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edited by
GARY ALAN SCOTT

Does SOCRATES Have a Method?

Rethinking the
Elenchus in
Plato's Dialogues
and Beyond

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response would be that both these beliefs and (a) have greater "evidential security" than their competing beliefs.⁷³ By detailing Socrates' long and varied confirmation of (3b") and disconfirmation of (2a') and (2b'), then, while also displaying how the entire process of discovery rests on both a critical and apparently unsecured proposition ("It is not lawful for Apollo to lie") and another secured by long argumentative and reflective experience (3), the oracle story emphasizes that while Socrates proceeds on assumptions, he does so not unreasonably. Those propositions that he does assume, we are assured, are those every prior attempt to overturn which has resulted in self-contradiction, while every argument where they serve as leading premises has either furthered inferences to similarly resistant apparent truths or contributed to the unmasking of a self-professed expert who, like Euthyphro, cannot make his words "stand still." That this is warrant enough for Socrates is only worrisome, then, when we forget just how many such arguments there must have been in thirty years of playing the relentless gadfly and street preacher. One function of the oracle story, then, is to remind us that by being always on the move, Socrates was best able to stand still.⁷⁴

73. For a good exposition of the contention that on Socrates' view the *elenchos* reveals falsehoods and secures truths because of the evidential strength of the agreed-upon premises, see now Adams, "Elenchos and Evidence."

74. My thanks to Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith for their commentary on this paper, as well as the many conversations concerning Socrates that we have enjoyed over the years. I am also grateful to Jennifer Reid, Debra Nails, and Gary Scott for their comments on previous versions of this paper (and Gary's invitation to contribute to this volume).

The
Socratic
Elenchos?

THOMAS C. BRICKHOUSE
and
NICHOLAS D. SMITH

Few topics in Socratic philosophy have received more attention than has "the Socratic *elenchos*." Despite the intense and extensive attention the subject has received, however, we find no general agreement about precisely what the *elenchos* is. In perhaps his most famous and most often cited work on Socrates,¹ to which we can credit much of this interest in "the Socratic method," Gregory Vlastos conceived of the *elenchos* as a method of proof that could only work given a general assumption that no one can be a consistent immoralist and a specific assumption that all of Socrates' own considered moral beliefs were consistent.² Vlastos argued that, given these assumptions, Socrates could conclude that all of his own considered moral beliefs were true.³ Accordingly, Socrates could be assured that any valid inference from moral premises in which he believed would also be true. On

1. Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*.

2. Respectively, Vlastos's "tremendous assumption" [A], "Whoever has a false moral belief will always have at the same time true beliefs entailing the negation of that false belief" (*ibid.*, 25), and the "further assumption" [B], "The set of elenctically tested moral beliefs held by Socrates at any given time is consistent" (*ibid.*, 27-28).

3. *Ibid.*, 28.

this basis, Vlastos claimed to have solved what he called "the problem of the elenchus": How could Socrates suppose that he ever proved anything with a style of argument that logically only demonstrated inconsistency among the beliefs Socrates adduced from his interlocutor?

Vlastos's 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's account fails, and several alternative accounts have been offered. None of these, either, has won much support among other scholars, who—as the three papers to which we are now responding amply show—continue to disagree even about the most basic defining traits of the *elenchos*. According to Benson, the *elenchos* requires only what Benson calls the "doxastic constraint":⁴ The interlocutor must believe the premises of an elenctic argument are true. Contra Vlastos, Benson provides impressive textual evidence against the claim that Socrates himself had to believe the premises he used in his arguments. According to McPherran, however, Socrates' interpretation of the famous oracle to Chaerephon is elenctic—but in this case, the one responsible for the oracle (Apollo or the Pythia) is not directly examined at all, and so none of the premises Socrates uses in his subsequent investigation can plausibly be held to meet the sole condition Benson proposes. Socrates' interpretive quest, therefore, cannot count as elenctic (at least in regard to the oracle) for Benson; but for McPherran, the interpretive activities count as a model of *elenchos*. Carpenter and Polansky simply despair of giving any general account of the *elenchos*.

