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Ignorance or Irony in Plato's Socrates?: A Look Beyond Avowals and Disavowals of Knowledge¹

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ABSTRACT

My central thesis is that Socrates of Plato's "early" dialogues believes he has the very wisdom he famously disavows. Eschewing the usual tack of analyzing his various avowals and disavowals of knowledge, I focus on other claims which entail a belief that he has wisdom *par excellence*—not just self-awareness of ignorance and not just so-called elenctic wisdom. First, I correct the common misimpression that Socrates is willing only to ask but not to answer questions. Indeed, he describes his own answers as a crucial part of his exhortative message, which, I show, involves not just an exhortation to participate in

"elenctic" discussion; his exhortation to virtue is not aimed just at getting his interlocutors to understand that virtue—whatever it is!—must be pursued first and foremost. The elenchus, I argue, is only a prerequisite for understanding the much more substantive lessons of his exhortative practice, which produces "the greatest good"—indeed "happiness" itself. This interpretation, I explain, goes hand in hand with Socrates' belief that he is a "good man", invulnerable to injury, who rationally and independently always makes unerring decisions aimed at justice. In light of such beliefs, as well as his fearless claims about others' injustices, I offer a plausible explanation of why Socrates denies having bona fide wisdom and being a "teacher" of it.

PROTARCHUS: *Why, then, did you yourself not give an answer to yourself, Socrates? SOCRATES: No [reason] why not. Do, however, have a part of the logos with [me]. (Philebus 54b)*²

SOCRATES: *If you don't wish to answer, then I'll answer for you.... (Apology 27b8-9)*

Three decades ago, when Gregory Vlastos wrote his paper titled “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge”, he could claim (1994, 39)³ that “the standard view” of such disavowals was that Socrates does not mean by them what he says.⁴ Today, due in no small measure to Vlastos’s work, it might well be said that the standard view has been reversed.⁵ I shall argue in this paper, however, that there are important passages in Plato’s early dialogues that are familiar enough but have unfortunately been discounted or misinterpreted by Vlastos and many of those who have followed his lead. Careful reexamination of these passages strongly suggests that we ought to consider a return to the formerly “standard view”. Besides discounting or misinterpreting crucial evidence, one factor that led to the abandonment of that view was its being virtually identified with what was in fact only one possible version of the view: viz., that of Norman Gulley (1968, 64ff.). After marshalling all the evidence which suggests that Plato’s Socrates⁶ cannot in his familiar disavowals mean what he says, I shall suggest some plausible reasons for the frequent disavowals that avoid the problems found in Gulley’s particular interpretation of them.

The “paradox”⁷ in Socrates’ alleged ignorance is familiar enough, so I shall not bother to start with reviewing the interpretive problem in detail. Let me instead begin by

highlighting one feature of the typical way in which the “paradox” has been presented in scholarship over the past couple decades: the scholarship is not of course monolithic, but there is a discernable tendency to fetishize knowledge-claims: in recent decades, the “paradox” of Socrates’ ignorance has often been presented as an at least prima facie incongruity between Socrates’ *claims* of ignorance versus his *claims* of knowledge.⁸ I, however, want to argue that, in order to get a full appreciation of what and how much Socrates thinks he knows, we need to pay more attention, than is now usually given, to other kinds of evidence. Vlastos’s observations in a 1957 address are, in this connection, worth reviewing: “... [N]o man ever breathed greater assurance that his feet were planted firmly on the path of right. He never voices a doubt of the moral rightness of any of his acts or decisions, never betrays a sense of sin. He goes to his death confident that ‘no evil thing can happen to a good man’ (*Apology* 41D)—that ‘good man’ is himself.” (1971, 7).⁹ Such observations are crucial in my own attempt to revive the formerly “standard view”.

SECTION 1). READINESS TO ANSWER QUESTIONS.

This brings me to the first familiar passage that I want to reconsider. Let me introduce it by noting how remarkable it is that Vlastos—in “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge”, published three decades after the address from which I just quoted—can so confidently cite (1994, 40) Aristotle in support of his view that Socrates’ disavowals are sincere: so Vlastos explains that “...for Aristotle the reason why Socrates ‘asked questions, but did not answer them’ is that

‘he confessed he had no knowledge’ (*Soph. El.* 183b7-8)...” (1994, 16 n. 47).¹⁰ “Socrates”, Vlastos tell us, “does not answer questions, does not expound his ‘wisdom.’ Pieces of it spill out in elenctic arguments, leaving the interlocutor wondering how much is being held back” (1991, 35).¹¹

Rather than simply taking Aristotle’s word for it that Socrates “asked questions but did not answer them”, one might well stop to consider—or reconsider—whether it was actually the case. A close look will show that it was not true of at least *Plato’s* Socrates (even though Plato does make it clear¹² that it was indeed an impression some had of the man). But it is not *Socrates’* (or *Plato’s*) failure to be clear about the matter. It is of course true that in Plato’s dialogues Socrates happens oftener to be the questioner than the respondent.¹³ But there are more than just a couple instances where Socrates expresses his willingness to answer as well as ask.¹⁴ Unfortunately, one of the most relevant instances is a very familiar passage indeed, but the passage is all too often either overlooked or obscured (unintentionally), mainly (I suspect) because of how it is usually translated and interpreted. The passage is *Apology* 33b1-3.

Below is, first, the Oxford Classical Text of the passage, followed by a couple widely-read English translations; lastly, I submit my own suggestion.

“<33b1-2> ...ὁμοίως καὶ πλουσίῳ καὶ πέντι παρέχω ἑμαυτὸν ἐρωτᾶν, <33b2-3> καὶ ἂν τις βούληται ἀποκρινόμενος ἀκούειν ὧν ἂν λέγω.” (Duke et al. 1995)

“<33b1-2> I am equally ready to question the rich and the poor <33b2-3> if anyone is willing to answer my questions and listen to what I say.” (Grube/Cooper 2002)

“<33b1-2> ...I am ready to answer questions for rich and poor alike, <33b2-3> and I am equally ready if anyone prefers to listen to what I have to say and answer my questions.” (Tredennick/Tarrant 2003)

“<33b1-2> ... I hold forth myself for both a wealthy person and a poor one similarly to question, <33b2-3> and if anyone wishes to hear the things I have to say by answering.” (Senn)

The accuracy of mine and Tredennick/Tarrant’s translation of the *first* clause (33b1-2) is well-confirmed by a number of venerable commentators,¹⁵ and so it is a little surprising to see it still so often mistranslated in the manner of Grube/Cooper.¹⁶ The second clause (33b2-3), however, is trickier. According to John Burnet, there is a hyperbaton here: he says the “answering (*apokrinomenos*)” belongs with Socrates’ “I say (*legō*)”, not with the “any (*tis*)” interlocutor (1924, 138-139). So Burnet would hold that our popular translators have got 33b2-3 wrong—that Tredennick/Tarrant and Grube/Cooper’s “answer my questions” should rather be “hear what I say in reply” (sc., to *their* questions, the ones mentioned in 33b1-2). But Emile de Strycker and Simon Slings maintain that the transposition Burnet attributes to the clause “would be contorted and misleading”, so they suggest that the “answering” there is the interlocutor’s rather than Socrates’ (1994, 350). Since contorted hyperbatons do occasionally occur in the language, for my own part I do not believe the Greek by itself is clear enough to adjudicate the issue, which is why I have above translated 33b2-3 so that it is as ambiguous as, I believe, the Greek itself is.¹⁷

SECTION 2.) “WAKENING” OFFERED TO ALL, WITH NO STRINGS ATTACHED OR GUARANTEES.

The context, on the other hand, clinches it in favor of Burnet's reading.¹⁸ It is true that “discussion” is mentioned at 33b1, which usually implies mutual asking and answering; but the *main* point of the whole passage appears clearly to be Socrates' willingness to be heard by anyone whether “younger or older” who “desires to hear when I'm speaking...” (33a7). Our passage seems really to be just an echo of the passage surrounding 30a, where Socrates states his commitment to “exhort” (29d), “admonish” (30a), and “persuade” (30a) everyone, both “younger and older”, concerning attention to virtue. There he did of course reiterate his eagerness also to “question”, “examine”, and “interrogate” (29e) them; but, crucially, that eagerness is mentioned there only as a *reaction* to someone who claims already to attend to virtue *after* being exhorted by Socrates to do so. Indeed, 29d ff. is the passage where we first hear (at least explicitly)¹⁹ of Socrates' habitual exhortations to virtue. So 33b is a reiteration of this commitment to deliver (“say/speak”) the same exhortative message to any and all.

Now, interestingly, in the earlier passage, at 30a, he had of course claimed that all this—including, and perhaps *most*²⁰ importantly, his exhorting/persuading—is something than which there is “no greater good for you”. At 30b4-6 he does seem to entertain the possibility that his practice may be harmful, “if by saying those things I corrupt the young”.²¹ But he then goes on to assure his judges that they will “be helped by hearing” him (30c), once he persuades them, for their own sake, not to “somehow err regarding the god's gift” by voting against him (30d-e), whereupon he reiterates his commit-

ment to “waken”, “persuade”, and “admonish” everyone of them (30e-31a).

I say that these facets of the earlier, 29d ff. passage are “interesting”, because they too are echoed later in our passage at 33a-b, where, immediately after the controversial 33b1-3, we have:

“And whether any of those [interlocutors] becomes good (*chrēstos*) or not, I would not justly be held as the cause; I never promised any learning to any of them, nor did I teach [any of them]. But/And if anyone asserts that from me he ever learned anything or heard in private anything that²² all the others didn't too, be well aware that he is not saying true things.” (*Apol.* 33b)

Again, as I have been arguing, the focus of 33a-b (as of 29d ff. and also 36c-d) is on what others “hear” from Socrates. And this is all the more remarkable, given that the upshot of 33a-b is that Socrates is allegedly *not* a “teacher”. I think the lesson we are meant to take from this must be this: Socrates denies being a “teacher”, not because he has nothing to say or even teach, but because (i) he is willing to say the same things to everyone, (ii) including the old,²³ and (iii) has, if any, a preference for speaking with fellow-citizens;²⁴ and (iv) he does not receive a wage for what he says; and (v) he does not *promise*²⁵ that anyone who listens to him will actually learn.²⁶ In refusing to accept the label of “teacher”, he is not disavowing knowledge; rather, he is distinguishing himself from those who *made a profession* out of what amounted to higher education in the Greek world at the time, the so-called Sophists. If his point was that he had nothing to teach anybody, then he surely would have made this clear; however, to the contrary, both 29d ff. and 33a-b quite

obscure the point about teaching that most commentators nowadays believe he is so anxious to make, since what those passages in fact do is to *highlight* how eager he is to bring them all a greatly (perhaps uniquely) beneficial bit of teaching.

SECTION 3). EXHORTATIVE CONTENT.

Now, of course, commentators like Vlastos would agree with me that Socrates is willing to consider himself a “teacher” *in a sense*; but, according to Vlastos, he has no knowledge that “can be handed over”: all he can offer as a “teacher” is partnership in a cooperative search that can yield, at most, “elenctically justified” knowledge (1991, 32, 36-37, 242). According to Vlastos, the elenctically defensible knowledge that Socrates admits to having cannot be transmitted by “direct expression” (1994, 65); rather, it can only be acquired (eventually) by participating in (enough) “elenctic” discussions. So, on this interpretation, Socrates’ “greatly beneficial” message/lesson can consist only in an invitation to participate in elenctic discussion.

There are two deeply problematic aspects to Vlastos’s interpretation. First, it is based on a patent misinterpretation of what Socrates means by “human wisdom” at *Apology* 20d ff. A second problem—one that I think is common even among those who do not cleave to Vlastos’s peculiar interpretation of “human wisdom”—comes from a misinterpretation of the import of Socrates’ exhortative message.

