

*Socrates and the Critique of Metaphysics*

Ian Angus  
Department of Humanities  
Simon Fraser University  
iangus@sfu.ca

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Contemporary appropriations of the ‘end of philosophy’ and ‘end of metaphysics’ usually draw no distinction between these two terms. Such appropriations usually refer to the classic critique by Friedrich Nietzsche and its continuation by Martin Heidegger.

“Philosophy is metaphysics” wrote Heidegger in a characteristic statement.<sup>1</sup> Correlative to this compaction, neither Nietzsche nor Heidegger drew a significant distinction between Socrates and Plato with respect to the origin of philosophy and metaphysics.

Heidegger did refer to Socrates in distinction from Plato (as well as Kant and others) as “the purest thinker of the West” on a significant occasion where the consequence of this difference that makes it visible is that “he wrote nothing.”<sup>2</sup> While it could be asserted that writing is the cause of, or evidence for, metaphysics, Heidegger makes no such assertion. His reference to Socrates asserts the independence of thinking from writing, though it seems rather an overstatement to suggest that writing in and of itself is adequate evidence of an impurity in thinking. Be that as it may, the difference between Socrates and Plato in this reference pertains to the critique of metaphysics only insofar as it might be taken to displace or qualify Heidegger’s turn to the presocratics to recover authentic thinking beneath metaphysics. For while “metaphysics is Platonism,”<sup>3</sup> “we know from Heraclitus and Parmenides that the unconcealment of beings is not simply present at hand.”<sup>4</sup> If Socrates were to be considered an alternative to Platonic metaphysics equal or greater in importance to that represented by the presocratics it would require an inquiry such as this essay undertakes for substantiation.

The qualifications that attend Nietzsche’s compaction of Plato and Socrates are more complex because he on several occasions explicitly contrasted them. At times his aristocratic ethic leads him to prefer Plato to the low-born Socrates.<sup>5</sup> At other times, he prefers Socrates’ critical, dialectical spirit to the pedantic idealism of Plato.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Nietzsche’s view of Plato

and/or Socrates changed, at least in nuance, throughout his writing depending upon the thematic of each work.<sup>7</sup> But, whenever the context is the critique of metaphysics, Socrates and Plato are treated together as the inception of a decadence that is constitutive of philosophy's spirit of seriousness expressed in the rule of reason. My reference for Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics will be the mature account as presented in *Twilight of the Idols* where Nietzsche recalls the virtue of his earlier work in this compaction: "I recognized Socrates and Plato as symptoms of decay, as agents of the dissolution of Greece, as pseudo-Greek, as anti-Greek" whose error consisted in the essentially philosophical error of moral inquiry itself because "the value of life cannot be estimated."<sup>8</sup> In that text Nietzsche associates Socrates and Plato through what he calls the "Socratic equation reason = virtue = happiness" such that "the moralism of the Greek philosophers from Plato downwards is pathologically conditioned."<sup>9</sup> This investigation treats exclusively of Socrates and Plato in the context of the critique of metaphysics and it is only in this context that one may refer to Nietzsche's compaction of them as expressions of late Greek, un-Greek, decadence. If one were to claim, as this essay does, that this compaction is not sustainable with regard to the issue of the critique of metaphysics, then Nietzsche's other accounts of differences between Socrates and Plato would take on even greater interest—in particular, the difference between dialectical inquiry and dogmatic wisdom in the practice and presentation of philosophy. It is interesting to note that even in the context of the critique of metaphysics in *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche's critiques of Socrates tend to focus on his willingness to be compromised by the levelling force of dialectics, whereas the appearance-reality distinction, the 'Egyptianism' of philosophers, is usually at the forefront in his critique of Plato.<sup>10</sup> A significant difference between Socrates and Plato would suggest that these are different issues distorted by their compaction in Nietzsche's account.

My argument will lean heavily on the scholarship of Gregory Vlastos to draw a sharp distinction between Socrates and Plato based upon an account of Socratic dialectical inquiry that has become known as ‘the Socratic elenchus.’ Vlastos’ scholarship has arguably become the “*locus classicus*” for the argument that Socrates achieves positive moral knowledge through this critical method.<sup>11</sup> Most debate has centred around Vlastos’ account of the elenchus.<sup>12</sup> Does it describe the elenchus adequately? Is the elenchus uniquely Socratic? Is the elenchus the only, or even the primary, method of Socratic inquiry? I want to lean on Vlastos’ account for a different purpose. In the first place, in order to argue that the critique of metaphysics, at least in its formulation by Nietzsche and Heidegger, refers to the legacy stemming from Plato’s middle period and, since it does not apply to Socrates, does not apply to philosophy outright.<sup>13</sup> I will refer to the core issue of this difference as the ‘ontologization of essence.’ It may be that the metaphysical temptation is endemic to the practice of philosophy, but it is not equivalent to it.<sup>14</sup> This may be said to be an ‘appropriation’ of Vlastos’ argument rather than a critique of it.

However, since my interest is in the adequacy of Socratic inquiry as an alternative to philosophy understood as metaphysics, I am led to pose the question of whether the failure of Socratic attempts at definition of an essence can be developed in any other direction than Platonic metaphysics.<sup>15</sup> Even if my argument for the pertinence of the distinction between Socrates and Plato to the critique of metaphysics could be adequately sustained, it might provoke the rejoinder that the only logical and coherent development of Socrates’ thought is into Plato’s. If this were so, then my argument would be without effect for the practice of philosophy even though it would apply to the thought of Socrates as a historical individual. The upshot would be to characterize this thought as incomplete and its completion as necessarily falling prey to the critique of metaphysics, which would suggest that another,

non-metaphysical, coherent extension of Socrates' thought could not be the centre-piece of a thorough conception of philosophy. In this way, the identity of philosophy and metaphysics might again be established. This leads in the second place to a critique of Vlastos' assertion that method constitutes the specific difference between Socrates and Plato.