We do not intend to offer detailed responses to *any* of the arguments above but will rather only give very brief explanations of why and where we do not find the accounts entirely compelling, though, as we have now already hinted, we find some very good evidence against each author's view in the others' arguments. Benson claims that the so-called "problem of the elenchus" cannot be solved—the *elenchos*, in his view, is not and cannot be a method for constructive philosophical discovery or development of moral doctrine. McPherran appears to be more optimistic, for he finds good reason to think that Socrates can employ elenctic arguments in constructive ways. He quietly concedes, however, that not all elenctic arguments appear to have the feature he uncovers in Socrates' interpretive debates. In this concession, he appears to disagree with Benson, who proclaims that "the *elenchos* [is] a unique form of argument with unique features" (107). Carpenter

4. Benson, 105. Vlastos calls this "the 'say what you believe' requirement" (*ibid.*, 7).

and Polansky complicate the picture even more than McPherran does, arguing that the Socratic *elenchos* actually has several functions, which cannot be given a single common analysis. Our own view is less optimistic still for the project that has occupied so many scholars. Briefly, our view is that there can be no solution to "the problem of the elenchus" and no single analysis of elenctic arguments, for the simple reason that there is no such *thing* as "the Socratic *elenchos*." Socrates argues with people in several different ways. Although it is tempting to group all or some of these ways under a single heading, "the *elenchos*," it is a temptation that should be resisted, for nothing in Plato's texts compels such a grouping, and gathering all of Socrates' various arguments under a single heading only gives rise to interpretive problems now so familiar in the literature. In brief, then, our view is that the very idea of "the Socratic *elenchos*"—and thus the notion that there is some very special "problem of the elenchus"—is an artifact of modern scholarship.

1. The "Doxastic Constraint"

According to Benson, the sole condition that must be met for a proposition to qualify as a premise in an elenctic argument is that it be believed by the interlocutor. Given only this condition, as Benson shows quite vividly, it cannot be that elenctic arguments prove any proposition true or false—at most they display an inconsistency in the interlocutor's beliefs and thus reveal some ignorance in the interlocutor. Benson recognizes, however, that even this single condition eliminates several instances of Socratic philosophizing—indeed, virtually whole early Platonic dialogues—from the elenctic category. Benson thus excludes the "speech of the laws in the *Crito*, most of the argument of the *Apology* [with the sole exception of the interrogation of Meletus, and] the prologue of the *Laches*" from consideration in his account of the *elenchos* (107). Now, we are not entirely convinced that Benson's "doxastic constraint" actually does exclude all of these: We see no reason to suppose that the speech of the laws in the *Crito*, for example, includes any premises to which Crito would not give his sincere assent. On the contrary, the substantive conclusions Socrates draws about the citizens' duty to obey the law are derived from Socrates' and Crito's *agreement* about the premises. Because the laws' argument has the effect of refuting Crito's claim that Socrates should escape, moreover, it reveals that Crito did not "speak well," or with knowledge, when he urged Socrates to escape.

Benson's approach faces a more serious problem, however. According to

the "doxastic constraint" no argument can count as elenctic unless the interlocutor actually believes the premises. But even if Socrates often insists that his interlocutors express only their own beliefs, he is also all too often willing to allow his interlocutors to answer his questions without making any such commitment—or even to give answers that they explicitly deny believing. Socrates does not simply give up the argument in the *Gorgias* when Calicles quite plainly stops giving answers he is willing to claim as his own beliefs (see *Grg.* 505d ff.), or when Thrasymachus does the same in *Republic* 1 (see *Rep.* 1.350d ff.), nor does Socrates seem at all daunted by Protagoras's arguing from a point of view that he explicitly disavows (*Prot.* 333c ff.). According to Benson's analysis, then, Socrates' arguments with these interlocutors may start out as elenctic but cease to be such the minute the interlocutor fails to satisfy the "doxastic constraint." These arguments, we are to suppose, become generic, as it were, and no longer the "unique form of argument with unique features" that we uniquely associate with Socrates. This sudden shift, however, comes with no dramatic acknowledgment from Plato's Socrates, who happily continues and draws his conclusions in each case.