So, first, how does Vlastos misinterpret “human wisdom”? Vlastos clearly believes his great insight in “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge” was to interpret Socrates’ avowal of “human wisdom” (*Apol.* 20d-e) as an avowal of elenctic wisdom (1994, 62),²⁷ which, Vlastos tells us, is

in fact genuine virtue according Socrates (1994, 61). But Socrates’ “human wisdom” cannot be interpreted as genuine wisdom/virtue.²⁸ For one thing, Socrates makes it pretty plain that by “human wisdom” he means simply the awareness of the limits of one’s knowledge—not any kind of substantive knowledge. He claims he has “human wisdom”, but denies flatly (20b4-c3) that he has *genuine* human virtue.²⁹ Contrary to Vlastos’s interpretation (1991, 239 and 1994, 62), Socrates in the *Apology* is not prepared to claim that *any* knowledge has “issued from” his examinations other than awareness of his own lack of knowledge about important matters.³⁰ It is worth noting that, as soon as the topic of Socrates’ peculiar human “wisdom” is raised (and thereafter throughout the *Apology*), Socrates repeatedly makes it clear how reticent he is even to *call* it “wisdom”.³¹ Also, Socrates describes human “wisdom” as worthless (23a7)³² not only “*in comparison with* true [divine] wisdom” (as Vlastos would have it; 1991, 110, 239 n. 17 and 1994, 62, my emphasis); rather, Socrates thinks that the human wisdom that he has is worth *nothing unless it leads to true wisdom* which humans allegedly lack.³³ Vlastos’s Socrates, on the other hand, is so far from thinking that his elenctically based human wisdom is worthless that he “is morally justified in living by” the results of the elenchus (1991, 271): the elenchus provides evidence that is “strong enough to offer us the moral certainty needed for prudent action” (269); so much so that Socrates “is serenely confident” that he has achieved both virtue and happiness (1994, 43). According to Vlastos, Socrates’ “human wisdom” is not worthless at all. Indeed, “the condition of moral excellence and therewith the condition of happiness” is “knowledge of good and evil” (1991, 110); but moral excellence—virtue—according to Vlastos’s Socrates is *elenctic* knowledge of good and evil (1994, 61), which he believes he has plenty enough of.

Many scholars who accept the sincerity of Socrates's disavowals part ranks with Vlastos: they do not interpret Socrates as avowing genuine human virtue.³⁴ But these scholars still face a version of the second problem with Vlastos's interpretation, to which I now turn; for they, for the most part, agree with Vlastos in concluding that Socrates has no substantive knowledge to pass along. But is it actually true that Socrates held he had no substantive knowledge—knowledge which *could*, so to speak, be “handed over”: i.e., a kind of independently worthwhile knowledge that could be presented and explained by “direct expression” outside of a purely “elenctic” discussion? I believe the evidence tells against the idea that Socrates' only message is an invitation to elenctic discussion.

Let me start by simply reiterating an important point that that I have just attempted to show: I think one lesson from the passages at 29d ff. and 33a-b (as well as 36c-d) is that what Socrates thinks is of the *most* importance—what he in fact bills as the ultimate aim of his peculiar “practice”, including the elenchus—is his *positive* message, i.e. what he has to *tell* everyone. That is to say, on Vlastos's kind of interpretation, the elenctic cart is put before the exhortative horse. In fact, Socrates' exhortation is not an exhortation to participate in the elenchus; rather, the elenchus is (at most) a necessary step to get his listeners to understand and be persuaded by the much more substantive content of his exhortation and admonishment.³⁵

SECTION 4). MAKING PEOPLE “BE HAPPY”.

I want to turn to another very remarkable passage that, despite its familiarity and its significance, has received surprisingly little

attention in the relevant literature, when it is cited or even acknowledged at all.³⁶ When it is mentioned, what it seems to imply is usually completely overlooked. In this case, mistranslation is not the cause. And I can of course only guess, but I suspect that it has been overlooked because most scholars simply *presume* that Socrates cannot literally mean what he says.

“What then is becoming for a poor man, working good (*euergetēs*), who needs to lead a life of leisure for the purpose of exhorting you? There is not, men of Athens, anything which is so becoming for the man of that sort as to be fed in the Prytaneion. At least it's much more becoming than if anyone of you has been victorious at the Olympics on a horse or on a two-horsed chariot or with a team [of horses]; for he makes you seem to be happy, whereas I make you be happy; and he is in need of no nourishment, whereas I am in need of it.” (*Apol.* 36d-e).³⁷

The reason why his claim here is so remarkable should be clear: If taken literally, he is implying that he makes them wise—i.e., *genuinely* wise, *genuinely* virtuous.³⁸ This is because Socrates of the early dialogues accepts what I like to call the “success-requires-wisdom” doctrine, according to which having genuine wisdom/virtue is necessary for having happiness.³⁹

Moreover, the claim to make Athenians “happy” is tied explicitly to his practice of exhortation and persuasion. This seems to suggest that Socrates not only “tried” to persuade each Athenian to attend first and foremost to the condition of their souls (36c), but actually succeeded in some measure.⁴⁰ More crucially, it seems to suggest that *what* they were successfully persuaded to do was not just to engage

first and foremost in a *search* for maximal virtue/wisdom; rather, he successfully persuaded them to engage *knowledgeably* in activities that actually *gave* them genuine virtue/wisdom. Indeed, this may be what made him say there was “no greater good” for them that his practice of persuasion (30a6-7)—that he has accomplished through that practice “the greatest good work/product (*euergesia*)” (36c3-5).⁴¹

Interpreted literally, Socrates cannot at 36d-e mean only that he has gotten Athenians to participate in philosophical discussion and examination. Elsewhere he does call such activity “the greatest good for a human” (38a); but as I argued in my 2012, by “greatest” he cannot at least there have meant *most ultimate*, since he values philosophizing as a necessary means for getting genuine virtue/wisdom. Taken literally, Socrates cannot at 36d-e even mean that he has made Athenians aware of the limits of their knowledge, instilling that “human wisdom” that he himself avows; as I have already argued, mere awareness of the limits of one’s knowledge is valuable, at most, only as a prerequisite to genuine human virtue.⁴²

To his credit, David Reeve is one of very few scholars who explicitly acknowledge that Socrates does not just say he provides Athenians with a “good” of unprecedented greatness,⁴³ but actually says he makes them “happy”. Reeve is also one of very few who have attempted to account for that claim head on. Unfortunately, he waffles. First, Reeve interprets Socrates as claiming only to subject the Athenians to “frequent elenctic examinations”, which result, at most, in non-expert “human wisdom”. (This seems nowadays to be the usual way of interpreting Socrates’ claims to be greatly benefiting the Athenians.)⁴⁴ Reeve concludes, “That is why Socrates confers ‘the greatest benefit’ on the Athenians and makes them really happy (*or as close to being really happy as possible*)” (1989, 179,

my emphasis; cf. his 2000, 29-30).⁴⁵ The reason that Reeve fudges things here may be because he realizes that according to Socrates the “human wisdom” he claims to offer the Athenians is not sufficient for happiness; according to Reeve, Socrates thinks that “expert” knowledge—something he allegedly does not teach—is necessary for happiness (1989, 136, 179). So one way to interpret Reeve’s conclusion is that “happy” at 36d10 is not to be taken literally.

However, Reeve’s treatment of the relevant passages suggests a different way of understanding his interpretation of 36d10: Reeve seems to think that because Socrates “repeatedly portrays the elenchus itself as the greatest good” and because he thought “expert” knowledge was not possible for humans, this means that Socrates “cannot have valued the elenchus because it helps to gain that possession for us” (1989, 178 n. 84). Perhaps, then, Reeve is suggesting that, for Socrates, elenctic examination is an *end in itself*, meaning that it alone is sufficient for *genuine* happiness, even if it never leads to “expert” knowledge.⁴⁶ Such an interpretation would certainly be consistent with Reeve’s contention that, according to Socrates, his “human wisdom” *is* genuine human virtue (1989, 150, 179; 2000, 30).⁴⁷

But, as I have already argued, Socrates explicitly says otherwise. Moreover, this interpretation of 36d10 would directly contradict Socrates’ success-requires-wisdom doctrine. It seems, therefore, that we must either interpret “happy” non-literally, or else interpret Socrates to mean that he confers genuine virtue.

SECTION 5). THE BENEFICIARIES.

Before I move on to consider other passages in order to resolve this interpretive problem, I

want first to address one potential problem for a literal interpretation of 36d10. Many scholars have noted that a commonplace of the early dialogues is that (at least as far as we know) Socrates' interlocutors remain unmoved by their encounter with him.⁴⁸ Indeed, Socrates himself reports that the usual result of his encounters is enmity (*Apol.* 21d, e, 23a), anger (23c), aggravation (23e, 31a), and grudge (28a, 37d)⁴⁹, not even the admission of ignorance (23d7-9). Also, if we interpret *Apol.* 36d10 literally, then how are we to explain Socrates' claim never to have found any Athenian who was genuinely wise (23a-b) and his claim that in Athens one can still find "an ungrudging many of humans who suppose they know something but know few things or nothing" (23c)? He even concludes that the majority of his jurors have not even learnt from him that the unexamined life is not livable (38a1-7); he actually says of those jurors who voted against him that they "aren't living correctly" (39d). How can Socrates be claiming at 36d10 that he makes the Athenians *literally* happy, if so many of them are so far from genuine wisdom that they do not even have mere "human wisdom"?

The answer is that we may interpret "happy" literally if we do not interpret "you" literally. And I think it is clearly only natural *not* to interpret "you" at 36d10 literally: he is no more suggesting that he makes *every* Athenian be happy than he is suggesting that an Olympian victor makes *every* Athenian seem happy. Those whom he is claiming to have made happy are only a subset of his audience—maybe a relatively small subset, but, in his mind, a crucial one. There is every reason to think that the alleged beneficial effects of associating with Socrates did not come about after only one or two encounters with him; rather, continual, sustained interaction was necessary.⁵⁰ I imagine that this is one reason why Socrates does

not expect (19a1-5, 24a1-4, 37a7-b2) that his allotted time with his jurors is sufficient for "teaching" and "persuading" (21b, 35c) them that he is innocent or even that the unexamined life is not worth living. I suggest that the Athenians he thinks he has improved are some of the wealthy young men who follow him, "listen to my speaking", and imitate him (23c, 37d, 39c-d). His list (33d-34a) of those young Athenians who, if his accusers were right, would have been corrupted by Socrates (but in fact, according to him, were not) could well be a partial list of those whom Socrates thinks he has made happy. After mentioning seven of such followers (including Plato), he adds that he could name "many others" (cf. 39d1). This, I suggest, is the enumeration of improved students that Socrates elsewhere (*Lach.* 185e-186b, *Gorg.* 515a; cf. *Prot.* 319e-320b, *Meno* 93b ff.) requires from those who claim to be good teachers. It is worth noting that at *Euthyphro* 2c-d, Socrates makes the point that it is best for the politician to start with improving the youth; so it may well be that he imagines that he has even made Athens herself happy by improving her youth: "For certainly, as sons become good (*chrēstos*) or the opposite, so too the entire house of the father will be managed—in whichever sort of way the children come to be" (*Lach.* 185a).

SECTION 6). THE GOOD/ARTFUL WORKS OF AN UNERRING COUNSELOR.

In any case, the list at *Apol.* 33d-34a is telling, and it corroborates my literal interpretation of 36d10 in another way: because there he is not simply trying to show that he has not harmed them or made them worse; rather, he is trying to show that, in his role as private "counselor" (31c), he has never "counseled anything

bad” (33d). The implication is that the counsel he gives makes them *good*, not bad. My point is *not* that *make good* and *make bad* are for Socrates logical contradictories. The point is that we already know from many other indications in the *Apology* that the content of Socrates’ “counsel” is quite substantial: he advises people not only to attend to virtue (31b), but about how it should be obtained—viz., eschewing financial, bodily, social and political power (29d, 30a-b),⁵¹ and by first recognizing that one does not yet have (maximal) wisdom (23b) and then by participating “each day” in philosophical discussion and examination (38a).

