987, 90. See also Döring 1984.

³⁹ Concerning Xenophon's Socrates, see Morrison 1994.

Socrates actually did declare his ignorance? Or do they make him declare his ignorance because they, i. e. Plato and Aeschines, think that he was ignorant (and maybe even that he was ignorant by his own standards, or by the standards implicit in his activity, even though he did not realize it)?

The evidence of Plato's dialogues suggests that Plato thought Socrates was quite ignorant. The historical Socrates was most unlikely to have met the standards for wisdom which Plato lays out in the *Republic*.⁴⁰ If Plato thought that Socrates knew nothing fine and good, and Plato was attempting in the *Apology* to give the best defense of Socrates that could plausibly be given, then Plato had good reason to make Socrates in the *Apology* declare his ignorance. This is so, even if the historical Socrates thought that he knew some important moral truths, and aggressively said so to the jury at the trial.

Like Plato's *Apology*, the Aeschines fragment can easily be read as Aeschines' own diagnosis of Socrates' condition. Suppose Aeschines, like Plato, thought that Socrates was ignorant. Socrates' ignorance raises a problem for his defense to which Plato in his *Apology* does not adequately respond: if Socrates is so ignorant, how can his influence be beneficial? If Socrates does not know that he knows anything fine and good, is it not criminally negligent of him to seek out and influence impressionable young boys?

Plato's response in the *Apology* to these questions is that Socrates passes on his conviction of ignorance, and coming to realize that one does not know what one does not know is enormously beneficial. No sensible person will find this response very comforting. There is a great deal more to human thought and behavior than one's assessment of one's epistemological position. What the Athenian jurors wanted to know, and what any sensible person would want to know, is whether association with Socrates made his young companions more or less likely to strike their fathers and mutilate herms. What Socrates says in the *Apology* leaves this central concern unaddressed.

The fragment of Aeschines does address this concern. What Aeschines says is that although Socrates had nothing to teach, simply his presence and his love for his companions made them better, as if by a kind of inspiration. This response is not very philosophically satisfying. But unlike Plato's, Aeschines' response does address the issue, because 'made them better' here means 'morally better'. Moreover,

⁴⁰ Note that the character Socrates in the *Republic* probably also does not meet the standards for wisdom he sets out. Döring contrasts the Socrates of the *Apology* with the Socrates of the other Platonic dialogues, on the grounds that the latter does know what the former does not. But this is not clear. The Socrates of the *Republic* has a strong opinion concerning what justice is, but he cannot define the good. Judged by his own standards, does the Socrates of the *Republic* know anything noble? Is he wise?

Aeschines' appeal to inspiration will have been much more persuasive in his cultural context than in ours.

Aeschines is saying what Xenophon says in the *Memorabilia*, that while Alcibiades was with Socrates he was a better person than he would otherwise have been, and than he later became.⁴¹ The Socrates of Aeschines' fragment 11 resembles the Socrates of Plato's *Apology*, but he also resembles the Socrates of Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. And Xenophon's Socrates is regarded by Döring and others as a dogmatic Socrates, incompatible with the portrayal in the *Apology*.

In Plato's *Apology* Socrates contrasts 'a sort of human wisdom', which he says he has, with 'more than human' or divine wisdom, which neither he nor anyone whom he has met possesses. A parallel contrast is attributed to Socrates in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, between those matters which it is given to human beings to understand by their own efforts, such as carpentry and arithmetic, and those matters which are dark to human beings and known only to the gods, such as whether it is wise to join the army or to marry a certain person (I.1.6–9).

This parallel raises the question whether the two authors are presenting somewhat different interpretations of something the historical Socrates actually said. As I have said before, it is quite possible that they are, and also quite possible that they are not. A loose parallel between two authors is suggestive, without being enough to warrant confidence.⁴² But let us suppose, for the sake of discussion, that the

⁴¹ *Mem.* I.ii.24. This and related texts are discussed in Morrison 1994.

