

others. Bedau unfortunately destroys the force and point of Williams's famous story.

Nevertheless, some useful procedural distinctions emerge in the course of the fictional cases: between *justifying* causing harm to others, and *excusing* someone from blame for doing this, i.e. it was wrong, but in the circumstances could not be helped. They also provide new lists in which some of the Holmes principles recur, but in which others too, are discovered, including Self-defence and Self-preservation; and what might turn out to be somewhat disastrous in its range of application, a 'rights' principle according to which 'one who has a right to the end has a right to some means sufficient to that end'.

In the Jim case, it is interesting to note that the further information Bedau demands is the kind of 'further information' that Kohlbergian researchers were debarred from allowing their subjects in response to their presentation of the Heinz dilemma (should Heinz steal a costly and unique drug to save the life of his spouse?) And interesting, too, to notice that, very much linked to that research, the new feminist critique of traditional approaches to ethics owed a great deal to noticing that it was women, far more than men, who had a tendency to ask for further information about context and detail.

This is a book, then, which can be recommended as a graphic and colourful way in which to approach ethical theory and the problem of making difficult moral choices. It offers a method of identifying and deploying rules of thumb which can indeed be helpful, but fiction and imagination are allowed to provide too ready an escape route in discussion of the better-known constructed cases.

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***Socratic Wisdom: The Model of Knowledge in Plato's Early Dialogues***, by Hugh H. Benson. New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2000. Pp. ix + 292. H/b £40.00.

Is there an epistemology in Plato's early, Socratic, dialogues? Hugh Benson believes there is, and has written an engaging book to show that the prevailing view that 'Socrates is no epistemologist' must be rejected (p. 1). Whose epistemology is it? As the quotation immediately preceding indicates, it is Socrates's own. Who is Socrates? Purely, Benson claims, a 'character in Plato's early dialogues' (p. 7). That character's views, however, are identical with the epistemological ideas of the historical Socrates (p. 10), and that identification, as we shall see, has serious implications for the kind of evidence to which Benson appeals in his argument. What is it to have an epistemology? It is to make knowledge 'an object of reflective examination' (p. 6, n. 13). Contrary to the

influential reading of Gregory Vlastos, Socrates is not simply an ‘ironist and moral philosopher’; he is also responsible for making the nature of knowledge one of philosophy’s central concerns.

*Socratic Wisdom* has a clear and articulate structure. Its first part examines Socrates’s dialectical method, the ‘*elenchos*’, in order to establish what Socrates thinks knowledge must be like if he believes that showing that his various interlocutors’ views are inconsistent reveals their ignorance of its nature. Its second part investigates the model of knowledge which leads Socrates to believe (as Benson claims he does) that one cannot know anything about any object unless one knows its definition, and uncovers at least an apparent conflict between the features of knowledge required by the *elenchos* and those presupposed by Socrates’s view of definition. The third and final part presents a model of knowledge which is closer to the commonsense notion of ‘understanding’ instead of the philosophical construct of ‘justified true belief’ and which, Benson argues, reduces that conflict, even if it leaves Socrates’s epistemology with two further problems: first, understanding seems very difficult to acquire; second, it appears that understanding anything requires understanding everything. Benson is not disturbed by these problems. On the contrary, he concludes that since they also exercised Plato and Aristotle, the epistemology he attributes to Socrates is historically plausible; and since they are still with us, the notion of understanding is philosophically important.

From one point of view, Benson’s book is a series of disagreements with Vlastos. In addition to the issue of Socrates’s epistemology, for example, Benson argues convincingly that the *elenchos* shows only that Socrates’s interlocutors’ beliefs are inconsistent and not, as Vlastos believed, that their definitions of the virtues are false. He rejects Vlastos’s idea that Socrates claims to know several moral truths, in apparent conflict with his profession of ignorance, and the distinction between ‘elenctic’ and ‘certain’ knowledge through which Vlastos attempted to resolve it; his careful examination of the textual evidence shows that the issue may be more complex than we have supposed. He claims that Socrates’s principle of ‘the priority of definition’ is the very strong view that one cannot know anything about an object unless one knows its definition and not the weaker (and, to my mind, more reasonable) position Vlastos attributed to him.