And there is still more: When Socrates explains why he did not become a *public* counselor by practicing conventional politics, it immediately becomes clear that he believes that, had he done so, he not only would have advised the Athenian Assembly on the necessity of knowing the good and the bad, but also would have advised them on *the just itself* (31e3-32a1, 32a1-2, 32e3-4).⁵² Indeed, he describes his peculiar practice of “private counseling” as involving “really battling⁵³ for what’s just” (though “privately”, not in a public capacity). And this cannot be interpreted very weakly to mean, for instance, only that he understands on an abstract level that justice—whatever it is!—must be done, while not understanding (completely or in lots of case) what justice demands.⁵⁴ As Socrates maintains in the *Gorgias*, it is not by sheer determination that the just is brought about; it is by “some power (*dunamis*) and art (*technē*)” (sc., substantive knowledge of good and bad) (509d-e).⁵⁵ Surely the Socrates of the *Apology*, and of the early dialogues in general, would have agreed. In the *Laches* he says,

“There is a need...to consider the counselor—whether he is an artisan/expert (*technikos*) in ministering to that thing

[sc., the soul] for the sake of which we are considering the things we are considering.” (185d)⁵⁶

“There is a need,” according to Socrates, because not just anyone is qualified to counsel, but only the one who is expert about the subject in question. It is greatly significant that the reason that he actually gives in the *Apology* for not having become a public counselor is *not* that he was not an expert about the just,⁵⁷ but that—due to his inevitable attempts to *bring about* justice—opposing political forces would have “destroyed” (sc., killed or exiled) him, thus ruining his chances of improving *anyone* (31d-e, 32a, 32e, 36b-c). Socrates’ mention of daimonic opposition to his political aspirations (31c-d) implies that he, at least at one point in time, was confident enough about his qualifications for the job that he actually decided to pursue it; it is important to recall that Socrates “hears” the *daimonion* only when it turns him away from what he is “going/about to do” (31d). And, according to his own account, the *daimonion* opposed him not because he was unqualified, but because he would ultimately not have been allowed to put his qualifications to use: he would have been killed or exiled first.

So when Socrates claims to make the Athenians “happy”, when he maintains that he is an unerring private “counselor” about justice and virtue, when he names the specific individuals who were counseled well and not corrupted, what he is really doing is proving that he thinks he satisfies the required condition of being a “craftsman (*dēmiourgos*)” or “artisan (*technikos*) concerning ministering to [the] soul”: viz., “being able to show some work (*ergon*) of that art (*technē*) which was well-worked/crafted (*eu eirgasmēnon*)” (*Lach.* 185e). As he says in the *Apology*, his exhortations have produced “the greatest good work (*euergesia*)”

(36c)—precisely what one would expect, by his own lights, from a competent artisan.⁵⁸

SECTION 7). BEING A “GOOD MAN”.

Indeed, we have still further indication in the *Apology* of Socrates' expertly produced “good works”. We find it in statements that are not explicitly knowledge-claims, and, perhaps for that reason alone, are typically either downplayed or discounted altogether. Among these are statements wherein Socrates expresses the belief that he is a “good man”. There are several indications of this in the *Apology* (28a7-b2, 32e3, 36d1-3, 41c-d).⁵⁹ The one that has gotten most attention occurs at the end of the *Apology*:

“But you too, gentlemen judges, ought to have good anticipation about your death and to think on this one thing—a true thing: that there is for a good man nothing bad—neither when he's living nor even when he's come to an end; nor are his affairs/troubles unattended to by the gods. And the things that have now come to be for me have not come to be spontaneously; rather, this is clear to me: that it was better for me to have died now and to have been released from troubles. And because of that, the sign did not turn me away from anything...” (*Apol.* 41c-d)

Hugh Benson has argued (2000, 243-244) against the idea that Socrates ever expresses the belief that he is good. He may well be right that some of the texts usually used to support the interpretation show only that Socrates considers himself *more* good than others. But I happen to think that Benson's position involves

a misinterpretation of *Apol.* 41c-d, as I believe it clearly implies that Socrates considers himself a good man for whom there is nothing bad. I shall, however, not quibble over 41c-d, because there is even clearer evidence, and it is unfortunately almost always overlooked (or perhaps just misunderstood), including by Benson:

“...Much enmity has been generated for me, and from many.... And this is what will condemn me, if indeed it does condemn: not Meletus or Anytus either, but the aspersion and grudge of the many, which actually has condemned many other good men too (πολλοὺς καὶ ἄλλους καὶ ἀγαθοὺς ἄνδρας),⁶⁰ and I suppose will also keep condemning. And there's no fear of its stopping at me.” (*Apol.* 28a-b)⁶¹

Now, we know that Socrates believed that no one could be genuinely good without being genuinely wise.⁶² Naturally, however, the word “good (*agathos*)” was used in ancient Greek, by Socrates too, in all sorts of ways, in all kinds of contexts, to describe all manner of things and qualities. So why should we think, when he applies the term to himself, that he is referring to *genuine human virtue*?⁶³ First of all, I would highlight the significance of the fact that when Socrates implies he is good, he is attaching the word “good” to the word “man”. When Socrates uses the phrase “good man”, he seems specifically to mean *genuinely virtuous man*, especially one who serves justice and the genuine good of the public (28b6-c1, 32e2-4). Indeed, describing oneself as “good” seems to have had in Athens those very connotations in the context of a litigation,⁶⁴ which we may see, for instance, in Socrates' derisive reference to the fact that Meletus in his own speech to the jurors had described himself as “good” (24b)—right before Socrates attempts to show

that Meletus “does injustice” by prosecuting Socrates (24c) and does not “attend to” (sc., understand) the crucial issues of the indictment, viz. who makes the young better or worse (24d).

SECTION 8). THE INVULNERABILITY OF A “GOOD MAN”.

In any case, there are two far more compelling reasons for interpreting “good” to refer to genuine wisdom/virtue when Socrates implies that he is “good”: first, Socrates’ implication that he is good is explicitly connected to his claim of invulnerability to harm; and second, his claim to be good is tied to his claim never to have done injustice and the claim that, whenever he decides to act, he takes into account only justice and whether he “does works (*erga*) of a good man or a bad one”.

As I have said, I think it is clear that at *Apol.* 41c-d, he considers himself among the good men for whom there is “nothing bad”. One thing that partly corroborates this interpretation of 41c-d is that it is not the first time in the *Apology* that Socrates implies that he is invulnerable to harm. Earlier, at 30c-d, he had said:

“....Be well aware that if you were to have me—a person of the sort such as I say I am—killed, you would not injure me more than you yourselves. Now then, neither Meletus nor Anytus would injure me in any way; for he would not even be capable of it; for I don’t suppose that it is sanctioned that a better man be injured by a worse one. Indeed he may perhaps have me killed or drive me out or disenfranchise me. But whereas that one and certainly some other, may perhaps/proba-

bly suppose that those things are greatly bad; I do not suppose so, but rather that doing these things that he’s now doing—putting his hand to having a man unjustly killed—is much more bad.” (*Apol.* 30c-d)

Now here, one might be inclined to say, he is implying not necessarily that he *is good*, but only that he is *better than* Meletus and Anytus. My point, however, in citing 30c-d is that Socrates clearly he thinks he has a goodness (or *at least* some degree of it *relative* to what others have or do not have) that affords him a remarkable kind of protection against *any* injury (including injury from death, exile, disenfranchisement, as well—one assumes—as from imprisonment, torture, maiming) that an inferior may try to bring about for him. I have argued elsewhere (Senn 2005) that the only thing that can really account for Socrates’ belief in this kind of invulnerability is to interpret it as the possession of something of positive intrinsic value that cannot be taken away by inferiors (and likewise cannot be counteracted by an inferior’s efforts to bring about something of negative intrinsic value for him). Indeed, I have argued, this implies that *all that ultimately matters* to Socrates—as far as good and bad, benefit and harm is concerned—is something that he thinks he has *already* got (at least some of). And, if we add to this Socrates’ belief that the ultimate basis for decision making is concern for the condition of the soul,⁶⁵ then what we have at *Apol.* 30c-d is a reference to *genuine* virtue, and Socrates is implying there that he already has it (to some degree).⁶⁶ And I think the same may be said of 41c-d, perhaps with even greater assurance.⁶⁷

Once again, it is important to recognize that a possession like Socrates’ “human wisdom” just cannot measure up to the invulnerability described in 41c-d or even in 30c-d: If Socrates

were “better” than Meletus and Anytus *only* due to his awareness of the limits of his own knowledge, while lacking any other substantive knowledge, then surely Meletus and Anytus could harm him a great deal: by preventing him from ever acquiring any genuine wisdom, thereby making his life not worth living (or not worth having lived). Meletus and Anytus could perhaps also prevent someone who was already genuinely wise from acquiring *more* wisdom, but the wisdom *already* acquired would evidently, according to Socrates, make life worth living (or at least worth *having lived*).⁶⁸ In this sense, anything short of genuine wisdom can offer little protection indeed; being better than someone in only that sense is indeed good, but not intrinsically good.⁶⁹

SECTION 9). TAKING INTO ACCOUNT ONLY JUSTICE.

These indications are, I think, remarkable enough by themselves. But consider the passage immediately following *Apol.* 28a-b, where he implied that he is a “good man”:

“You’re not speaking admirably, human, if you suppose that there’s a need that any man who is even some small benefit take into account (*hupologizesthai*) risk of living or dying, but not consider only this whenever he acts: whether he does just things or unjust things, and whether he does works (*erga*) of a good man or a bad one.” (*Apol.* 28b-c)

This is the first explicit statement in the *Apology* of Socrates’ determination never to take into account, in decision making, anything other than whether his action will be just or unjust.⁷⁰ And its connection with 28a-b suggests

that what Socrates meant by “good men” at 28a-b was genuinely *just/virtuous* men. It also suggests that Socrates thinks that, as a good man himself, he has the capacity to see to it that his decisions *actually end up being* just and, consequently, of some “benefit”. If he did not think so, one might wonder what is the point of belaboring his commitment to the principle expressed at 28b-c. Can he think that he deserves congratulations or credit for mere good intentions? What “even small” benefit can he think there is in trying to take into account only what is just, if one cannot (consistently) figure out which action(s) would be just?

SECTION 10). DELIBERATING INDEPENDENTLY.

It is important to observe, in this connection, that Socrates is indeed so confident in his ability to deliberate effectively and to come consistently to just decisions, entirely on his own, that he even says so, and quite explicitly:

“...I—not now for the first time, but actually always—am the sort of person such as to be persuaded by none of my things other than the statement (*logos*) that to me, when I reason (*logizomai*), appears best.” (*Crito* 46b)

Socrates is asserting here that he will only be persuaded when he has reasoned the matter through for himself; what determines his decisions is always and only the conclusion of his own argument—a principle that I have elsewhere called “Autonomous Rationalism”.⁷¹ Not only does Socrates express this general confidence in his ability to come to the correct decision on his own, but the *Crito* actually provides us with a specific instance of this reason-

ning process at work.⁷² In determining whether it is best for him to await his “unjust” execution (*Crito* 50c, *Apol.* 30d, 33b3-5, 37b, 41b3) or to allow his friends to help him escape, Socrates confidently makes use of some quite specific precepts about the just. And these precepts are evidently accepted as sufficiently informative to be helpfully applied to his current predicament: Socrates uses them to determine that it is best to submit to being “unjustly” executed. And he does so with complete confidence—without fear, reservation, or perplexity—that he has arrived at the best decision.⁷³

I have already mentioned that the sole ultimate end of deliberate action according to Socrates is goodness of one’s soul. The most fundamental precept, then, that he uses in decision-making elsewhere and specifically in the *Crito* is that one must at all (other) costs strive to ensure that one’s soul is as virtuous as possible. He confidently advises others to act according to this principle, and he never treats it as open for debate. Could he consider this the extent of his knowledge about the good? If this were all he really were supposed to know, it would be dangerous to act—as Socrates in fact does in the *Crito*—as though the principle in question were helpful in making a correct decision about whether or not to remain in prison. But more importantly, Socrates in the *Crito* actually seems to have (or to think he has) some very specific knowledge about *which* acts harm the soul. And this consists not simply in the knowledge that unjust acts harm the soul, but in the knowledge that doing harm to others harms the agent’s soul. If he did not think he knew this, he certainly would not treat the prohibition against harming others (or bringing about bad things for others) as inviolable (*Crito* 49c-d). If he thought either of these precepts—the one about maximizing goodness of soul or the one against injuring others—were

seriously open for discussion, then he would not at the end of the *Crito* (54d4-6) tell his friend not to bother trying to convince him otherwise: Socrates says that he is so convinced of these basic points that he is “not capable” of listening to alternatives!⁷⁴

SECTION 11). FEARLESS/ SHAMELESS ATTITUDE TOWARD HIS OWN ACTS.