⁴² Kahn would rule out any argument based on parallels between Xenophon and Plato on the grounds that Xenophon is dependent on Plato, so that he is not an independent witness. To this two brief responses: (1) Many of the examples of dependence which Kahn lists in his appendix (393–401) are not convincing. The strongest case for dependence is the one made by A. Patzer (1984a) for the dependence of certain features of Xenophon's account of dialectic on Plato. (2) But more importantly, even if Xenophon's account is dependent on Plato in some places, indeed in all of the places where Kahn finds dependence along with others, this does not mean that Xenophon's account of Socrates is of no independent value, as Kahn mistakenly argues. First, Xenophon may well have chosen to borrow certain material from Plato (or Antisthenes, or whomever), because what he finds in that author squares well with his own memories of Socrates and his general impression from years of conversations with other companions of Socrates about their beloved mentor. Second, from the fact that Xenophon's account derives from Plato's in some places and for some features, it does not follow that Xenophon's account derives from Plato's in all places and in all features. And so long as the latter is false, Xenophon's account has independent value. Kahn's strongly dismissive conclusion overlooks principles familiar from textual criticism. An eclectic manuscript which derives largely from lost archetypes, but partially from one surviving archetype, has independent value in constituting a text.

historical Socrates did habitually draw a contrast between human and divine wisdom, and maintained that neither he nor any other human being known to him has divine wisdom, which is the kind that really matters. Can we build on this supposition to infer anything very precise or interesting about Socrates' philosophical views?

Unfortunately, we cannot. As I discussed earlier, what Plato makes Socrates say in the *Apology* is remarkably under-specified. Socrates tells us virtually nothing about what kind of knowledge would count as 'fine and good'. He admits — but does not seem sure — that awareness of one's own ignorance is 'a kind of human wisdom'. He later says that craftsmen do know things, namely their crafts. Is knowledge of a particular craft a kind of human wisdom also? Socrates does not say, nor does he say anything which implies an answer.

Scholars have been naturally and appropriately ingenious in supplying detailed interpretations of what Socrates' contrast between divine and human wisdom amounts to. But given Plato's presumably intentional reticence on this topic in the text of the *Apology*, these interpretations are inherently speculative. People like Vlastos and Döring and others have given philosophically powerful and precise interpretations of what the contrast between divine and human wisdom involves. Most of these would have been interesting and worthy contrasts for the historical Socrates to have drawn — though of course they are mutually incompatible. But for any one scholar to believe that his philosophically powerful and precise interpretation is not only the correct specification of what Plato had in mind, but also reaches through the mediation of Plato's interpretation of Socrates to be the correct specification of what the historical Socrates had in mind, would be to have remarkable confidence in one's own powers of divination.

Perhaps it will be useful for me to close with a reminder, not directed at any one scholar's arguments in particular, but applicable to many different arguments in general, of just how slim and fragmentary our evidence for classical antiquity often is, and how dramatically this affects the degree of confidence we are entitled to have in our conclusions.

There is, after all, an all-too-human temptation in historical scholarship to underestimate what happens when probabilities multiply. Let us imagine an honest and self-critical scholar of Socrates who will admit that this interpretation of Socrates' ignorance in the *Apology* has a 40% chance of being right. The other, say, 19 interpretations which

are not incompatible with the evidence each have significantly poorer probabilities, as judged by our imagined scholar. Since the nearest competitor to his interpretation has a probability of (let us say) only 20%, his interpretation is much the most likely of the group.

Suppose further that our scholar believes the odds that Plato was trying to give an accurate portrayal of Socrates' thought and character are 60%. And suppose he thinks the odds that Plato got it reasonably right are also 60%.

These are generous odds. I myself would not give any detailed interpretation of Socrates' ignorance a 40% chance of being correct, and I do not believe that it is more likely than not that Plato's aim was an accurate portrayal of Socrates or that he got it right. But a more optimistic scholar than I am, a Vlastos or a Döring or a Kahn, might well assign these odds. Even so, on such an optimistic view, our imagined scholar must admit that the odds of his account of Socratic ignorance being true of the historical Socrates are merely 40% times 60% times 60%, or 14.4%.⁴³ Not a very inspiring number.⁴⁴

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⁴³ This particular calculation assumes that the component probabilities are independent. But even if they are not, the basic trend remains.

⁴⁴ Thanks are due to Helen Lang, Hilary Mackey, Ineke Sluiter, Harvey Yunis, and the readers for this journal, for helpful written comments which led to welcome improvements.

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