From another point of view, however, *Socratic Wisdom* is a straightforward continuation of Vlastos’s approach to Plato’s Socratic dialogues. Benson makes no secret of his dependence on Vlastos and of his gratitude to him. His procedure confirms both the range of problems Vlastos considered significant and the principles on which his reading of Plato depended.

One of these principles (to which Benson, I believe, adheres in his discussion of Socratic ignorance, though not in his examination of the *elenchos*) is that only explicit statements and their logical presuppositions and consequences can raise, and can be used to resolve, the philosophical and interpretative questions of Plato’s dialogues. Vlastos, for example, argued that Socrates’s

professions of ignorance of the nature of virtue, given his view that virtue requires that knowledge, seem to conflict with his confidence that he is virtuous. Benson replies, and Vlastos would have agreed, that if the texts where Socrates appears to say that he is virtuous do not in fact commit him to such a claim the conflict would disappear; he then argues that they actually don't (pp. 242–9). Perhaps Benson is right: his view is certainly worth considering. Still, even if he is, the conflict does not disappear. For, in addition to the texts where Socrates seems to say that he is virtuous, we also need to consider *the way in which the dialogues, within which he functions as a literary character, depict him*: even if he never makes Socrates assert his virtue, Plato consistently portrays him as a virtuous man—and by that I don't mean simply someone who fights bravely, obeys the gods' command, and so on, but a person with the truly extraordinary devotion to the pursuit of virtue which, in Socrates's case, constituted virtue itself. If we take seriously the view that Socrates is a literary character, we cannot begin to understand him without asking how Plato represents him; and once we do, explicit statements will often not be enough to determine the nature of Socrates's character or the philosophical issues the dialogues raise.

To interpret Socrates only on the basis of his explicit statements is, in my opinion, to try to treat him as a historical personage after all, relying on evidence which he (and not his author) seems to provide. But that is an illusion, since all the evidence, direct and indirect, is Plato's own and cannot be understood without reference to his intentions. Benson argues, for example, that because Socrates recognizes his ignorance he refrains from 'positive, bold, and extraordinary action' and adopts 'a policy of inaction' which, though not identical with virtue, is less likely to cause harm than the willingness to act (pp. 245–6). What, now, is the evidence for Socrates's life of inaction? All of it consists of various *statements* Socrates makes: he says that he did not participate in politics, that he voted against the illegal execution of the Arginousai generals and that he refused to assist in the illegal arrest of Leon; he tells Euthyphro that he should be ashamed to prosecute his father without knowing what piety is; he counsels Laches and Nicias not to offer advice regarding education without knowing the nature of virtue and refuses to do so himself; he argues that it is better to suffer injustice rather than do it; he claims that an unwise man will be better off if he is poor because he will then be able to do less and will therefore make fewer mistakes. But even if we grant that all these statements recommend inaction over action, Plato has Socrates make them as he depicts him in the process of acting—either engaging in the *elenchos* or defending it—in a manner that proved to be 'positive, bold, and extraordinary' enough to cause his own death!

One might argue, of course, that Plato does not portray Socrates as a virtuous man, and that disarming his claims to be virtuous eliminates the conflict with his professions of ignorance. But isn't Socrates virtuous? Is his life in any way deficient? What else does he need? He only lacks the knowledge he consid-

ers necessary for virtue. The logical conflict between his explicit statements now emerges as a literary paradox, a tension between his views and his practice.