According to a fairly typical interpretation of the wisdom that Socrates disavows, it is what is called “definitional knowledge” of virtue and of the good, in the sense defined, e.g. by Gary Matthews, as knowledge of an “explanatory set of necessary and sufficient conditions” (2008, 117).⁷⁵ For the purposes of this paper, I accept that interpretation. And passages such as *Euthyphro* 6e make it clear that it is not *just* intellectual curiosity that is supposed to motivate a desire for answers to Socratic questions; rather, he thinks having definitional answers is practically helpful (as a “paradigm”) in identifying real-world instances of virtuous acts. I have already mentioned the success-requires-wisdom doctrine, which Socrates appears to accept. It may be that Socrates believes that one possibly could, without genuine wisdom, identify some or even lots of instances of just and unjust actions. But he seems, at the very least, to think that one could not, without genuine wisdom, know about *every* case. Some scholars have speculated that it is for knowledge about the particularly “difficult”, “borderline”, or “controversial” cases that Socrates considers wisdom useful, or even absolutely necessary.⁷⁶

It may be in light of such views that Socrates seems to think one’s *attitude* toward one’s own actions, particularly in thorny cases, is

revealing about whether or not one presumes to have genuine wisdom. For instance, in *Laches*, he says of Nicias and Laches,

“They indeed seem to me to have the power to educate a human; for they would not ever have fearlessly made declarations about purposes/pursuits good (*chrēstos*) and bad (*ponēros*) for a young person if they for their part didn't trust that they were sufficiently knowledgeable.” (*Laches* 186c-d; cf. *Meno* 70b6-c1)

Socrates is saying that, on the basis of these veteran generals' fearless declarations about the good, we may conclude that Nicias and Laches must consider themselves experts about the good too. He makes similar conclusions about Euthyphro, but in this case, due not merely to Euthyphro's statements, but to his actions:

“...If you didn't know plainly the pious and the impious, it's not possible that you ever would have put your hand to prosecuting for murder an elderly man—[your] father—on behalf of a hired man. Rather, concerning the gods, you would have feared taking the risk lest you not do it correctly, and concerning humans, you would have been ashamed [to do so].” (*Euthyphro* 15d-e; cf. 4a12-b2, 4e4-8)

And, likewise, with Meletus' prosecution of Socrates:

“...For a young one, it is no paltry thing to have come to understand so great a matter. For, as he asserts, he knows in what manner the young are corrupted and who corrupts them. And it's probable he is someone wise. And, having discerned my lack of learning, he is going before the city, just as before a mother, to accuse me

of corrupting his peers.” (*Euthyphro* 2c; cf. *Apol.* 24d3-5)⁷⁷

I suggest that it is no coincidence that, in spite of his *general* disavowals of wisdom, Socrates never expresses any real doubt or perplexity or shame about any *specific* course of action of his own.⁷⁸ That is, given the principle expressed in the above passages, Socrates (and Plato) *meant* for others to see that the disavowals are not to be taken seriously.

What about those “specific” cases? In the few cases where we are given a glimpse into Socrates' real-world decision-making we find him manifesting a remarkably tranquil confidence—and that too, in circumstances that appear to be of the most intimidating, trying, and morally complex and controversial sort, where if anywhere we should expect that the perplexity, or at least doubts, of a self-confessed non-expert would surface.⁷⁹ He believes without reservation that he is not (contrary to popular belief) “guilty (*adikei*)” of corrupting the young (*Apol.* 33d-34a), and that he acted justly in helping Athens fight her imperial wars (28e), and in voting against the overwhelmingly popular motion to try collectively the generals of Athens' forces at Arginusae (32c), and in refusing to carry out the Thirty's order to arrest Leon (32d), and in not letting himself or his family and friends submit to the typical supplications of the jurors (35b-d), and in making his unusual proposal concerning the sentence he deserves (36b ff., 36e-37a), and in not giving in to Crito's plea to escape prison (*Crito* 49e-50a) in spite of recognizing (*Crito* 50c; *Apol.* 30d, 33b3-5, 37b, 41b3) the injustice of his judges' ruling.⁸⁰ His familiar professions of ignorance and perplexity are nowhere to be seen in these important cases. Even by his own lights, Socrates cannot so confidently suppose that he succeeded in acting justly in them without

also supposing that he has expert knowledge of the good and the just.⁸¹ As if to put the matter past any doubt, sometimes Plato even quite explicitly draws attention to Socrates' tranquil resolve, as when he makes Crito not only take note of Socrates' "pleasantly slumbering" in the prison cell just days before his unjust execution, but also remark more generally on the "happy manner" that Socrates has had throughout his "entire" life (*Crito* 43b).⁸²

SECTION 12). NEVER HAVING DONE INJUSTICE.

Lastly, and perhaps most tellingly, recall Socrates' remarkable claims in the *Apology* that he has *never*⁸³ performed an unjust act (*Apol.* 33a, 37b; cf. *Gorg.* 521d and *Apol.* 27e3-5).⁸⁴ His unblemished record of just deeds is clearly yet another case of Socrates' living up to the requirement (discussed earlier in connection with making others good/better) that an artisan/expert must be able "to show some work (*ergon*) of that art (*technē*) which was well-worked/crafted (*eu eirgasmenon*)" (*Lach.* 185e). There are here two problems for anyone who maintains that Socrates is serious in his disavowals of wisdom. One is: how does Socrates think it was possible (and actual!) for him to *succeed* in consistently avoiding injustice throughout his long life, given his success-requires-wisdom doctrine?⁸⁵ The other is: how does Socrates think he is to *come to a competent conclusion* that every single act that he ever performed was just, given his view on "fearless declarations" and his view that at least the thorny instances cannot be correctly identified without definitional knowledge?⁸⁶

It is important to reiterate the fact that my interpretation of Socrates is based not simply on the fact that he makes confident moral claims.

The basis for my interpretation has primarily to do with Socrates' categorical confidence not simply in some general moral propositions, but in the ability he thinks he has to avoid error consistently and to give others consistently correct and substantive counsel—all based only on his own rational deliberations using precepts about which he shows little sign of doubt or of willingness to reconsider seriously.

I should note here that, on my interpretation, it is perfectly admissible that there is still much that Socrates does not think he understands. Indeed, I think there is plenty of reason to think there is much that he wants to come to know; it is actually this desire that fuels the search he describes in the *Apology* as wanting to continue even after death if possible.⁸⁷ But his deficiencies in understanding do not seem (at least to him) to stand in the way of his making correct decisions, acting knowledgeably, and living an adequately good life (even if he has not achieved a *maximally* good life). Whatever perplexity continues to cause him trouble appears to be "merely" philosophical—it does not cause *practical* trouble in his day-to-day decision-making.⁸⁸

SECTION 13). "SIMPLY" IRONIC DISAVOWALS.

What, then, do I make of the disavowals, given how much they may seem at least *prima facie* to clash with the interpretation I have offered? On Gulley's interpretation, Socrates is saying what he believes is false "as an expedient to encourage his interlocutor to seek out the truth, to make him think he is joining with Socrates in a voyage of discovery" (1968, 64ff.). But several scholars have pointed out how especially hard it would be to disregard the disavowals we find in the *Apology*. Vlas-

tos, for instance, thinks the disavowals at *Apol.* 21b and 21d are unique, because there we find Socrates making the disavowals to himself “in the inmost privacy of self-scrutiny...” (1994, 48): “Could Socrates have said *to himself*, ‘I am aware of not being wise in anything,’ if he thought it untrue?” (42, original emphasis). A few sentences later, Vlastos suggests the obvious answer himself: Yes, if Socrates is presenting in these passages a narrative that he knows is fiction.⁸⁹ But Vlastos balks at the possibility, saying that in that case “...Socrates is lying to the judges, to whom he had promised, just a moment earlier (20D): ‘Now I shall tell you the whole truth’ “ (42).⁹⁰ Vlastos evidently thinks that that is an undesirable conclusion; for he prefers (e.g., at 48; cf. his 1991, 238) the assumption according to which Socrates’ narrative is fact. But surely it is possible that Socrates’ promise to tell the whole truth could itself not be seriously intended.

It is remarkable what little else there is to say in favor of taking Socrates’ disavowals seriously. There is no particular reason to think the disavowals in the *Apology* are especially believable. As I have also indicated, we cannot fall back on Aristotle’s observation that Socrates asks but does not answer questions; it is patently not true of Plato’s Socrates and there is no compelling reason to think Aristotle would have had some special insight that we lack. Often, the sheer frequency of the disavowals seems to be accepted as a good reason to take them seriously.⁹¹ If, however, there were some motivation for the disavowals other than sincerity, their frequency by itself would not necessarily constitute a good reason to take them seriously. I shall momentarily suggest such an alternative.

But it is worth recognizing that, given how little there is to support the idea that Socrates is serious in his disavowals, and how much we

must downplay or distort fundamental elements of Socrates’ conception of virtue and happiness in order to reconcile his personal confidence with the allegedly sincere disavowals, we have, it seems, little to lose and much to gain by abandoning the commitment to Socratic ignorance.

So how precisely do I account for the frequent disavowals? I agree with Gulley that in the disavowals Socrates is saying what he believes is false. But I disagree that the purpose of them is always pedagogical, and I think that, where it is pedagogical, he has no interest in deceiving his listener(s) into believing that he is ignorant. I agree with Vlastos that Socrates is not being intentionally deceptive in his disavowals (he does not *expect* that the disavowals will be accepted as what he believes). But, partly for reasons I have already touched upon, Vlastos’s interpretation (1991, 32) of the disavowals as examples of “complex irony” goes too far. Indeed, Socrates has the very wisdom (and ability to teach) that he claims not to have. If we reject Gulley’s interpretation of the disavowals and instead explain them as instances of what Vlastos calls “simple” irony of the potentially “puzzling variety” (1991, 21-23),⁹² then I think we may adequately account for why Socrates disavows wisdom even when not engaging in a conversation per se (like in his speech in the *Apology*), and why he might do so even after completing a conversation,⁹³ and even why he might disavow wisdom after claiming that he is going to tell his listeners “the whole truth”. After all, such a promise may itself be an example of “simple”, potentially “puzzling” irony.

Consider first the *Apology*. It would be perfectly appropriate and understandable that Socrates would be ironic about disavowing wisdom and teaching, and even about promising to tell his judges “the whole truth”, if his intent were to mock his accusers and to mock what he must have thought was a patently baseless

and indeed farcical proceeding. Let us recall that he had little (if any) expectation of victory given the deep-seated prejudice against him and his judges' inability to comprehend his "practice" (18d2-7, 19a1-5, 24a1-4, 37e3-38a7, 35e1-36a5, 37a7-b2). Also recall his refusal to stoop to the typical defensive maneuvers expected by Athenian jurors, of which he repeatedly reminds them (34c ff., 37a3-5, 37c4-5, 38d-e); abstaining from those maneuvers is one thing, but calling such attention to those "pitiful dramatics" (35b) seems gratuitous, unless it were aimed at ridicule. Given these facts, it would seem perfectly apt for Socrates to mock the solemnity involved in all the trappings of courtroom drama.⁹⁴ Moreover, as I am about to show, there is actual textual evidence that he is doing just this.