### 1. Vlastos' Socrates

Gregory Vlastos' argument that distinguishes Socrates(E) of the early aporetic dialogues from Socrates(M) of the middle dialogues (which he takes to be representative of Plato's own views in that period) does not rest on any argument external to the Platonic corpus—even though he needs evidence from Xenophon and Aristotle to show that the difference is not simply that of two stages of Plato's views but that the first is equivalent to Socrates himself.<sup>16</sup> It rests on a periodization of Plato's writings that reveals three stages in the internal development of the problematic established at the first stage.<sup>17</sup> In that sense, it is a philosophical, not only a historical, argument. Nevertheless, it does not contradict historical evidence nor does it introduce an eccentric periodization. The periodization is the basis for an argument that the elenctic method of inquiry that characterizes the early Socratic, aporetic dialogues is replaced by the mathematical method in Plato's middle period that provides the basis for the metaphysical doctrine of the forms.<sup>18</sup> Vlastos' philosophical periodization thus rests on the assumption that the method of inquiry is a fundamental characteristic of Socrates and Plato's philosophies and, by implication, that method is fundamental to philosophy.

The periodization proposed by Vlastos allows him to define ten features of Socratic philosophy in distinction from the positions adopted by Plato, though put into the mouth of Socrates to be sure, in the middle period.<sup>19</sup> I will focus on only two of these features. First,

the most significant difference for Vlastos is that the dialogues of Plato's middle period defend a metaphysical theory of the forms, and a theory of recollection whereby the soul comes to know the forms, whereas Socrates has no such theory.<sup>20</sup> Second, while the middle dialogues seek and find demonstrable knowledge, Socrates seeks knowledge elenctically and expresses consistently his failure to find such knowledge.

The other differences are as follows: The most global one is that Socrates is exclusively a moral philosopher, whereas the middle dialogues concern themselves with all manner of philosophical problems. Further features of Plato's middle period include the existence of a tripartite model of the soul, knowledge of mathematical sciences, and a political theory that ranks constitutions, in marked contrast to their absence in the early dialogues. Also, the enduring concerns with *eros* and piety are reformulated due to their connection to the theory of the forms in the middle period. Moreover, the Socratic populist conception of philosophy, pursued by adversarial investigation, is supplanted by an elitist conception expounded didactically—in which the role of interlocutors has shrunk to indicating assent or requesting clarification. These features are no less important than the two which I have selected. However, it is arguable that they are, in a philosophical not a biographical sense, derived from the two selected features since the theory of forms provides the condition of possibility for the emergence of various more local theories under the unifying rubric of the forms and hooks themes previously present in Socrates' dialogues to the theory of the forms in a didactic and conclusive manner. In any case, the features of Vlastos' differentiation most relevant to the critique of metaphysics are the two selected.

The absence of a theory of forms or of a doctrine of immortality in Socrates is sufficient to suggest that the critique of metaphysics errs fundamentally in conflating Socrates and Plato. Consider one of Nietzsche's formulations: "Death, change, age, as well as procreation

and growth, are for them [philosophers] objections – refutations even. What is, does not *become*; what becomes, *is* not . . . . These senses, *which are so immoral as well*, it is they which deceive us about the *real* world.”<sup>21</sup> Only with the theory of forms would the notion of reality as unchanging being—which is Nietzsche’s target—have emerged as the *denial* of the reality of change and the positing of a real world beyond change. As Vlastos summarizes “[c]losely related to their inaccessibility to sense-perception is . . . their *absolute exemption from change*.”<sup>22</sup>

This suggestion of error could be proven through the argument that the theory of forms is only possible through the substitution of the mathematical method for that of elenctic inquiry. Vlastos makes this assertion. “[I]t was in the course of pursuing such [mathematical] studies himself and to a great extent *because* of them that Plato had reached the metaphysical outlook that characterized his middle period.”<sup>23</sup> The only proof of this claim that Vlastos adduces is a citation from *Republic* (521c10-523a3) in which Plato himself makes the claim. “What is that study, Glaucon, that pulls the soul away from becoming to being? . . . It seems to belong to that study we are now investigating which naturally leads to insight, for in every way it draws us towards reality, though no one uses it aright.”<sup>24</sup> This proof could of course be supplemented by an explanation of the Greek understanding of mathematical solids and, in particular, Plato’s version of this. But, it seems to me that this would prove only that *in Plato’s understanding* mathematics leads to a theory of forms, which is hardly surprising. A different understanding of mathematics, such as that of modern algebra, to take an obvious example, would not necessarily lead to a theory of forms. Other aspects or developments of Greek mathematics might also be ambiguous in this respect. Plato’s assertion, which Vlastos seems to take at face value, does not establish the truth of Vlastos’ claim that the theory of forms *derives from* the shift to a mathematical method. This claim is rather a consequence of Vlastos’ assertion, noted earlier, that method is fundamental to philosophy. Such an

assertion itself needs to be held up to scrutiny. Leaving this issue aside for the moment, it is nevertheless clear enough that the shift to mathematical method and the theory of forms emerge both co-temporaneously and in close theoretical relation in Plato's middle period. This co-emergence is what is central for a critique of the conflation of Socrates and Plato by the critique of metaphysics.

The essence of the Socratic elenctic method is the search for the relevant *eidōs*, a practice that I will call 'essential definition,' through the dialogical examination of proffered answers. The 'what is x?' question—what is piety, justice, friendship, etc.—provokes answers that often confound specific examples of 'x' with the essence that is being sought (though the answers can also be wrong in other ways). Dialogic inquiry requires the assertion of Socrates' ignorance, since, if he knew, the better course would be to ask him or for him to volunteer to tell. Similarly, the claim of the interlocutors to know underlies the proffering of answers. The elenctic method is given expression in the aporetic form of Plato's early dialogues and the depiction of the way of life of a philosopher who has to live with the failure of the search for knowledge.