We should also wonder just how strongly the "doxastic constraint" must apply in this "unique form of argument." Must the interlocutor hold the premise with any kind of confidence, or is it enough that he is willing even tentatively to affirm it? In the passages in which Socrates insists on this "say what you believe" rule, he seems to want his interlocutors to signal their assent in fairly strong ways: "For the sake of the argument" is not good enough (see *Cri.* 49c–d, *Grg.* 500b, *Prot.* 331c, *Rep.* 1.346a). In other cases, however, he says nothing about the "constraint," so we should wonder how strongly it applies in these cases. One special reason for skepticism about this comes from a feature common to many of Socrates' arguments (a feature about which Benson himself has had very important things to say in other papers): Socrates often directs his arguments—sometimes from the very beginning—toward a definition of some moral term or other. In these arguments, which always end up in *aporia*, Socrates often very deftly guides his interlocutor through several attempts to provide the sought-after definition. So what are we to make of the interlocutor's condition, in regard to the "doxastic constraint," in each successive attempt to provide a definition?⁵ It might be tempting, perhaps, to attribute to the interlocutor a belief in the

5. We are indebted, in what follows, to the very interesting analysis offered in Hope May, "Socratic Ignorance and the Therapeutic Aim of the *Elenchos*," in *Wisdom, Ignorance, and Virtue: New Essays in Socratic Studies* (suppl. *Apeiron* 30.4), ed. Mark L. McPherran (Edmonton: Academic Printing & Publishing, 1997), 37–50.

first attempted definition, given his willingness to affirm that definition at the beginning of the argument. Even if we were to concede that the "doxastic constraint" applies in first definitional attempts, however, we might well wonder whether it also applies to subsequent attempts. Socrates may hope, of course, that each new attempt is *sincere* in some way—he may want the interlocutor to suppose that each new attempt has at least sufficient initial plausibility to earn it serious scrutiny. But any evidence that the interlocutor actually believes the *first* definitional attempt may actually qualify as some evidence, at least, *against* the claim that the interlocutor believes subsequent attempts, unless a case can be made that the interlocutor's beliefs are constantly changing during the elenctic process or that the interlocutor has several inconsistent beliefs about the definition of the relevant moral term. Certainly in the last definitional attempt in the *Euthyphro*, for example, the "doxastic constraint" does not apply to Euthyphro: Socrates actually has to explain several features of the attempt—one initiated by Socrates himself—to the clueless Euthyphro (see esp. *Euthyp.* 12a and Euthyphro's very tentative assent at 12d).

Such definitional attempts in the dialogues may qualify as sincere attempts to *capture* some convictions the interlocutor holds about F-ness or F things in a definition, but that is a different matter: One might well think that F-ness is a virtue, for example, or have several strong beliefs about what things are F, without having anything like a clear or strong belief about what F-ness is. If this is so, however, and if the "doxastic constraint" is a serious constraint at all, then, according to Benson's interpretation, most (if not all) of Socrates' definitional searches must also be ruled out as nonelenctic. Such an exclusion would, of course, still leave those dialogues or parts of dialogues in which Socrates does insist on the "doxastic constraint," but we think it would leave far more Socratic argumentation *unexplained* than explained. In this case, what Benson's analysis requires threatens to make the "Socratic *elenchos*" the exception, rather than the rule, of Socratic philosophizing.