Before I turn to it, let me make it clear that one of the virtues of the general interpretation that I am entertaining here is that if we accept it, we need not interpret Socrates' "irony" as intentionally deceptive (as Gulley, for instance, seems to have); in fact, if his aim is to mock or even simply to be playful, he would fail if his listeners were deceived by his disavowals. It is worth noting, in this connection, that Plato portrays so few people as actually having accepted his disavowals of wisdom; not only Socrates' adversaries, but most of his friends and associates (*Lach.* 180b-c, 200c-d; *Charm.* 176b, *Ion* 532d; *Meno* 71b-c, *Symp.* 175c-d, 217a, 218d, 219d, 222a; *Rep.* 367d-368c, 506b-d; *Phaedo* 118a15-17), as well as the public at large (*Apol.* 23a, *Euthyphro* 3c-d), conclude that Socrates either is wise or at least thinks he is.⁹⁵ The fact that he evidently *failed* so utterly in deceiving people on this score is some reason to believe that he did not *intend* to deceive.

So what is the textual evidence that Socrates' disavowals of wisdom, and his promise to tell the whole truth in the *Apology*, are not to

be taken seriously, and are part of Socrates' attempt to mock his accusers and the proceedings? Only a few Stephanus pages before his familiar disavowal of knowledge about virtue (20c, e), we find his disavowal of knowledge—"cleverness (*deinotes*)"—about "the way of speaking (*lexis*)" typical of the Athenian courtroom: he says he will be "speaking at random, with any chance terms" (not in "expressions and terms that've been systematized"), i.e. "in the ways I've been in the habit of speaking"—and not merely as a matter of principle, but because, being "simply/artlessly (*atechnōs*) a foreigner to the way of speaking here", he simply lacks the *skill* to speak otherwise (17c-18a). Readers unaccustomed to the Athenian courtroom will overlook an important fact that Burnet rightly emphasizes, quoting James Riddell: Socrates' exordium (17a-18a)—including the denial of being "clever/formidable (*deinos*) at speaking", the begging leave to speak in one's accustomed way, the refusal to speak in a style "unbecoming" an old man, the claim of unfamiliarity with the courtroom—"may be completely paralleled, piece by piece, from the Orators", sc. from such illustrious, professional speech-writers as Lysias, Isocrates, Demosthenes, Aeschines, and Antiphon; this suggests that Socrates' real skill belies his claims of inability (Burnet 1924, 66-67; Riddell 1877, xxi).⁹⁶ Socrates has claimed that he will be "speaking at random with any chance terms" (17c), that he will be speaking in his ordinary and natural way, not as skilled litigants usually do in court (17c, 17d-18a). The claim is so far from being true that it was itself a commonplace among skilled defendants.⁹⁷ The accumulation of such commonplaces in this brief passage by itself suggests that Socrates can hardly be "speaking at random" as he claims—which moreover must have been obvious to most or all of his (or Plato's) Athenian audience. Burnet's observation is

apt: "It is just like Socrates to say he knows nothing about forensic diction at the very moment when he is showing his mastery of it" (1924, 73). Accordingly, Burnet concludes, "the exordium is, amongst other things, a parody..." (67).⁹⁸ Since Socrates can be so clearly disingenuous in disavowing rhetorical skill, while in the very same breath promising to tell them "the whole truth" (*Apol.* 17b), it would be pure naïveté to accept unquestioningly his later disavowals of skill. And it would be quite in keeping with the satirical disavowals of rhetorical skill, if his disavowals of wisdom and virtue were aimed, in part, at sarcasm too.⁹⁹

Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith have identified a downside to the kind of interpretation that I am making of Socrates' disavowals:

"If we suppose that Socrates is willing to be dishonest or intentionally unclear about whether or not he has knowledge and wisdom, then we will have *at least some reason* to be suspicious about any other claim he might make as well. Once we convict someone of being a liar or a riddler on one issue, we will have no *clear* reason to accept the person's apparent meaning in any case." (2000, 66, my emphases; cf. their 1994, 32 and also Benson 2000, 179)

The words I have emphasized above indicate that Brickhouse and Smith are aware that they are walking a thin line here; for they themselves have supposed (2000, 62ff.; cf. Benson 2000, 176-178) that Socrates is sometimes dishonest, viz., when he claims that others are wise:

"In this claim, however, we judged Socrates to be saying something other than what he believes, because we also found

texts in which he broke from this pose and admitted that he thought no one was wise or had the kind of knowledge we found him elsewhere granting to his interlocutors." (Brickhouse and Smith 2000, 64)

But of course we have similar reason for thinking that his disavowals of wisdom and virtue are not to be taken seriously; for, as I have shown in previous sections of this paper, there are passages in which Socrates clearly "broke from this pose" (to use Brickhouse and Smith's phrase), revealing his opinion that he does have the relevant knowledge. Perhaps one reason why Brickhouse and Smith (and others) have overlooked or downplayed these passages is that they seem to be narrowly preoccupied with *knowledge-claims* (Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 35-36 and 2000, 101-120; cf. Benson 2000, 223ff.), as many recent commentators unfortunately have been.

I believe my interpretation of Socrates' disavowals in the *Apology* can also account substantially for Socrates' disavowals in other dialogues. In many of these cases I do think there is a pedagogical purpose in the disavowals; but in these cases the pedagogy hinges upon a kind of mocking irony that Socrates' interlocutor(s) and listener(s) are meant to discern. What I have interpreted as Socrates' "simple", possibly "puzzling" irony in disavowing knowledge puts him in an excellent position to mock the shameless arrogance of interlocutors who profess knowledge, especially after lengthy elenctic exchanges with Socrates who, in sharp contrast, professes ignorance. Most or all of these disavowals are just a part of Socrates' usual mocking flattery toward those who profess wisdom. In these cases, his profession of ignorance is ironic in two, separate ways. The first is largely aimed at humor and is, in relation to Socrates' broader aim, the less significant

aspect of his irony: it would be ironic, in the ordinary sense of the term, if one who indeed was ignorant could defeat in the argument those who confidently profess knowledge. The humor works whether or not the interlocutor or listener really believes that Socrates is ignorant, particularly since Socrates' refutations do not hinge on his own beliefs but on those of the interlocutor. But apart from comic effect, by professing ignorance, Socrates can effectively shift attention away from himself and onto the shamelessness of his arrogant interlocutors, for the purpose of shaming and ridiculing them, ultimately in order to highlight (for their sake and ultimately for Socrates' own¹⁰⁰) their need for continued philosophizing and the same need of listeners, to whatever extent they share the defects of Socrates' actual interlocutor. For an interlocutor or listener who felt shamed by Socrates' mockery and was thereby convinced of the need to philosophize, the bite of shame, the immediacy of the need and possibility of its satisfaction would be intensified by the realization that Socrates has (or believes he has) what they have not yet got. It is worth emphasizing again the fact that such mockery would be ineffective insofar as it was taken seriously and not recognized as mockery.¹⁰¹

Brickhouse and Smith allow that Socrates does use what they call "mocking irony" against interlocutors who profess knowledge. But they assert that "the mockery does not work by his own disclaimer...; the irony is in the mocking compliments and flattery Socrates lavishes on others. So he is not guilty of mock-modesty; his modesty is genuine" (2000, 63).¹⁰² It should be clear, however, that their inference (at "So...") is unwarranted. If they are right, it would at most mean only that Socrates *need* not be guilty of mock-modesty; it would not mean that he *is* not guilty of it.¹⁰³ But, significantly, despite their assertion that Socrates' mockery "does not

work by his own disclaimer" and that "the irony is in the mocking compliments and flattery Socrates lavishes on others", Brickhouse and Smith go on to explain that "[a]t least part of the irony in Socrates' mock-praise of others is in the *contrast* between the customary Socratic disclaimers of knowledge and wisdom, on the one hand, and the acknowledgements of others' knowledge and wisdom, on the other" (63; original emphasis). So they acknowledge that the disclaimers themselves (sincere or not) are indeed a part of Socrates' mockery.

Let me be clear that I am *not* interested in using Socrates' mockery in these instances as *evidence* for concluding that Socrates is not sincere in his disavowals; I believe I have already offered sufficient evidence for such a conclusion in the previous sections of this paper. Rather, my main point in the present section has been to try to explain one of the main reasons for Socrates' frequent disavowals, and how they and their frequency are *consistent* with an ironic interpretation of them. I have already laid out a substantial case against taking the disavowals at face value; and that case was independent of the conjectures that I have just offered in an effort to explain the purpose of Socrates' disavowals. Indeed, insofar as it is clear that the disavowals cannot be taken seriously, *all* of us (not only I) who are interested in understanding Plato's Socrates are compelled to try to discover how those disavowals can be explained *without* the assumption that he means by them what he says.

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END NOTES

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2 Unless attributed otherwise, translations are mine. Plato references are to the latest editions of the Oxford Classical Text.

3 My references herein will be to the 1994 revised version of Vlastos 1985.

4 So too, Grote, writing in 1865, reported that this kind of “ironical” interpretation “appears in the main to be preferred by modern critics” (1885, 419-420), though not by Grote himself (367ff., 420-422). Vlastos cites Irwin as one who, like Vlastos, was also taking the disavowals seriously (Vlastos 1994, 39; Irwin 1977, 39-40). Vlastos could also have added two other prominent scholars who also dissented from the “standard view”: A. Taylor (1951, 48) and Guthrie (1971, 127).

5 Recent scholars who take the disavowals seriously include: Kraut 1984, 246 ff.; Austin 1987, 27ff.; Leshner 1987, 282ff.; Reeve 1989, 164; Woodruff 1990, 90ff.; Penner 1992a, 139-147 and 1992b, 22 ff.; Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 32 and 2000, 68; McPherran 1996, 176ff.; Graham 1997, 36; Nozick 1997, 148; Stokes 1997, 26ff.; Nehamas 1998, 65-67, 72, 75; C. Taylor 1998, 48; Matthews 1999, 27; Benson 2000, 168; Wolfsdorf 2004, 117; Lear 2006, 459-460; Santas 2006, 11; Weiss 2006, 250; Rowe 2007, 78 n. 40; Gonzalez 2009, 117-118; Bett 2011, 218. A few scholars have resisted the trend, among them: Beversluis 2000, 226ff. and Leibowitz 2010, 17ff. Kahn 1996 accepts the disavowals in the *Apology* (96), though he thinks that Plato in “later” dialogues (in particular the *Charmides*) is calling their sincerity into question (201).

6 My focus is Socrates as Plato depicts him in his “early” dialogues, not necessarily the “historical” Socrates. For the purposes of this paper, I accept the usual division between “early” and “middle” dialogues, where “early” includes at least *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Protagoras*. *Gorgias* and *Meno* are often considered “transitional” between early and middle, so my interpretation of Plato’s “early” Socrates does not hinge on those two works, however consistent (I and many others think) they are with the “earlier” dialogues. I shall also occasionally cite even later dialogues, where I think such references are telling, though nothing crucial depends on such references.

7 Vlastos 1971b, 7 and 1991, 32 and 1994, 48; Kraut 1984, 268; Austin 1987, passim; Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 30; Graham 1997, 25; Nehamas 1998, 12; Morrison 2006, 108; Bett 2011, 231.

8 See, e.g., Vlastos 1991, 236-242 and 1994, 43ff.; Leshner 1987, 280ff.; Nehamas, 1987, 47; Reeve 1989, 54ff.; Wood-

ruff 1990, 88ff.; Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 35-36; 2000, 101-120; Gomez-Lobo 1994, 14ff.; Irwin 1995, 28-29; Benson 2000, 223ff.; Wolfsdorf 2004, passim.