The elenctic method is not reflexively justified in the early dialogues. Vlastos points out that "[h]e asks: What is the form piety? What is the form beauty? And so forth. What is form? He never asks."<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Socrates' method rests upon a rule of dialogue upon which Socrates consistently insists. "Say only what you believe." It is this rule which, as Vlastos shows, distinguishes the *elenchus* from *eristic* and, if one may generalize, Socrates from the Sophists. It is not just that Socrates is contentious, but that his contention is driven by a search for an adequate answer.<sup>26</sup> Socrates rules out what we have come to call Devil's-advocate arguments as well as surmises which the interlocuter will not assert as his beliefs. Thus, Vlastos proposes this definition of the elenchus: "The Socratic elenchus is a search for



moral truth by question-and-answer adversary argument in which a thesis is debated only if asserted as the answerer's own belief and is regarded as refuted only if its negative is deduced from his own beliefs."<sup>27</sup>

Elenctic questioning contains an extraordinary assumption which can be isolated if one keeps in mind that Socrates does expect to discover truth in this way. At least, if one accepts his expressions of disappointment at face value, the *elenchus* is not an exercise in which the experience of *aporia* is the intended result—unlike, for example, the arguments intended to produce equipollence and suspended judgment in skepticism.<sup>28</sup> The intended result is knowledge of essential definition, though *aporia* is ubiquitously the actual result which must be incorporated into the life of the philosopher. If one assumes, as Socrates does, that the answers proffered can either be brought to contradiction or can be shown to state a truth, then it is supposed that, in Vlastos' words, "side by side with all their false beliefs, ... interlocutors always carry truth somewhere or other in their belief systems" because, if they did not, then false beliefs could not, without didactic interruption, necessarily be shown to entail contradictions.<sup>29</sup> This supposition could have, at most, inductive evidence.<sup>30</sup> It amounts to assuming that no person, at least no one that Socrates might encounter, can be supposed to live an entirely mistaken moral belief-system. In our time, so it seems to me at least, it is precisely this worry that haunts our thinking. After a century of world wars, Nazis, ethnic cleansing, mass media, advertising, and the like, one suspects that humans can be entirely cut off from moral truth. Perhaps it is for this reason that nowadays one sees an incipient faith in transcendental intervention into human affairs alongside a radical skepticism with regard to a truth of morality at all—two complementary beliefs that would have both been unimaginable to Socrates.

## 2. Ontologization of Essence

Vlastos pinpoints the substitution of a mathematical method for an elenctic one in *Meno* (81dff.) where Socrates aims to illustrate that all learning is recollection through questioning a slave boy about the area of a square.<sup>31</sup> He argues that this episode demonstrates the reach of Socrates' elenctic method. "Only as far as convicting him [the slave boy] of error. Elenchus is good for this, and only this. It does not begin to bring him to the truth he seeks. ... To bring him to it Socrates *must shed the adversative role* to which persistence in elenctic argument would have kept him. Shed it he does."<sup>32</sup> Socrates steps beyond the *elenchus* in the moment that he extends the diagram in a manner that makes visible to the boy that it is the diagonal of a square that produces another square with twice the area of the original square (84d). Though Socrates states immediately prior that "I simply ask him questions without teaching him,"<sup>33</sup> his drawing is such as to elicit a response that could not be elicited by any amount of showing contradictions in incorrect answers. We might even be willing to assert, since a picture is said to be worth a thousand words, that he inserts the equivalent of a didactic discourse at this point in his questioning.

Here, where the mathematical demonstrative method incipiently replaces the elenctic one, is the origin of the theory that the soul recollects atemporal forms which have been forgotten at birth that becomes full-blown in Plato's middle period and utterly changes the role of Socrates in the dialogues. A demonstrative method will tend to take didactic form resulting in a conception of education as instruction based on a distinction between a knowing elite and an untutored mass.<sup>34</sup> Its basis is the ontologization of the distinction between opinion and knowledge in which knowledge is taken to be a 'higher reality' that can be contrasted with appearance.

This ontologization is clearest in *Republic* (475cff.) where the discussion begins from the question of who are the true philosophers. They are said to be lovers of spectacles, like those who love the Dionysiac festivals, with the specification that the spectacle philosophers love is that of truth. This specification turns on the distinction between those others who enjoy many exemplars of beautiful things but who do not, as do philosophers, “delight in the nature of the beautiful in itself.”<sup>35</sup> That is to say, philosophers delight in the essence of the beautiful itself, the *eidos*, which shines through all its exemplars. It is the practice of essential definition which defines the philosopher. The one who sees only beautiful things is then said to be dreaming, whereas the one who sees the essence is awake (476c). Further, seeing the essence means that one has knowledge, rather than merely opinion (476d). Then it is stated that knowledge is of things that are, whereas that which is not is not knowable. Thus, “knowledge pertains to that which is and ignorance of necessity to that which is not” (477a). Finally, it is settled that opinion is mid-way between knowledge and ignorance and thus “partakes of both, of *to be* and *not to be* ...” (478e). This is the point at which essential definition becomes ontologized. When it is said that knowledge of the essence is knowledge of greater being, or that opinion not only lacks knowledge of beautiful things but also partakes to a lesser degree in their being, the scale of knowledge is matched to a scale of being. Essence is ontologized.

The essence of this ontologization of essence is that form is taken to be a higher reality than an instance of the form. It is justified by Plato in his discussion of the divided line (509d – 511e) whereby intelligibility is distinguished from visibility. Thus far, in simply making the distinction, he agrees with Socrates. But the key argument of the divided line is that its various levels are not merely distinct, but that “they participate in clearness and precision in the same degree as their objects partake of truth and reality” (511e).<sup>36</sup> The order

of truth, or intelligibility, is thus identified with, or mapped onto, the order of reality, or ontology. This step beyond Socrates is the basis for the allegory of the cave, which is designed to illustrate it, and for the claim that philosophers perceive a higher reality than the rest of humanity. Thus emerges the identity of truth with being beyond becoming.