II. Socratic Interpretation

In Benson's account, it makes no sense to think that Socrates' search for truth is pursued by elenctic argument. In McPherran's interpretation, by contrast, which derives mainly from Socrates' attempt to understand the oracle to Chaerephon, it does make sense to suppose that Socrates' refutations constitute a serious and substantive attempt to uncover truth. McPherran

argues that an *interpretive* element can be identified in elenctic argument. In the case of the oracle, Socrates is presented with a claim (the oracle that no one is wiser than he is) that he regards as indubitably true—but it is not a claim whose interpretation is at all obvious. Since only the correct interpretation of that claim will expose to clear view the truth of the claim (whereas false interpretations might render the claim false), Socrates undertakes to interpret the oracle correctly. This he does by testing rival interpretations of the claim made in the oracle (in this case, there are just two such competing interpretations), and discovers to his reasonable satisfaction which of the rival interpretations works—which renders the oracle's claim true and which does not.

As McPherran notes, however, this situation has some very special features. For one thing, the claim made by the oracle, because of its divine origin, Socrates feels he has strong reason to accept as *true*. The same can hardly be said for most of the claims made by his mortal interlocutors, which Socrates subjects to scrutiny. In these other cases, Socrates seems to think he has at least some reason to think the relevant claims are *not* true—or at least there is nothing in the “authority” of those making the claims that provides any reason to accept them as true. So McPherran's interpretive conception of the *elenchos* can only apply to those cases in which there is some (other) reason to accept the relevant claim as true. It may be enough that Socrates finds some plausibility in the claim, though, if this is all there is to it, the success of Socrates' interpretive strategy will be founded on nothing more than his intuitive sense about the claim in question. After all, maybe Socrates' hunch is wrong and the right way to interpret the claim is the way that reveals *what is wrong* with the claim—rather than some way that would make the claim seem right! This seems a very insecure foundation for the pursuit of truth. And yet, how *else* would a search for truth proceed, by those who do not already have access to the truth, except by searching about for those reasonings that *seem* to give the most plausible answers to our questions? And short of divine sanction, who else but the ignorant are to judge what will count as “most plausible” among competing answers?

A rather different problem, however, seems more troubling. In the case of the oracle to Chaerephon, Socrates may reasonably suppose that the only two interpretations worth considering are those that McPherran identifies. But in order to make this assumption, Socrates must also suppose that in making his pronouncement, Apollo's oracle used words in at least *something* like the ordinary way. But this assumption seems insecure against the (perhaps legendary) history of the Delphic oracle: In proclaiming Athens's

preservation by “wooden walls” in the Persian invasion, for example, the oracle hardly made an ordinary reference to the sides of ships, despite Themistocles' successful interpretation. One might rightly worry that the field of possible candidates for correct interpretation might be considerably larger than McPherran's Socrates seemed to suppose. As we ourselves are finding with some scholarly discomfort, even very clearly articulated and ubiquitous phenomena seem open to a confusing array of inherently plausible interpretations.

But these are versions of skeptical worries that have been aimed, in other circumstances, against the possibility of gaining knowledge from the senses, from inductive reasoning, and from what is called inference to the best hypothesis. McPherran's Socrates is no more guilty of epistemic vice (apart from the peculiar religious element of his beliefs) than any of the rest of us are when we seek the truth. McPherran has offered one model of how Socrates can seriously think he is pursuing truth by refuting people. This is obviously in sharp contrast with Benson, who states unequivocally: “I do not deny . . . that Socrates aims to uncover truths and acquire knowledge. . . . I do deny, however, that Socrates (directly) employs his *elenchos* in an attempt to achieve these goals” (107). Benson never explains what he had in mind in making the qualification that Socrates does not *directly* employ the *elenchos* in his pursuit of truth, but perhaps McPherran has, in a sense, articulated in detail what Benson may have had in mind. For in McPherran's account it is noteworthy that Socrates' approach to truth is quite obviously an *indirect* one: Socrates seeks to improve his and others' understandings of things by ruling out false alternatives. The problem is that there may be no limit to human ingenuity in generating new moral hypotheses to test. The same may be true for hypotheses that generate new possible interpretations—of empirical phenomena or oracular pronouncements, or of premises that seem intuitively to be true. In science, we freely invent new hypotheses, but must generally resort to methods that can only (and at most) disconfirm one of the rival hypotheses we have dreamed up. Such is the human epistemic condition, and in McPherran's account the elenctic method is in good company with other ways we pursue truth indirectly.