9 I shall say much more about *Apol.* 41d in due course.

10 Cf. Vlastos 1991, 94-95. Irwin cites the same passage from Aristotle as reason for us too to take Socrates’ disavowals seriously (1977, 40).

11 Guthrie says that “...Socrates preferred to ask questions of others, though occasionally in a Platonic dialogue he offers his interlocutor the choice of roles” (1971, 126-127, my emphases), citing only *Gorg.* 462b and *Prot.* 338c-d.

12 *Rep.* 336c, 337a, 337e, 338b1-2; *Theaet.* 150c (cf. *Meno* 79e-80a) The fact that these occur in what are commonly accepted as “later” dialogues may suggest that it reflects readers’ reaction to Plato’s own portrayal of Socrates in “earlier” dialogues. The fact that we find it repeated in Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 1.2.36, 4.4.9) and Aristotle settles little, since they both may well be simply reproducing what they found in Plato. Lacey aptly notes that Socrates’ supposed refusal to make his own declarations is “an impression one hardly gets from the rest of Xenophon!” (1971, 39).

13 It is of course usual to observe that Socrates’ role of “questioner” seems to become “increasingly” nominal in “later” dialogues. Indeed, according to Vlastos, as “early” as the *Euthydemus* and *Lysis*, Socrates has discarded the “adversary procedure” of the “elenctic” dialogues in favor of “virtual monologue”: i.e., “the didactic style of the middle dialogues, where the interlocutor is a yes-man, who may ask questions and occasionally raise objections, but never puts up substantial resistance” (Vlastos 1994, 30ff. and 1991, 115ff.). Given Vlastos’s assumptions, he must conclude that such dialogues are not as genuinely “Socratic” as “earlier” ones. I argue that, given other assumptions, such a conclusion is far from obvious.

14 Besides the *Apology* passages that I am about to consider, we have: *Ion* 532d, *Prot.* 338c7-d5, 347b3-9, 348a6-7, *Gorg.* 462b, 467c, 470b-c, 504c, 506a ff., *Rep.* 1.337c, 1.348a-b. To these we may add *Euthyphro* 3c-d, where Socrates and Euthyphro discuss why Socrates is being singled out for prosecution (and not, e.g., someone like Euthyphro): “For,” he explains, “the Athenians actually, as it seems to me, don’t pay vehement attention to anyone who they suppose is clever/formidable (*deinos*)—unless of course [they suppose] he’s skilled at teaching his own wisdom. But they are angered by one who they suppose makes others too be of that sort—whether from envy as you say, or because of something else.” Socrates explains how he is different from the diviner in this respect: “For perhaps/probably you seem to be scarce at holding yourself forth and [seem] not to be willing to teach your own wisdom. Whereas I fear that I, because of my love of human beings, seem to [the Athenians] to say profusely whatsoever I have to every man, not only without payment, but even being, with pleasure, put out [of pocket] if anyone is willing to hear me.” It is true that Socrates is here describing how he “seems” to the Athenians—what they “suppose” he does. But remark-

ably it is an appearance that not only is *contrary* to the impression described elsewhere (see note 12 above), but also agrees substantially with *his own* account of his practice, including in the *Apology* (especially concerning his willingness to talk to anyone, and his willingness to become poor as a result of his peculiar “practice”).

15 Thompson 1901, 61-62 (who compares the passage to *Meno* 70c1); J. Adam 1916, 94; Burnet 1924, 38; Smyth 1984, 446; de Strycker and Slings 1994, 349; Stokes 1997, 159. Stokes’ comments are illustrative of the usual reaction to a correct reading of 33b1-2: “That Soc[rates] says he not only asks but *answers* is surprising....” After noting how very unusual is Socrates’ answering in the early dialogues, Stokes concludes, “Either our passage... is careless, or it was written with the *Gorgias* in mind, or Pl[ato] was unclear when he wrote this sentence just how he was going to portray Soc[rates] in the definition dialogues” (159-160). (Stokes translates 33b2-3 in the usual manner.)

16 Unfortunately, Fowler makes the same error in the Loeb edition of the text, now freely available to everyone at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>. The error finds its way into some of the best scholarship on Socrates (notably Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 7-8). To his credit, Reeve avoids the error in translating 33b1-2 (1989, 161); but he fails to observe the passage’s import when he later glosses the text, interpreting Socrates’ “doing his own things” (33a6-7) as though it involved only “asking his questions of young and old, rich and poor” (Reeve 1989, 163).

17 I have nowhere seen 33b2-3 translated in the ambiguously neutral way that I here suggest: all of the many published translations I have consulted accept either de Strycker and Slings’ reading or else (far less frequently) Burnet’s.

18 I have encountered only one published translation that gets *both* 33b1-2 and 33b2-3 right according to Burnet’s account: the one published, only online, by Woods and Pack 2007/2012.

19 It is really (pace Stokes 1992, 75) another way of putting the point expressed earlier at 22d and 23a: that wisdom in “the greatest things” is not the knowledge of the money-makers, or of the doctors or trainers, or of the rhetoricians, etc.

20 Note “*gar*” at 30a8, and cf. 36c3-d1, 36d4-6.

21 *Apol.* 33d-34a, which I shall soon discuss, shows that he does not seriously entertain this possibility.

22 As the relative clause here can be taken to refer to both “learned” and “heard”, it cannot be said that Socrates is in this passage denying that someone may have *learned* something from him. All he appears to be denying is that whatever was learned, it was not something that was promised and it was not “private” learning. Needless to say, the text does not imply that he believes anyone has in fact learned from him. But it is worth noting that he is not denying it either.

23 The willingness to speak to the old would distinguish Socrates from the professional teachers of his day; as de Strycker and Slings note, “only young people ha[d] teachers” (1994, 349). Philosophy was considered fine for

young people to be educated in, but adults who continued such study were regarded as wasting their time and shirking real responsibility (*Rep.* 487c-d, 497e-498a; *Euthyd.* 304e-305a; *Gorg.* 484c-486d; *Menex.* 234a-b).

24 Cf. *Theaetetus* 143d. Socrates here separates himself from the Sophists who, being mostly foreigners (19e), not to mention businessmen, had no such loyalties (cf. Burnet 1924, 124).

25 Nehamas reminds us of Socrates’ criticizing Gorgias for claiming that his students will be virtuous (*Gorg.* 460a) but disavowing responsibility if they turn out vicious (457b-c). “I think,” Nehamas concludes, “that if there ever was a sense, any sense, in which Socrates did think of himself as a teacher of *aretē*, he would never have disavowed this central responsibility” (1992, 73; 1998, 66). But Nehamas’s diagnosis of what Socrates needs to disavow in order to escape the problem he imputed to Gorgias is mistaken. It is not teaching or the ability to teach that Socrates needs to disavow, but the *guarantee* of teaching. And this is precisely what Socrates takes such pains to disavow at *Apol.* 33b.

26 To some extent my treatment here of the Socrates’ reticence in applying the term “teacher” to himself parallels Scott’s 2000, 15-26; but, as far as I can tell, Scott does not grapple directly with the question of whether Socrates (honestly or not) disavows *knowledge* or *virtue*. Cf. also de Strycker and Slings 1994, 167, 170. Reeve entertains an interpretation close to what I have here suggested, but rejects it (1989, 162-163).

27 Reiterating its prominence in his account, he chastises his critics for overlooking “this crucial feature of my position” (1991, 238 n. 12).

28 Reeve also thinks Socrates identifies what he calls “human wisdom” as genuine human virtue (1989, 150, 179; 2000, 30). As does Graham 1997, 36. Woodruff seems to do so as well: “...non-expert knowledge will include the quite extraordinary human knowledge that Socrates connects with virtue—an understanding of one’s own epistemic limitations” (1990, 90; cf. Woodruff 2006, 45, where he claims that Socrates is a kind of teacher of virtue). Kraut argues not only that Socrates’ “knowledge of how little he knows” makes him think he is virtuous, but that it is in virtue of that knowledge that he “cannot be harmed” (1984, 273-274)—a point to which I shall shortly return. Kraut (1984, 231), Reeve (1989, 35), Woodruff (1990, 90ff.), and Graham (1997, 29) all agree that what Socrates disavows is “expert” knowledge.

29 The reason that Socrates starts describing his peculiar “sort of wisdom” as “human” (20d8) is decidedly *not* because it constitutes the “human’s and citizen’s virtue” (20b4) that Euenus and the rest advertise as having. Indeed, Socrates’ peculiar “sort of wisdom” is called “human” because he thinks it is *not* the wisdom the Sophists claim to possess, which he now says is “wisdom too great for a human” (20e1)—a characterization that not only serves, in Socrates’ typical fashion, to heap accolades on those who profess genuine virtue (cf. *Euthyd.* 273e), but also foreshadows his claim that no human is genuinely wise/virtuous (*Apol.* 23a).

30 Benson makes a similar objection against Vlastos (2000, 170-171 n. 13). See also Irwin 1995, 28-29 and Wolfsdorf 2004, 128-130, 132.

31 It is introduced not as “wisdom” but as “a sort of (*tina*)” wisdom (20d7). He says only that “I seem (*kinduneuō*)” to be wise (20d9). And again at 20e6-7 his reticence is still more explicit, calling it “my wisdom—if indeed it is some wisdom—even of *any* sort (*hoia*)”. In relation to wisdom, he and everyone else “is in truth worth nothing” (23b3-4). He reiterates the same reticence every time he refers to his “wisdom” (see 29b4, 38c4). Cf. Fine 2008, 78-80.

32 “...Human wisdom is worth something little—actually, nothing.” A. Adam 1914 ad loc.: “καί corrects ὀλίγου and introduces a stronger word.” Cf. Smyth 1984, 650.

33 Awareness of the limits of one's knowledge may indeed “profit” one (*Apol.* 22e), but only in that way explained in the *Meno*: i.e. it is profitable as a prerequisite to seeking greater, substantive knowledge (84b-c; cf. *Charm.* 174d). See Senn 2005, 5 and 2012, 6.

34 There are a number of scholars who agree with Vlastos that Socrates thinks he has some elenctically-supported knowledge (Brickhouse and Smith 1989, 133, 137, 160; 1994, 18-23, 27, 39-41, 81-82, 127-128; Reeve 1989, 48, 52; Woodruff 1990, 90ff.; Nehamas 1992, 69; C. Taylor 1998, 50-51), but who disagree that this knowledge constitutes the kind of wisdom that genuine virtue requires, describing it rather as a kind of knowledge that falls short of “expertise” (Reeve 1989, 35, 51-53; Woodruff 1990, 90ff.; Nehamas 1992, 69 and 1998, 75; Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 31, 36-44, 60; C. Taylor 1998, 46-49).

35 Weiss 2006 sees this quite well (though she goes too far in concluding that this is what ultimately *motivates* his peculiar practice; see my 2012 for further discussion). Irwin too sees that Socrates' exhortation and his elenctic cross-examination are related to each other as end and means (1995, 19). Irwin, however, seems to miss the significance of this; for the “moral reform” that he says Socrates “advocates” in his exhortations is “an ‘examined life’ that includes daily argument about virtue” (ibid.). So it is not clear, on Irwin's interpretation, that cross-examination is a “means” to anything ultimately except further cross-examination. My interpretation, according to which examination is described as subordinate to the exhortative message, is corroborated by the *Charmides*, where Socrates refuses to let Charmides “chant” the “incantations” (or “admirable speeches/words”)—which heal the soul by conferring sound-mindedness (*sōphrosunē*)—until he *first* (158e, 176b) submits to an examination concerning whether or not he may already possess sound-mindedness and so not need healing.

36 One is quite hard put to find reference to the passage in the indices locorum of the major works on Plato and Socrates in the last few decades.