### 3. The Myth of the Real World

It is this conception of philosophy as based on a distinction between real and apparent worlds, that is set into place in Plato's middle period, which is the object of the critique of metaphysics. This is perhaps most straightforwardly demonstrated with reference to the section of Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* entitled "How the 'Real World' at last Became a Myth," subtitled "History of an Error," where it is the distinction between the real and apparent worlds that he is concerned to criticize.<sup>37</sup> For Nietzsche, Socrates, Plato and Christianity are compacted due to their common dependence on this distinction.<sup>38</sup> To distinguish the real world from the apparent one is an expression of a "denial of life" whereby one flees the world of becoming for the security of unchanging being. Vlastos' distinction of Socrates from Plato shows that such security would only be provided by an ontologization that associates knowledge with higher being such that one could move higher toward true being away from opinion. It is hard to see how Socrates' *aporia* denotes security.

However, even though it seems to be the ontologization of essential definition in Plato's middle period that is at issue, the search for essential definition itself is included in Nietzsche's critique. Nietzsche sees no important distinction between Socrates and Plato in this respect. But if Socrates did not ontologize the distinction between opinion and knowledge as Plato did, would Nietzsche's critique still hit its mark?

Note that the first stage of the myth of the real world begins, not with reference to Socrates, but to Plato. “The real world, attainable to the wise, the pious, the virtuous man – he dwells in it, *he is it*. (Oldest form of the idea, relatively sensible, simple, convincing. Transcription of the proposition ‘I, Plato, *am* the truth.’)”<sup>39</sup> Attainability is key here, and it must be ontologization that achieves attainability. If the idea of the ‘real world’ were merely that of essences as ‘mental constructs’ or ‘abstractions’ for example, there would be nothing “attainable” about it. Or, perhaps more accurately, it would be always and everywhere attained and thus irrelevant to Nietzsche’s critique—which turns on the notion of the wise man as having a way of being different from, and higher than, others. In Nietzsche’s historical schematization, attainability comes first; unattainability is referred to in the subsequent stages as a Kantian kind of ‘backing off’ from attainability. Could the story work for Nietzsche if a Socratic unattainable prior stage were added? Obviously, Socrates would have to be portrayed as an incipient, weak Plato, headed toward attainment of the ideal world but not determined enough to arrive. This, indeed, is Nietzsche’s version of Socrates in the context of the critique of metaphysics in which he is united with Plato by a common decadence. However, this portrayal cannot properly resolve the problem of dialectics when it is understood as elenctic method. Elenctic method, as we have seen from Vlastos, is levelling precisely because of the search for truth combined with the failure of both the interlocuters and Socrates himself to attain it. Anyone possessing the truth would be raised to a didactic position that would be the undoing of the elenchus. This is what happens in Plato’s middle period in which the dialogues simultaneously overcome *aporia* and become didactic. Nietzsche himself seems to be aware of this shift in dialectic when he calls the Platonic dialogue “that frightfully self-satisfied and childish kind of dialectics,” whereas with regard to Socrates he says that “[i]t is above all the defeat of a *nobler* taste; with dialectics the rabble

gets on top.”<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche cannot have it both ways. If Socrates is the plebian decadent dialectician, he cannot also be the Ur-Platonic didactic truth.

Thus, the first stage of Nietzsche’s story of the real world could not begin with Socrates since it would have to confront the aporetic nature of his search and the disjunction introduced when Plato’s ontologization makes it attainable. If Nietzsche wants to aim his critique at essential definition itself, it cannot be either for its attainability or its comforting result. In this sense, imitation of Socrates and imitation of Plato are different precisely at the point where Nietzsche spells out his criterion. In his words, “one must imitate Socrates and counter the dark desires by producing a permanent *daylight* – the daylight of reason.”<sup>41</sup> But aporetic failure is no permanent daylight. It leaves one with the question of how to live without knowledge, with a search for daylight that cannot abolish the night. Thus, while Nietzsche’s critique certainly takes aim at both Plato and Socrates, it does so only by conflating them exactly where Vlastos has established a distinction. If the story of the real world were to begin with an aporetic search for truth, it would have to address the Socratic paradox that explodes a simple opposition between attainability and unattainability. The *eidōs* is both present—ie. always attained—in every apprehension of a case as a ‘case’ of an ‘x’ and yet unattainable through definition. Nietzsche’s critique only strikes its mark after an ontologization of essential definition such as is accomplished in Plato’s turn from the elenctic to the mathematical method. His critique thus doesn’t go ‘all the way back’ into the origin of moral philosophy, but stops at the metaphysical guarantee that writes morality into the structure of Being.

At the final stage of the myth of the real world, “the moment of the shortest shadow,” which was Nietzsche’s own time, he asks whether the abolition of the ‘real world’ returns us to the apparent world. The answer is ‘no,’ because “with the real world we have also

abolished the apparent world.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, once the distinction is made, we cannot return to one side of the distinction by negating the other side, since they are co-dependent on the making of the distinction itself. With the final words of the story, “incipit Zarathustra, Nietzsche indicates that his myth *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is an attempt to answer this question. Given his conflation of Socrates and Plato, we can expect that this myth will articulate a position entirely apart from the search for essential definitions and thus beyond both morality and dialectic. The present argument, however, suggests that the critique of metaphysics as otherworldliness goes back only as far as the ontologization of essence. It thus leaves us post-Nietzscheans in a position analogous to that of Socrates: essential definition, *elenchus*, and *aporia*.