We have argued for a different sort of indirect constructivism elsewhere,⁶ and there is no reason now to repeat our earlier arguments. But understanding Socrates' pursuit of the truth and of knowledge as an *indirect* one seems to be called for if his refutations are to be understood as playing more

6. Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, chap. 1.

than a preparatory role. The question is, can there be a single univocal analysis of Socrates' philosophizing under the heading "*elenchos*"?

McPherran has not helped much (and may not have intended to help much) in the achievement of this goal, for he acknowledges that not all of Socrates' arguments appear to have been interpretive in nature. So even if we find his account of Socrates' reasoning about the oracle quite plausible (and we do indeed find it a very plausible account), McPherran has done little to support the kind of strongly unifying ambitions of those like Vlastos and Benson. This fragmentation becomes even more pronounced in the essay by Carpenter and Polansky.

III. The Many Purposes and Varieties of Socratic Argument

According to Carpenter and Polansky, refutation is at the heart of the Socratic *elenchos*. But even if this is its most obvious feature from a logical point of view, they observe that "Socratic cross-examinations seem to have many purposes" (89). Support for this observation, at any rate, is ample in Plato's early dialogues if one considers all the claims Socrates makes about what he is doing—and all of the claims others make about what he is doing that he at least tacitly concedes. In our own earlier work, we actually did survey several of these and tried to show how Socrates' refutative argumentation could serve each of them.⁷ Other scholars, not involved in the present debate, have also listed a number of goals Socrates appears to have, and have tried to show how each of them is reasonably pursued via refutative argumentation.⁸ As Carpenter and Polansky note, "An embracing reflection upon all elenctic discussion does not appear [in Plato's dialogues]," and they claim that this is so "because Socrates has no single method of refutation or cross-examination" (90). Instead, they say, Socrates styles his approach according to the individual requirements of the specific interlocutor or argument context. There can be no doubt that Socrates shapes his approach to suit what he perceives as the specific requirements—or just deserts—of the interlocutor. Even Benson, who seeks to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for the *elenchos*, allows that "it is always *ad hominem*, in the sense that it is always directed specifically at an individual" (note 17 to Chapter 6) and to concede this—unless we are to convict Socrates of pro-

7. Ibid.

8. See, for example, Woodruff, "Expert Knowledge."

ducing very poor *ad hominem* arguments—is surely to concede that he must to some degree shape his arguments to fit the specific blindness or perceptiveness, the prejudice or openness, and ineptitude or aptitude of distinct interlocutors. Given the great variety of interlocutors Plato's dialogues provide for Socrates, we should not wonder that we find enormous differences in the ways Socrates deals with them. With Euthyphro, he is haughty and ironical; with Meletus, he is aggressive and demanding; with Charmides, he is teasing and urbane; with Hippias, he is sarcastic; with Crito, friendly; and so on. Carpenter and Polansky conclude that in all of this difference of style there is no sense to be looking minimalistically for the thinnest of common logical strands, as Benson tries. But in fairness to Benson, nothing in what Carpenter and Polansky note refutes Benson's understanding about what *is*, after all, common to all of Socrates' particular refutations—or at least those in which the "doxastic constraint" is accepted and satisfied. For surely, as long as Hippias says only what he believes, and what Hippias says is all that Socrates employs in his arguments, what *else* we find Socrates doing will not make any difference to all that the "doxastic constraint" entails. So, despite the great variety of interlocutors and argumentative circumstances, Benson could still be entirely right about what makes an argument an elenctic argument.

Carpenter and Polansky articulate a much more telling worry, in our view, when they notice that "the term *elenchos* and its derivatives appear fairly commonly in the *Euthydemus*, and many of the refutations called by this name are performed by the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus" (92). What should trouble Benson about this is that these refutations, at least for the most part, may also be reasonably claimed to satisfy the "doxastic constraint." But if what these eristic brothers do is the same as what Socrates does—as it must be, if Benson is right about the necessary and sufficient conditions of the Socratic *elenchos*—then it is no longer at all clear why we should take any special interest in coming to understand "the Socratic method." By any contemporary measure, eristic competition does not qualify as interesting philosophy or argumentative methodology.