37 Stokes' commentary on the passage is worth noting: “Since he cannot be saying that the Olympic victor merely tries to make them seem happy, by symmetry he does not mean that he, Socrates, *tries* to make them actually happy, nor would such a claim cut any ice in court” (1997,

22, original emphasis). Indeed, even the doctor, the trainer, and the moneymaker all can claim to *try* to make the Athenians happy (*Gorgias* 452a-c).

Charles Brittain has suggested to me that 36d10 ought to be translated as “I am [in the process of] making you happy” rather than “I make you happy”. First of all, this does not, I think, make sense, given our text. According to the usual way of understanding the passage, it may indeed seem plausible to assume Socrates meant not that he *made* anyone happy, but only that he *is in the process of making* them so. But Socrates' claim about what he does for the Athenians is so closely connected to his claim about what the Olympic victor does that Socrates' “I make you be happy” is in the Greek actually elliptical: *poieō* does not even occur; rather, it is only understood from the Olympic victor's *poiei* earlier in the sentence. So if we were to accept Brittain's suggestion, we would have to interpret in the same way Socrates' claim about the Olympic victor: we would have to interpret Socrates as saying not that the Olympic victor *has made* anyone seem happy, but only that he *is making* them seem so. It is hard to understand what that would mean. The matter is, in any case, settled on independent grounds: we know that the Olympic victor's *poiei* cannot here mean “is making” because Socrates introduces the analogy by saying, “... if anyone of you *has been* victorious (*nenikēken*)...” So at 36d10 Socrates is explicitly referring to what Olympic victors *have done*—not to what they *are doing*. Since Socrates is clearly making a parallel claim about himself, it follows that the parallel claim is referring likewise to what Socrates *has done*—not to what he *is doing*.

In any case, it would not really be an obstacle against my interpretation even if our text were to permit Brittain's suggestion. For one thing, we cannot interpret Socrates to mean that he is making any positive, substantive contribution toward their becoming happy (i.e. short of actually making them happy), *unless* we accept (as I hold) that he considered himself to be an expert about the good—about what contributes positively and substantively to happiness. It would, for instance, be quite a stretch to suggest that he “is making” the Athenians happy by providing them with only some necessary condition for happiness which, all by itself (i.e. without genuine virtue), is worthless (e.g., “human” wisdom or the desire for genuine wisdom/virtue). Likewise, it would be quite a stretch to suggest that I “am making” my niece “be” a dentist only by persuading her to go to dentistry school or by paying her tuition. If Socrates were to hold that just anyone who provides for a person a necessary condition for happiness really “is making” that person be happy, then he would have to allow that not only he, but even the doctors, the trainers, and the farmers “are making” the Athenians happy. As a matter of fact, he clearly thinks that if those craftsman lack knowledge of virtue, they cannot be said to be the ones who “are making” anyone really virtuous or really happy. This, I take it, is why Socrates concludes in the *Euthydemus* that wisdom, “alone of the things that are, makes the human happy...” (282c-d).

38 It is worth recalling that Socrates is in the passage using “a literary trope” (de Strycker and Slings 1994, 189): it is a clear riff on Xenophanes’ characterizing his own “wisdom (*sophia*)” as much more valuable to the city than Olympic prowess (DK 21B2).

39 There is no space to defend the attribution adequately here, so I simply assume it. It appears most explicitly in the *Euthydemus* (282a1-b6, c8-d1, e2-4, 288d6-7, 289c7-8). But I think it is a motif of most or all of the early dialogues, including the *Apology*. I give full attention to the point in Senn 2012 (2-9), where, among other things, I argue against scholars (like Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 129-130) who maintain that happiness, according to Socrates, is possible in absence of genuine wisdom.

40 Note that at 30a-b and 31b “persuading” is not qualified by “trying”. The point of that qualification at 36c4 seems to be that Socrates does not want to go so far as to claim that he succeeded in persuading “every (*hekaston*)” Athenian, as I shall explain more fully in Section 5.

41 In Senn 2012 (6 n. 20) I went too far in saying the “greatest good” at 30a and 36c “cannot” mean the *most ultimate* good. I had wrongly assumed that “greatest” in those passages must be interpreted just as it must at 38a. Certainly by “greatest” he may not at 30a and 36c mean *most ultimate*; but, as I am now arguing, 36d-e (among other things) allows such an interpretation. It is worth noting that if Socrates’ brand of persuasion does *not* provide substantive knowledge, then it is only on the level of Gorgias’ merely belief-inspiring rhetoric (*Gorg.* 454e), hardly something that ensures “happiness”. As I shall show in Section 6, Socrates in the *Apology* describes himself as engaging, at least “privately”, in a form of persuasion aimed knowledgeably at justice, just as the “admirable” and “artful” kind of rhetoric described in the *Gorgias* (503a-b, 504d-e, 527c).

42 See my note 33 above.

43 We might have thought this was all that Socrates meant at 30a6-7 and 36c3-5—if it were not for 36c-d, among other things.

44 Kraut’s explanation of Socrates’ claim to benefit the Athenians is similar: Socrates’ great benefit to his interlocutor consists simply in getting him to be “bothered by difficulties in his moral views” (1984, 225). Nehamas (1992, 76) evidently accepts the kind of interpretation of Socrates’ great benefit that Kraut and Reeve offer, as do McPherran (1996, 220-221), Stokes (1997, 22-30, 173; 1992, 50, 63, 66), and Doyle (2012, 52). In order to make 36d10 consistent with Socrates’ alleged lack of genuine wisdom and virtue, Stokes significantly waters down the import of “happy” there (as well as of “virtue” at 30b). Morrison seems to accept the usual interpretation, but admits how unsatisfying it is (2000, 261); however, he lays the blame for this at Plato’s door: “what Plato makes Socrates say in the *Apology* is remarkably under-specified” (263). Morrison does not see that solving the problem actually involves *rejecting* the now usual interpretation. (Of the seven scholars mentioned here, only Reeve, Stokes, and Doyle explicitly acknowledge Socrates’ use of the word “happy”.)

45 Brickhouse and Smith 1994 (roughly in accordance with Vlastos 1991, 32, 241-242) seem to go a bit further, claiming that his interlocutors can be happy as Socrates is provided they partake in enough elenctic examination so as to acquire as many elenctically secure convictions as he has (28-29 with 129-130). But Brickhouse and Smith gloss over 36d10 in the same way Reeve does: They say, since Socrates (as every human) lacks genuine wisdom he has only a happiness “such as is possible for humans” (129; cf. 132-134). So too Doyle: “The unparalleled benefit Socrates claims he has provided to the city in doing the god’s bidding is *eudaimonia*—happiness (or well-being) itself; or, at least, its most basic precondition” (2012, 53, my emphasis).

46 Kraut seems to adopt this kind of interpretation:

“Because of the god [sc., via the oracle], he now sees moral discussion as an intrinsically worthwhile activity, even when it does not lead to definitive solutions; and he realizes that the peculiar form of wisdom he has acquired through moral discussion [sc., his ‘human wisdom’] is the only existing form that is intrinsically worthwhile” (1984, 271 n. 43). Likewise, Bett suggests that it is hard to avoid attributing to Socrates a “deeply paradoxical” view: viz. that a life of “fruitless inquiry itself constitutes the best possible human life” (2011, 230-232). I comment specifically on Bett’s point in my note 58 below.

47 Also one of the few scholars who grapple with 36d10, Gonzalez accepts this kind of interpretation: “...Human goodness consists of caring for one’s goodness, where this ‘care’ involves continual examination and discussion of the good. ... This ‘care’...is inherently and positively good, so much so indeed that it can by itself make us happy” (2009, 141). Gonzalez is fully aware of the paradox this view entails (118), especially given his willingness to take seriously Socrates’ disavowals of “secure and final” knowledge (117). Indeed, he poses the relevant question aptly and starkly: “What is the great benefit of getting them to *care* about virtue if they can never *possess* it?” (138). This makes it all the more remarkable that Gonzalez unflinchingly accepts his “paradoxical” answer: “...Socrates characterizes the goodness of the individual as *caring about and examining*, rather than possessing, the good...” (145, original emphasis). One might well be excused for misunderstanding such an interpretation as attributing to Socrates a straightforward contradiction, rather than mere “paradox”.

48 Kraut 1984, 300; Nehamas 1985, 13 and 1987, 48 and 1992, 70-71 and 1998, 65-66; Stokes 1992, 79 n. 15; Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 4 and 2000, 69ff.; Beversliu 2000, 9; Scott 2000, 1-2. Vlastos too points this out (1994, 15), but elsewhere emphasizes the precise opposite in attempting to account for *Apol.* 30a and *Gorg.* 521d (1991, 32, 241-242).

49 Cf. *Gorg.* 457d-e; contrast *Sophist* 230b-c.

50 Cf. *Gorg.* 513c8-d1, *Meno* 85c10-d1, *Theat.* 150d2-e8.

51 Stokes recognizes that Socrates’ criticism of his fellow citizens’ “materialistic values”, and his advocating “anti-materialistic values”, suggest that Socrates has more knowledge than simply an awareness of his own

ignorance (1992, 75); but Stokes (75-76) attributes his confidence not to genuine knowledge of the good but only to Socrates' noticing that his "values" are consistent—that his have not been refuted on the grounds of self-contradiction. But this alone can hardly have inspired the degree of confidence that Socrates actually evinces: for even if he has demonstrated that everyone he has met who has "materialistic values" has not maintained consistency, that would not show "how difficult it is to sustain...a consistent set of materialistic values", as Stokes (1992, 76) seems to think. Rather than so strongly favoring his own "anti-materialistic values", a safer conclusion for Socrates, on Stokes' interpretation, might be that most humans tend to be pretty bad at maintaining a consistent set of any values—though it could perhaps in principle be done. I suspect that those same humans would be just as bad at maintaining consistency if they were instead to adopt Socrates' "anti-materialistic values". Why would Socrates have suspected any differently?

52 This manifests itself in other parts of the *Apology* as well: When the court sentences him to death, he accuses them (or those who voted against him) of injustice (41b)—of not "living correctly" (39d)—since they followed his accusers in their unjust arraignment of him (30d, 33b3-5, 39b5-6), implying that they injure (only) themselves (30c, sc. their own souls), which according to *Crito* 47d ff. is the natural result of unjust action. As Burnyeat 1997 aptly puts it, "...the *Apology* is one long counter-indictment charging the Athenians with rampant injustice" (5).

53 Cf. *Gorg.* 503a8-9, 513d2-5, 521a2-4.

54 Beyond the principles that I cite in what immediately follows, I shall farther below provide more support for this interpretation, when I consider Socrates' determination always to take into account only what is just and his confidence that he has never done injustice.

55 Cf. *Hipp. min.* 375d.

56 Cf. *Rep.* 4.428b: "...[I]t is certainly not by *lack of learning* but by knowledge that one counsels well."

57 So Socrates' explanation for not entering conventional politics is not, as Kraut 1984 seems to maintain, that he was so satisfied with the Athenian legal system that he thinks he would not have been able to counsel the Athenians better than anyone else. Kraut suggests that Socrates could not have thought of himself as a "moral expert"—i.e., "someone who can satisfactorily defend an answer to the sorts of questions that are typically asked in the early dialogues" (209)—because, if he had, he would not have been so satisfied (as Kraut argues that he was) with the legal system of Athens (247): he would have preferred a state ruled by moral experts like himself instead of by the many (247). But Kraut admits (208, 233) that Socrates preferred a state ruled by moral experts *anyway*, regardless of whether he considered himself one. Kraut was maybe thinking that if Socrates had considered himself a moral expert, he would have made greater attempts to place himself in the position of ruler instead of simply conducting philosophical discussions in private. But, as I am presently explaining, the reason

Socrates actually states for not trying to become a ruler is not that he "thought that neither he nor his followers could have done a significantly better job than the many" (Kraut 232), but that the *daimonion* ("admirably") prevented him because he would have been destroyed in his public attempts to bring about justice. I do not deny that there were certain things about the Athenian polity that Socrates enjoyed; but I disagree with Kraut's suggestion that, given Socrates' view that the moral experts should rule, the only way to explain why Socrates did not work politically to put into place such a regime is "to take Socrates at his word when he says that neither he nor anyone else has satisfactory answer to his 'What is X?' questions" (247). Plato in fact makes Socrates give a quite different explanation, as I am about to show. (It happens to agree with the disposition of the philosopher toward conventional politics described in the *Republic*: lack not of competence, but of interest (496c-d, 521b, 592a).)