Judged on its own terms, however, *Socratic Wisdom* is serious and successful. Benson's minimalist view of the *elenchos*, according to which Socrates need not believe any of the premisses he uses to show that his interlocutors are inconsistent and therefore ignorant (and nothing more) is, as I have already said, compelling. Benson claims that this implies that Socrates distinguishes between knowledge and true belief because otherwise 'it is difficult to see how he could take himself to have established the interlocutor's ignorance when he does not take himself to have established the falsehood of the interlocutor's belief' (p. 93). Benson also argues, however, that 'Socrates thinks that definitional knowledge suffices for getting things right. And the implausibility of supposing that mere knowledge of a (definitional) proposition suffices for getting things right forces us to distrust a simple-minded ... account of Socratic definitional knowledge, according to which definitional knowledge is merely the justified true belief of a definitional proposition' (p. 146).

That is why he proposes to construe Socratic knowledge on the model of understanding. But that, I think, eliminates the need to distinguish between knowledge and true belief. Since understanding is less of particular propositions than of fields (Benson cites medicine and navigation as Platonic examples, and uses gravity and history as his own), Socrates may think that inconsistent views reveal ignorance without having to attribute true beliefs to someone who happens to have, by accident, the right idea about one of a field's elements. If virtue, for example, is such a field and Charmides is ignorant of it, he may accept a definition of temperance which could eventually prove to be true, and still fail to believe it truly, as Benson thinks he does, in any but the most trivial, uninformative sense (pp. 73–5, 93). Understanding, in my view, is always of fields of interrelated propositions, and the very nature of those propositions is determined by their interrelations. Entertaining a true proposition without understanding its interrelations, therefore, does not even imply that one understands the proposition in question, and saying that one believes it truly is saying very little indeed.

Benson is not (and does not claim to be) the first author to call attention to the importance of understanding both for the interpretation of Plato and for epistemology more generally. His careful and systematic book is a significant step in the right direction, although many questions (more than I can raise in this review) remain unanswered. Benson, for example, claims that Socratic knowledge yields 'completely reliable' judgements concerning its object. But that is true neither of the *technai* with which Socrates constantly compares knowledge nor of the cases Benson himself cites: 'At least part of what we have in mind in saying that Einstein understands gravity', he writes, 'is a contrast between Einstein's cognitive states concerning gravity and most of the rest of us' (p. 213). That is true, but it does not imply that Einstein's judgements con-

cerning gravity are 'completely reliable'. He argues that 'genuine understanding', like Socratic knowledge, 'is something that few, if any people, have', but the understanding expressed in the theory of general relativity is hardly limited to Einstein himself, while no one (except perhaps for Socrates) has ever been shown to possess the knowledge pursued in Plato's early dialogues.

Still, Benson makes a strong and convincing case for trying to capture the notion of knowledge Socrates and his successors were after by means of the concept of understanding, or one of its variants. That is an idea worth pursuing, and its implications will be very significant in the long run. Benson's argument is in general both philosophically and historically plausible. My disagreement with several of his substantive positions as well as his methodological literalism does not in any way prevent me from recognizing *Socratic Wisdom* as a work to be taken seriously by everyone concerned with Plato or a more complex and engaging approach to the problems of epistemology.

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***Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism***, by Robert B. Brandom. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. Pp. 230. H/b £23.95.

*Articulating Reasons* contains a substantial introduction and six chapters, four of which have been previously published (in some form) during the last 12 years. It 'presents ideas and arguments drawn from or developing out of [Brandom's] 1994 book *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) and is aimed at readers who have 'perhaps not so much dipped into the big book but [are] curious about its themes and philosophical consequences' (pp. 35–6). A book of just 230 small pages inevitably omits much of the detail contained in a work of 741 large ones: the reader of the current book is referred to *Making It Explicit* for more on the presuppositions, motivations, and commitments of Brandom's views. So, as Brandom says, *Articulating Reasons* will contain no surprises for those already familiar with his work. But it is enormously helpful to have this succinct and accessible introduction to the work of an important, ambitious and increasingly influential philosopher. There will be many who have shared a growing awareness of the significance and originality of Brandom's ideas, but have been daunted by the sheer scale of *Making It Explicit* from studying his views at first hand. This book is the perfect way in.

Brandom sets out his stall in an introduction that identifies a series of oppositions in philosophical accounts of thought and meaning, and uses them to