Of course, neither Vlastos nor Benson needs to have supposed that "the Socratic *elenchos*" was the only form of argument that could be called by the name *elenchos*. So, perhaps one point of the *Euthydemus* is to contrast "the Socratic *elenchos*" with other forms of *elenchos*. Plato obviously does have Socrates contrast the sort of persuasion orators provide with his own sort, as we see in Socrates' conversation with Polus in the *Gorgias*, for example (see *Grg.* 471e–472c, 475e–476a). And certainly Plato means for us

to see a contrast between what Euthydemus and Dionysodorus do and what Socrates does. Yet there is nothing in that dialogue that tells us the contrast is of two very different sorts of *elenchos*—the contrast is in the ends they serve: Socrates seeks truth, whereas the eristic brothers seek only victory in arguments. If we apply this as the differentia between species of *elenchos*, however, Benson's view of the uniquely Socratic *elenchos* cannot be correct, for Benson acknowledges that a consequence of his view is (again) a denial that "Socrates (directly) employs his *elenchos* in an attempt to achieve these goals [sc., to uncover truths and acquire knowledge]." But Benson can also mount impressive evidence for the claim that in many (or, indeed, most) of Socrates' arguments the goal appears quite explicitly to be the simple refutation of the interlocutor. So neither can we make the pursuit of truth a necessary or sufficient condition of the (uniquely Socratic) *elenchos*.

This is not to say that we cannot distinguish between Socratic and eristic refutation, for surely we can. McPherran's approach, indeed, might be one way to do so: In Socratic refutation, ambiguities and alternative interpretations of premises might be identified and then scrutinized for their plausibility, whereas in eristic refutation these ambiguities and interpretive alternatives would (at least typically) be masked and employed to trip up the interlocutor with equivocations or fallacies. But unless there turns out to be some logical feature or features that are both unique and common to all or most of Socrates' arguments (or at least all of his refutative arguments), then it will still turn out that there is no "unique form of argument with unique features" to be found in Plato's early dialogues or to be attributed to (Plato's) Socrates. And as we have said, even McPherran acknowledges that not all of Socrates' arguments have the feature he has identified.

IV. Against the Very Idea of "the Socratic Method"

So, what is left of "the Socratic *elenchos*"? Plato fails to give the supposedly "Socratic method" so much as a name and (as Carpenter and Polansky have shown) applies the one scholars have given it to any sort of refutation at all—including eristic verbal sports in which none of us has much interest. Other scholars have argued plausibly that Aristotle does identify a kind of argument—peirastic dialectic—that seems to fit well with what Socrates does;⁹ but even if this is so, Aristotle never so much as hints that this style of

9. See, for example, R. Bolton, "Aristotle's Account of the Socratic Elenchus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 11 (1993), 121–52.

dialectic is to be identified uniquely or even strongly with Socrates. The most reasonable conclusion, we claim, is a purely negative one: there simply is no such thing as "the Socratic *elenchos*."

But if this is right, don't we lose something terribly important from our study of Socrates? We think not. Plato shows us a Socrates who is absolutely dedicated to *arguing* and to *reasoning* about things. Plato's Socrates says that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being" (*Ap.* 38a), and claims to be "not just now, but always . . . the sort of man who is persuaded by nothing but the reason that seems best to me when I consider it" (*Cri.* 46b). We do not have to suppose that "the examined life" has to follow some "unique form of argument" to be worth living, nor do we have to suppose that the reasons we should follow when we examine our lives must always flow from a single form of reasoning. Socrates' arguments are mostly—but not always—refutative in style, which is to say they are arguments against a position someone has taken. They are often—but not always—hortative in some way. They are mostly—but, as Carpenter and Polansky rightly note, not always—ethical in content. Socrates often does—but sometimes does not—insist that those answering his questions say only what they believe. Sometimes Socrates searches for definitions with his interlocutors. Sometimes he evaluates the relative merits of contrasting individual claims. Sometimes he appears bent only on revealing the cognitive inadequacies and pretensions of his interlocutors. Other times, he seems to be enlisting their helpful companionship in pursuing something worth knowing that neither he nor they feel very sure about. Still other times, Socrates argues in ways that appear directly and unabashedly to be leading his interlocutors to some moral position Socrates himself is promoting. What is common to all of these examples of Socratic philosophizing is that they involve the examination of the life-shaping beliefs of the interlocutor (and sometimes of Socrates himself) through the generic medium of *argument*, but not through a specific form of argument.