#### **4. The Role of the Instance in Socratic Essential Definition**

The previous argument suggests that the distinction between Socrates and Plato that Vlastos’ scholarship justifies relegates the critique of metaphysics to the legacy of Plato’s middle period defined by the ontologization of the forms and the doctrine of immortality and makes space for a non-metaphysical conception of philosophy stemming from Socrates’ aporetic dialectic. However, this argument, even if correct, would be without merit for an alternative conception of philosophy if it were the case that the aporetic Socratic dialogues allowed of only one logical and coherent development—that put in place by Plato during his middle period. In other words, though the critique of metaphysics would not apply to Socrates, it would apply to any logical development of his thought. Socrates’ thought would be exempt only at the price of being an incomplete expression of philosophy whose completion would not be exempt. Thus, I would like to indicate in briefest outline the

credibility of another line of development of Socrates' philosophy than that established in Plato's middle period.

I will begin from a general observation about the practice of essential definition. There is an ambiguity in the notion of essential definition, an ambiguity which pervades both Socrates and Plato's accounts. The ambiguity is whether searching for an *eidos* refers to apprehending the *eidos* itself or giving an account of the *eidos*. In other words, is it apprehension of essence or definition of the essence that is at issue. In Plato, for example, apprehension of the essence is taken to be equivalent to, or the necessary and sufficient condition of, giving a definition of the essence. In other words, the giving of an account is not thought as distinct from the apprehension. Thus, when one cannot give an account, it motivates the judgment that the essence is not apprehended. Similarly, the giving of a definition, suffices as proof of the apprehension of the essence. This must seem less compacted to us than to either Socrates or Plato.

Let us return to the point in *Republic* discussed earlier where philosophers are distinguished from the lovers of other spectacles. "The lovers of sounds and sights, I said, delight in beautiful tones and colours and shapes and in everything that art fashions out of these, but their thought is incapable of apprehending and taking delight in the nature of the beautiful in itself (476b)."<sup>43</sup> The apprehension or non-apprehension of the beautiful itself that allows its enjoyment is here attributed to thought. Fair enough, it is to be expected that for the philosopher apprehension and definition would coincide, but it is also the case that for the non-philosopher non-apprehension and the inability to give an account coincide. "He, then, who believes in beautiful things, but neither believes in beauty itself nor is able to follow when someone tries to guide him to the knowledge of it" (476c).<sup>44</sup> Not believing in beauty itself here is taken as, not exactly equivalent to, but necessarily connected to not



being able to follow an account. Not being able to follow an account is, of course, a lesser criterion than not being able to produce one. One may then say: The one who does not apprehend beauty itself can neither produce nor follow a definition of the beautiful.

The compaction between apprehension of the *eidōs* and being able to define it does not originate with the ontologization of essence in Plato's middle period. It is already present in the early Socratic dialogues. Consider end of the *Euthyphro*, where the failure of the search for the *eidōs* of holiness leads Socrates to remark "For if you didn't know clearly what holiness and unholy are there's no way that you would have taken it upon yourself to prosecute your father" (15d).<sup>45</sup> Here, being unable to give a definition is taken necessarily to involve an inability, or unwillingness, to act in such a way that contains the assumption that one apprehends the essence. The lack of apprehension of the *eidōs* is taken as a sufficient criterion for inability or unwillingness, not only to follow an account, but to *act* as if such an account had been given. The compaction between apprehension and definition thus extends to action. In Nietzsche's phrase, reason = virtue = happiness.

To be sure, this comment by Socrates is ironic, given that Euthyphro is engaged in the prosecution of his father and is thus acting exactly as if he had the knowledge in question. Indeed, he believed at the outset of the dialogue that he had such knowledge. Does he believe it at the end? The situation is more equivocal. There is no reason to believe that he has renounced the claim to know, since he does not explicitly do so. However, he does rush off when asked to begin again, indicating that he does not think it likely that he can define his knowledge and defend it successfully in dialogue with Socrates.<sup>46</sup> It is thus unresolved whether the dialogue has had any effect on Euthyphro's claim to know or his willingness to act as if he did know. Nonetheless, Socrates' point that he would have "both been worried about the gods and ashamed before men" if he acted without knowledge is meant as a

conclusion from the failure to define the *eidōs*. The point here is not that the Socratic compaction of apprehension and definition is compelling for non-philosophers, or others—it very likely isn't since the philosophical calling is on this view precisely the acceptance of the rule of reason in distinction from 'the many'—but rather that it is compelling for Socrates and that he tries to urge it upon others in elenctic inquiry. This compaction is thus one of the assumptions of elenctic inquiry. This is partly recognized by Vlastos when he notes that one of the consequences of the rule of elenctic inquiry—say only what you believe—is that it has an “existential dimension” which is “a challenge to his fellows to change their life.”<sup>47</sup>

Compaction of apprehension of an *eidōs* with giving a satisfactory account of it, such that the process can be called 'essential definition' in both Socrates and Plato, disallows certain other possibilities. For example, it disallows the possibility that an artist, or political actor, apprehends the relevant essence when rendering it in a specific instance, yet in remaining focussed on the instance cannot give a discursive account of what universal it is an instance of. Against this compaction, a greater possibility of differentiation may be suggested: 1] the wise person who apprehends and also can define the essence, 2] the philosopher who apprehends and fails to define the essence, 3] the 'artist/politician,' or 'genius of the instance' who apprehends the essence in the instance and who does not attempt to define it—due perhaps to the felt need to act/make immediately (which requires that one remain focussed on the instance), and 4] those who see only instances (but in this case instances of what? Not instances but 'many different occasions') and are stuck in opinion. Thus, there might be two intermediate positions between wisdom and opinion that are not apparent to either Socrates or Plato due to the compaction of apprehension and discursive definition in their conception of the *eidōs*. One of these is directly relevant to the interpretation of the

philosopher in the Socratic dialogues as one who fails to give an account of the *eidōs* but nevertheless remains committed to the search for it. In this case, the difference between Socrates and Plato can be described through the degree of success with which they define the essence: Socrates apprehends the essence but cannot define it. Plato apprehends the essence and defines it. Given their common assumption that essential definition requires both apprehension and discursive definition, Socrates' search leads to *aporia* whereas Plato's leads to knowledge.