As Benson notes in his paper, the very first reply to Vlastos's famous article on the Socratic *elenchos*—by Richard Kraut¹⁰—provided essentially the same response as the one we are now offering. Vlastos's account derived from his impression that there was a very special problem confronting the way Socrates argued, given what Socrates seemed to be prepared to claim as a result of his arguments, and Vlastos named this "the problem of the *elenchos*." Kraut replied, in effect, that, on the contrary, there was nothing unusual going on in Socratic arguments or what he claimed to get from

10. Kraut, "Comments."

them—it was just what we all do when we try to argue well. Accordingly, there is no “problem of the elenchus.” What Kraut did not specifically say in his early reply, but might have said to anticipate our argument completely, is that neither must there be anything unique or distinctive about the *elenchos* for there to be the sort of problem Vlastos tried far too imaginatively to solve.

What *was* unique about Socrates was that he was a man absolutely—even religiously, as McPherran’s work has so powerfully shown—devoted to the life of reasoned argument. He put every other concern that occupies ordinary people behind his concern to lead “the examined life.” Unlike his contemporaries—and unlike most of us—Socrates was clearly (sometimes painfully) aware of his own ignorance, but this ignorance was a condition to which he never allowed himself simply to acquiesce. Instead, he spent his days struggling to remediate his ignorance—if not, *per impossibile*, to eliminate it altogether. This sort of life, Plato’s works try to show us, is a model for us all—a model we can emulate without first mastering some special method of reasoning. The very project pursued most elegantly by Vlastos and then debated by all of those who have nonetheless followed the path he proposed for us—to identify such a special method—has distracted us from the Socratic mission, which is what made Socrates what he was.

But it is not just a distraction from what is essentially “Socratic”; it actually conflicts with what we believe is at the heart of the Socratic mission, for it wrongly attributes to Socrates something more reliable and more powerful than any of us, including Socrates, actually have. We claim that it is a vital feature of the Socratic mission that Socrates claimed to have no special tools, no unique and powerful weapons, against the ignorance he exposed and sought always to transcend. Armed with literally nothing but his strength of character, Socrates leads us on a quest to become less ignorant than we are. On this quest, we must not be seduced into thinking that there are wonderful special steps we can take or “unique methods” we can master to shortcut the impossibly long distances to be traveled. Even at the end of his life, our exemplar declared himself still ignorant, after all he had done and all he had argued. But rather than rue the life that had led him to such apparent failure, he emphatically advocated it as a model for all of us to follow. The very practice of the examined life, even if it never yields moral knowledge, improves us by continually showing us when our beliefs fall short. Far worse than never to attain moral knowledge would be not to try to attain it, or to give up on trying not to be ignorant.

Socrates had no special advantage, no “Socratic method,” on which he

could rely, and there is no such wonder, for instance, to be found in the early dialogues. To imagine that there is such a thing turns Socrates into a more clever man than he was, but also a less heroic man than he was. Like the prisoners in Plato’s cave, Socrates was and is only “like us” (see *Rep.* VII.515a) in what he could bring to the task of overcoming ignorance. The only advantage Socrates ever claimed over any of his contemporaries was that he was aware of his own ignorance, whereas others were not. This provides no tool or craft by which to advance one’s cognitive condition. It provides only motive for those who regard ignorance as a bad thing.