One might suggest that the essence is nevertheless always there, always 'attained,' since it is apprehended by all whenever they cite instances. Recall that Socrates does not disallow the instances as instances when they are proffered; he disallows them as the *eidōs* itself. However, definition of this apprehension is rarely attained. Socrates' experience is one of continuous failure. Given a failure to define, but an apprehension, instances must remain crucial. This is the essence of a non-ontological definition of essence. Since the essence has no being outside or above the instance, the instance cannot be shunted aside for a straightforwardly universal, essential, knowledgeable discourse.

For Plato, the search for essential definition must be successful, at least in principle. Its success is guaranteed due to the ontologization of essential definition. Only philosophers apprehend the form; the others do not; therefore they do not apprehend true reality. Falsity has no object at all because the object of falsity has no reality, unlike the object of knowledge. The object of opinion is mid-way between being and non-being since it partakes of both truth and falsity. Thus, in Plato, when philosophers apprehend the form and can give an account of apprehending the form, they move beyond sensuous instances and go directly to the forms themselves. The philosophical teaching is indifferent to bodily pleasures (*Republic* 485e), preaches the immortality of the soul (*Republic* 611a) and the likeness of the

soul to eternal being (*Republic* 611e), and prefers the eternal laws to the laws of one's own city. This is indeed the object of Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics. The philosopher, since his insight into essence is also a higher reality, discards instances of the beautiful because he has no need for them to apprehend the beautiful itself. The beautiful itself is apprehended directly.

The Socratic aporetic dialogues do not move beyond the instances which animate them, whereas it is the purpose of Plato to do exactly that. The possibilities that I have raised here are not meant to be definitive. They have been raised solely to pose the question of whether a different development of Socrates' initiation of moral philosophy other than Platonic metaphysics were possible. This is meant in a logical, rather than a historical, sense. The question is not without historical interest, since it implies an assessment of to what extent Hellenic schools such as skepticism, Stoicism or Cynicism might validly claim Socrates as an ancestor. But in a logical sense the issue is rather whether a different development of Socratic moral philosophy was foreclosed by the Platonic option. Moreover, the question poses the issue of whether a continuation of Socratic moral philosophy is a valid option in the present post-metaphysical conjuncture. I am suggesting that the compaction of apprehension and definition in both Socrates and Plato could be disaggregated in a direction that would continue Socrates' fidelity to instances through the artist/politician whose 'genius of the instance' bears a certain similarity to the Socratic philosopher's failure to define essence even while it is being apprehended.

## **5. Philosophy, Metaphysics and Method**

If we recall that Vlastos' distinction of Socrates from Plato rests on the assumption that the method of inquiry is a fundamental characteristic of Socrates and Plato's philosophies

and, by implication, that method is fundamental to philosophy, it is significant that the present inquiry, while beginning from Vlastos' distinction, has come to define the difference as one of 'fidelity to instances.' Vlastos subtitled his essay on the Socratic *elenchus* "method is all."<sup>48</sup> The present argument suggests that, not only is method not all, it is not the main thing. Vlastos notes that elenctic method is not reflexively justified in the aporetic dialogues, that "[t]he search for those general properties of forms which distinguish them systematically from non-forms is never on his elenctic agenda."<sup>49</sup> Vlastos' interpretation of Socrates at this point seems to waver. On one hand, the question of method is the crucial difference that allows him to distinguish Socrates from Plato. On the other hand, the question of method is never explicitly addressed by Socrates, though it is by Plato.<sup>50</sup> If one wishes to argue for the superiority of the elenctic method to the mathematical one (as Vlastos clearly does), then one would suppose that the failure to articulate it as a method, or to reflexively justify it, is a significant failure.

The present argument suggests that while an elenctic method can be abstracted from Socrates' search for knowledge as depicted in the early aporetic dialogues, it is misleading to use this method—which has been abstracted by the interpreter, was never articulated by Socrates, and was never associated by Socrates with his practice of philosophy—as a mark of the specific difference between Socrates and Plato. As noted above, Vlastos claims that the theory of forms is only possible through the substitution of the mathematical method for that of elenctic inquiry. What he proved, however, was only their co-emergence. It is likely that the difference between Socrates and Plato would be better marked by the difference in substantive philosophy which consists in the ontologization of essential definition.

The difference in substantive philosophy consists in the two characteristic Platonic doctrines that emerge coincidentally with, and are justified by, the turn to a mathematical

model of knowledge: the theory of forms (established through the ontologization of essence) and the doctrine of immortality (based upon the theory of forms due to the higher reality of mind than body). Socrates, by contrast, is not committed to the doctrine of immortality. In the early dialogue *Apology* (40b-d) he refers to it merely as one of two possibilities and impossible to know, whereas in the middle dialogue *Phaedo* (63b, 64a, 114d) he presents it as a true doctrine. It is thus more likely that the doctrine of immortality provides the motive for the theory of forms, the mathematical method, the ontologization of essence and the theory of recollection that would account for them. Or, more precisely, that the move beyond matter to spirit emerged simultaneously in these methodical and ontological realms. This, then, is the essence of metaphysics.

It is not elenctic method but fidelity to instances that defines the practice of inquiry of Socrates in distinction from Plato's otherworldliness. A continuation of Socrates' inquiry in which this fidelity to instances is central to philosophy would not be in the direction of Plato and would not succumb to Nietzsche's and Heidegger's critique of metaphysics. Such fidelity to instances characterizes those other features of Socrates' philosophy outlined by Vlastos that do not refer simply to the absence of Platonic doctrines: elenctic inquiry with aporetic result, populist orientation (he debates anybody) and a solely moral orientation.<sup>51</sup> Such fidelity to instances is the essence of a non-metaphysical philosophy. It does not consist in a rejection of universality and essential definition, but rather the necessary enactment of the search for these within a concrete domain that is tied to a relevant and unsurpassable instance. It is necessarily and universally embodied. In this sense, it is similar to Nietzsche's notion of the "spiritualization of the senses" as a way of overcoming the body-mind duality. "The spiritualization of sensuality is called *love*: it is a great triumph over Christianity. A further triumph is our spiritualization of *enemity*. It consists in profoundly grasping the value

of having enemies ... .”<sup>52</sup> Spiritualization in this sense is not opposed to philosophy as Nietzsche thought, but is, in my view, the very meaning of the fidelity to instances in Socratic philosophy. The discursive knowledge through which metaphysics elaborates itself is built on the lie that instances can be dispensed with, passed over, in an ascension to the immortal, eternal. But this lie does not come with the practice of essential definition that is essential to philosophy itself but with the domination of irrelevant instances by skeletal universals that emerges when thought’s form is divorced from its content: the lie of advance protection that is called ‘method’ circumscribes the addressees of question and answer, and drones uninterruptedly. The joy of Socrates is constant surprise, the necessity to begin every inquiry again with the appearance of a new interlocutor or new topic. Philosophy is allied at its core to this newness, this lack of protection.

Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” in *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* trans. Fred D Weick and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) p. 17, the reference to Plato and Kant is on p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” in *On Time and Being*, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) Vol. 1, aphorism 261 and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) preface.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 212.

<sup>7</sup> A detailed account of such changes is available in Werner J. Dannhauser, *Nietzsche’s View of Socrates* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in R. J. Hollingdale (trans.) *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) in “The Problem of Socrates,” aphorism 2, p. 29-30.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in “The Problem of Socrates,” aphorism 10, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Compare the sections in *Twilight of the Idols* that deal with “The Problem of Socrates” and “How the ‘Real World’ at last Became a Myth.”

<sup>11</sup> Hugh H. Benson, “The Dissolution of the Problem of the Elenchus” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. 13, 1995, p. 47n6.

<sup>12</sup> See the summary by Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith which suggests that “Vlastos’ understanding of the *elenchos*, however, has failed to generate even a consensus, much less universal agreement, among scholars. Most of the subsequent scholarship on the topic has sought to show the ways in which Vlastos’ account fails, and several alternative accounts have been offered. None of these either, has won much support among other scholars ...” in “The Socratic *Elenchos*?” in Gary Alan Scott (ed.) *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchos in Plato’s Dialogues and Beyond* (University Park: Pennsylvania State



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University Press, 2002) p. 146. In referring to this assessment, I am not suggesting that anything substantive is proven by a lack of scholarly consensus but rather indicating that the direction of the vast majority of scholarly attention paid to Vlastos' thesis is strictly toward its adequacy as an account of Socrates in Plato's dialogues and not, as is presently intended, toward a substantive philosophical issue.

<sup>13</sup> There is an established, even if superficial, figure of thought which would diagnose the moment in which philosophy 'went wrong' in order to (once, and finally, this time) set it right. The sense of origin on which this figure of criticism rests suggests that the erroneous 'moment' itself is a pure error in the sense that it was not prefigured by any prior development. If it were so prefigured, it could not be extracted in order to set philosophy aright. Thus, the error must be understood as an internal fall deriving entirely from an external pressure. This is not a viable way to understand the intrusion of metaphysics into philosophy. Moreover, this figure fails to understand that the notion of 'finally setting it [truth, philosophy, metaphysics] right' undermines itself because it depends precisely on a metaphysical notion of truth.

<sup>14</sup> I have attempted to show how this is the case in another essay entitled "In Praise of Fire: Responsibility, Manifestation, Polemos, Circumspection" *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, Vol. 4 – 2004.

<sup>15</sup> I should clarify that this question does not rest on an assumption that a 'development' of Socrates' philosophy, with regard to essentials and not merely new applications, is indeed required for an adequate practice of philosophy. I later formulate this 'development' in terms of removing an ambiguity in the practice of essential definition through the notion of 'fidelity to instances.' This would be a clarification within the non-metaphysical Socratic orientation. However, it does imply that the fact, noted by Vlastos, that the reflexive justification of the elenchus is never addressed by Socrates, has a significance that he does not appreciate. A contemporary analysis, unlike the practice of Socrates, has to seek such a justification—which is precisely what Vlastos attempts. Vlastos' imputation of A and B assumptions to Socrates in order to sustain the claim that the elenchus leads to positive moral knowledge seems a rather unwarranted leap in some respects comparable to Plato's ontologization of essence. For this reason, I am inclined to accept the argument that Vlastos' error here is with respect to the concept of 'proof' that he attributes to Socrates put forth by

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Richard Kraut in response to Vlastos' original (1983) paper, "Comments on Gregory Vlastos, 'The Socratic Elenchus,'" *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. 1, 1983, pp. 59-70. However, my current argument is different from that put forward by Kraut insofar as he follows, or perhaps initiated, the main orientation of scholarship to the critical analysis of Vlastos' account of the elenchus as practiced by Socrates. My orientation focusses rather on the centrality of method to the distinction which is not addressed in this scholarship.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) chapter 3. This argument for the historical Socrates is not important for my argument, however. Though he incorrectly claims that Vlastos does not consult Xenophon in this matter, even if Lloyd P. Gerson is justified to say "I do not think that there is the slightest basis for such a confident separation, other than perhaps Vlastos' *a priori* judgment about what *his* Socrates would or would not say," it is enough for my current argument that "I believe, along with most scholars, that the two fundamental pillars of Plato's speculative and systematic philosophy are the separate existence of Forms and the immortality of the soul. ... The dialogue *Phaedo* is the first dialogue in which arguments for both claims are offered." "*Elenchos*, Protreptic and Platonic Philosophizing" in Gary Alan Scott (ed.) *Does Socrates Have a Method?*, p. 221.

<sup>17</sup> Vlastos' argument makes a distinction between the Socrates of the early elenctic dialogues (*Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Republic I*) and the Socrates of the middle dialogues (*Cratylus*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic II-X*, *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*), referring also to a transitional period between early and middle dialogues (*Euthydemus*, *Hippias Major*, *Lysis*, *Menexenus*, *Meno*) and a late period (*Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Philebus*, *Laws*). While I refer, for the sake of simplicity, simply to a distinction between Socrates and Plato, Vlastos' rendering pays careful homage to the fact that both Socrates are artifacts of Plato's dialogues. The simplicity of my terminology does not, in the present context, obscure the detailed point being made by Vlastos. Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, pp. 46-7; cf. Gregory Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) additional note 1.1, p. 135 where the transitional period is not yet distinguished from the early one.

<sup>18</sup> Vlastos has pointed out that, in distinction from the middle dialogues where reference to method is common, the early dialogues make no reference to a special method of

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philosophical inquiry. “They are constrained by rules that he does not undertake to justify.” That is to say, the question of method has become a thematic issue for Plato in the middle period. This is not to say that the Socrates of the early dialogues has no method, but only that its reflexive justification is not posed as an issue, that “Socrates’ inquiries display a pattern of investigation whose rationale he does not investigate.” Gregory Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, pp. 1, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, pp. 47-9.

<sup>20</sup> Vlastos argues that “the irreconcilable difference between Socrates(E) and Socrates(M) could have been established by this criterion even if it had stood alone.” *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, p. 53, italics throughout removed. It is pertinent to my later argument for the non-priority of method that this major stand-alone criterion is that of the theory of forms not that of method.

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 35.

<sup>22</sup> *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, p. 68.

<sup>23</sup> *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, p. 108.

<sup>24</sup> *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, p. 4, 8-9, and additional note 1.2, pp. 135-6.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> “And the term ‘suspension’ is derived from the fact that the mind being held up or ‘suspended’ so that it neither affirms nor denies anything owing to the equipollence of the matters in question.” Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. R. G. Bury (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1990) p. 74.

<sup>29</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, p. 114.

<sup>30</sup> Vlastos uses this supposition as a clue to what Socrates might have meant in disclaiming knowledge in *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, p. 114.

<sup>31</sup> Vlastos argues that the confidence of Plato in Socrates’ elenctic method undergoes a “demise” in the dialogues *Euthydemus*, *Lysis*, and *Hippias Major*, which he classes (with *Meno*) as a transitional dialogue, however this demise does not motivate Socrates to “conclude that his own ability to make personal judgments ... has been discredited.” In contrast, *Meno* shows the emergence of an alternative method and thus signifies an initial discrediting of the

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elenctic method. Gregory Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, pp. 29-33, quote from p. 32. In this sense, *Meno* seems to occupy a privileged place in Vlastos' account of the transition.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, p. 119. Italics in the original.

<sup>33</sup> In the W. K. C. Guthrie translation.

<sup>34</sup> The divided line in the *Republic*, where the distinction between opinion and knowledge is written onto a hierarchical conception of experience, is the epistemological basis for this social distinction as, contrariwise, when Husserl declares that the task of philosophy is "knowledge of opinion" the return of philosophy to Socratic dialogue has begun (even though this return is still incipient in an analogous sense to the *Meno*) since in Husserl it vies with a conception of science that is being overthrown.

<sup>35</sup> 476b. In the Paul Shorey translation.

<sup>36</sup> In the Paul Shorey translation. Francis MacDonald Cornford's translation reads "assigning to each a degree of clearness and certainty corresponding to the measure in which their objects possess truth and reality."

<sup>37</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 40-1.

<sup>38</sup> "In the great fatality of Christianity, Plato is that ambiguity and fascination called the 'ideal' which made it possible for the nobler natures of antiquity to misunderstand themselves and to step on the *bridge* which led to the 'Cross'." *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 106. There are defensible historical reasons for this compaction between Plato and Christianity which tend to reinforce the 'philosophical' reason given by Nietzsche—otherworldliness. Werner Jaeger has documented the crucial role of Greek *paideia* in transforming Christianity from a late Jewish sect into a universal force and the revival of Plato, in particular, as the mediation that preserved Greek *paideia* within Christian civilization. See *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>39</sup> *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 41.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 106, 31.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 33.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

<sup>43</sup> In the Paul Shorey translation. Francis MacDonald Cornford has: "The lovers of sights and sounds delight in beautiful tones and colours and shapes and in all the works of art into which these enter; but they have not the power of thought to behold and to take delight in

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the nature of Beauty itself.” Allan Bloom’s translation is: “ ‘The lovers of hearing and the lovers of sights, on the one hand,’ I said, ‘surely delight in fair sounds and colors and shapes and all that craft makes from such things, but their thought is unable to see and delight in the nature of the fair itself.’ ”

<sup>44</sup> In the Paul Shorey translation. Francis MacDonald Cornford has: “Now if a man believes in the existence of beautiful things, but neither believes in beauty itself nor is able to follow when someone tries to guide him to the knowledge of it ...” .

<sup>45</sup> In the Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant translation.

<sup>46</sup> One might claim that Euthyphro is rushing off to withdraw his suit because he has, under Socrates’ influence, come to realize its injustice. This would not affect the point that I am making here since such a realization would also be predicated on the coincidence of not being able to give an account, not apprehending an account, and not being able to act as if an account were given.

<sup>47</sup> *Socratic Studies*, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> *Socratic Studies*, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Socratic Studies*, p. 58.

<sup>50</sup> Moreover, as Vlastos shows, there is a sense in which Plato’s theory of recollection is a solution to the grand assumption in elenctic inquiry that false beliefs can always be brought into conflict with true beliefs that the answerer holds. The answerer can never be entirely wrong in the conduct of his life, as it were, even if his answers to specific questions are.

*Socratic Studies*, p. 29.

<sup>51</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, pp. 47-9.

<sup>52</sup> *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 43.