58 Bett sees quite well the "tension" between Socrates' confidence in his recommended lifestyle and his disavowals of wisdom (2011, 231). Bett calls the tension not "eliminable" (232). But of course the tension is perfectly "eliminable" *if we part ways* with Bett (218) and refuse to take Socrates' disavowals seriously. A further benefit in parting ways with Bett is that we are not driven to attribute to Socrates a view that Bett correctly describes as "deeply paradoxical": viz. that a life of "fruitless inquiry itself constitutes the best possible human life" (230-232). Not only is such a view "paradoxical" and contrary to common sense, but, more importantly for our understanding of Socrates, the view is utterly inconsistent with Socrates' own view that wisdom is necessary for happiness. So we have ample reason for concluding that Socrates does not accept the paradox that Bett considers not "eliminable".

59 Socrates claims explicitly to be good (521b)—even "admirable-and-good (*kalon kagathon*)" (511b)—in the *Gorgias*. This is remarkable, as "*kalon kagathon*" is in the *Apology* the term used when the issue of "human's and citizen's virtue" is first raised (20b), and we know that it had quite a special meaning for both Socrates and his fellow Greeks (though Socrates' use was crucially different; see Dodds 1959, 242-243, 273). My conclusions will not hinge on the *Gorgias*, as some regard it as a "transitional" rather than "early" dialogue. It is worth noting, however, that Benson's dismissal of 521b is not compelling (2000, 244-245 n. 82), since it turns crucially on his misinterpretation of similar references in the *Apology*. I take up Benson immediately below. (Benson does not address *Gorg.* 511b, though he presumably dismisses it as he does 521b.)

60 Rowe translates the phrase as "many others before me, good men too", explaining that "Socrates carefully avoids the implication that *he's* 'good'..." (2010, 179 n. 42, original emphasis). Rowe does not, however, explain why he differs here so markedly from most translators, and from scholars like J. Adam (1916, 78) and Burnet (1924, 117-118), who both render the phrase: "many other good men too". I believe Rowe has simply misread the Greek. The

first *kai* (=“too”) is adverbial, the second (untranslated) conjoins “many” and “good” (cf. Smyth 1984, 651-652; A. Adam 1914, 76).

61 Benson does not address the passage in his discussion at 243-244, and it is not specifically cited in Benson’s index locorum. Stokes does not address the passage in his discussion of the matter either (1997, 26ff.), though he does translate the passage accurately.

62 Some scholars have questioned the identification (Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 124 and 2000, 150; Benson 2000, 243). But the doctrine is pretty explicit at *Lach.* 194d1-3, *Hipp. min.* 366d3-368b1, *Lys.* 210d1-4, *Euthyd.* 282e2-4; cf. also *Gorg.* 459e5-6, 506d5-8 and *Rep.* 1.349e. Kahn does not think the Socrates of the *Apology* accepted the doctrine. He says, “Care for the excellence of the soul includes the pursuit of practical intelligence or understanding.... Thus the Socratic conception of *aretē* certainly includes a cognitive or intellectual element. But nothing in the *Apology* suggests that virtue is simply a kind of knowledge, or identical with [genuine] wisdom [or knowledge of what is most important]” (1996, 90) As a matter of fact, many things in the *Apology* do indeed “suggest” it, to say the least. Pace Kahn, there can really be no real doubt that Socrates considers *sophia*, *phronēsis*, virtue, and having a good soul/self as one and the same. His examining and questioning of those who seem “*sophos*” (23b4-7, 33c3, 41b7) is clearly none other than his examining and questioning of those who seem to have “virtue” (29e5-30a1, 38a3-5), just as the exhortation to be as “good” as possible is none other than an exhortation to be as *phronimos* as possible (29e1, 36c7). Having a “good” soul/self is clearly identified as “virtue” (30b2-3; also 29e2 with 30a1). This is why Socrates routinely just assumes that if there is someone who is making people “good/better” in “human’s and citizen’s virtue” (20b4), the person must be “educating” or “teaching” (19e ff., 24e) them and must himself have an “art” (20c), a “wisdom” (20d9-e1) that makes that work possible. (It is instructive, in this connection, to compare *Euthyphro* 2c2-7 with *Apol.* 25c1-2.) These plain facts are obscured when translators and commentators interpret “*phronēsis*” as meaning “practical intelligence” or “good sense” (e.g., Kahn 1996, 90 and Forster 2007, 4), as though Socrates distinguished *sophia* and *phronēsis* in the manner of Aristotle. See Burnet (1916, 258 and 1924, 12) for a corrective on this point.

63 Some commentators allow that Socrates does claim for himself a kind of virtue (Kraut 1984, 268; Nehamas 1987, 49; Reeve 1989, 57 with 150 and 179; Kahn 1996, 90). But it is usually held to be a “virtue” that falls short of the “expertise” that virtue par excellence requires (Kraut 1984, 231, 272-274; Nehamas 1987, 49 and 1992, 69 and 1998, 75; Reeve 1989, 35, 51-53; Kahn 1996, 103). Vlastos, as we have already seen, thinks Socrates regards himself as having bona fide virtue. And, as I have already indicated, Reeve waffles.

64 As de Strycker and Slings note, “in Athens, it was customary for both parties in a lawsuit to extol their own ethical and civic merits (corresponding to the ἀνθρωπίνῃ τε καὶ πολιτικῇ ἀρετῇ of 20b4-5) and to revile or to ridicule

the character and deeds of their opponents...” (1994, 296; see their references to the Orators).

65 We find this belief expressed most explicitly at *Crito* 47d3-5, 47e7-48a7 (see my 2005, 18). We are not to let the terms “just” and “unjust” distract us from this point; for, as Socrates uses the terms, particularly given the context, they are plainly either synonymous or co-referential with the terms “good” and “bad”, “admirable” and “shameful”. See *Crito* 48b7, 49a5-6, 49b4-5, and again my 2005, 18.

66 I think that at *Apol.* 36d1-37a2 too he is tying his “goodness” to his ability to have (or to bring about) what is ultimately good—i.e. happiness. That is, his “goodness” (or “worthiness”) is due to his ability to bring about happiness.

67 Brickhouse and Smith say that “all that follows from what he says [at 41c-d] is that the virtuous person will never be miserable. But, of course, from the fact that the virtuous person cannot be miserable, it does not follow that they are always happy” (2000, 133). They are right, if one reads the passage very narrowly and disregards what Socrates says elsewhere about virtue and the conditions for a good life, which I highlighted in the interpretation just given. To address Brickhouse and Smith’s specific concerns, we may look at it this way: 41c-d implies that a virtuous person has a kind of charmed existence (both in life and in death or dying)—charmed inasmuch as nothing bad can happen (or be done) to her/him and nothing she/he does can be bad: the virtuous person can never err or suffer any distress, dissatisfaction, or misfortune (at any rate no “mistake” or “misfortune” will bring about anything bad for her/him). So, at the very least, the virtuous person has no need to worry about living a bad life. But we can say more: We know (from *Euthyd.* 280e ff.) that avoiding error by using our resources correctly goes a long way toward achieving happiness (even if it is not by itself sufficient for happiness). And if, *on top of* correct use of resources and avoiding error, we are blessed with resources which, if used correctly, are sufficient for happiness, then we are assured of happiness. Now, by any reasonable measure, lack of such resources is surely a “bad” thing. So it seems that, on Socrates’ conception of a good life, one for whom there was *nothing* bad—no mistreatment, no incorrect action, no ill fortune, no lack of resources—would live a good life. As Socrates seems likewise to suggest at *Gorg.* 492e, those who need nothing are correctly said to be happy.

68 As I argued in Senn 2005, I do not think *Crito* 47d-e can ultimately be interpreted to imply that Socrates believed any bodily injury, sickness, or disability, in and of itself, makes life not worth living—i.e., unless it prevents someone *without any wisdom* from acquiring any. Without repeating the arguments of that paper, let me suggest that a bodily injury (say, to the brain) that prevented a person from normal cognitive functioning might well, according to Socrates, have a noteworthy effect even on a person who was already wise. But I suspect Socrates would characterize such an effect, not as an “injury” to the person, but as essentially that person’s death. Insofar as Socrates identifies soul/thought and self, he would say

a bodily injury that obliterates normal cognitive functioning would thereby obliterate *the person*. It may be worth noting at *Rep.* 496b-c Theages' bodily "sickness" is described as having *prevented* him from being an "exile" from philosophy, the sickness evidently being too severe to keep him out of conventional politics, but not severe enough from keeping him from philosophizing with Socrates. (Theages of course was mentioned in Socrates' list of "uncorrupted" young followers at *Apol.* 34a.)

69 See my note 33 above.

70 It is reiterated at 28d and 32d. We find it at *Crito* 48c-d too.

71 The translation and the interpretation of *Crito* 46b are not without controversy. I discuss both at great length in my 2012, and shall here simply assume mine are correct. Since I have argued (2012) that we find the same rationalism in the *Apology* as in the *Crito*, I reject Kahn's conclusion (1996, 97) that the "deeply religious" Socrates of the *Apology* cannot be the same as the Socrates who embraces the rationalism of *Crito* 46b.

72 Kahn correctly points out that Socrates does not in the *Crito* "claim" to possess expert knowledge of good and bad, but it is not so clear that, as Kahn says, "the *Crito* does not represent Socrates as an expert (epistēmōn)" (1996, 103). Surely it is remarkable and suggestive that at 47b ff. we have Socrates claiming that we must be persuaded by no opinion but the expert's, and accordingly must act "in that way alone which the one person—the supervisor/knower (*epistatēs*) and expert (*epaiōn*)—opines [as best]", while only one Stephanus page earlier we have Socrates' bold commitment to be persuaded by only the conclusion of his own reasoning. Indeed, one might well interpret 47b ff. as an explanation of 46b.

73 His confidence in the *Crito* cannot be explained, as some do (Vlastos 1994, 35; Graham 1997, 29; Woodruff 2000, 138; Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 24-25 and 2000, 88-89; Irwin 1995, 19, 122), by suggesting that he is there referring merely to the results of elenctic reasoning. First, there is no indication whatever that the statements Socrates accepts in the *Crito* were established through elenctic reasoning (either in *Crito* or in the past discussions to which Socrates there alludes) (Kahn 1996, 247; C. Taylor 1998, 50-51). Second, and more importantly, if we do not accept Vlastos's idea (which I already put to rest above) that the "human wisdom" afforded by the elenchus constitutes genuine virtue, then truth discovered elenctically, non-expertly cannot (in light of the success-requires-virtue doctrine to which Socrates cleaves) explain his exclusive confidence in his own ability to reason and deliberate independently and effectively.

74 Vlastos 1971b, 10ff. thinks *every* issue for Socrates (except, possibly, the view that all things are done for the sake of happiness; cf. Vlastos 1991, 112 and 1994, 30) is an open issue, subject to re-examination (cf. Irwin 1977, 38, 71; Kraut 1984, 4 n. 1; Reeve 1989, 51-52, 179; Nehamas 1992, 64-65; Gomez-Lobo 1994, 29-32). *Crito* 54d4-6 calls into question the seriousness of Socrates' supposed willingness (*Crito* 46c, 48d-e, 49e) to listen to counterargument on these matters. Recall also that Socrates made

it clear even earlier (49a) that there is "no common counsel" for those who disagree over the fundamental principle (*archē*) that it is never correct to do injustice even in retaliation. This casts further doubt on the suggestion that Socrates' beliefs rest purely on elenctic reasoning.

75 Cf. my 2012, 13-14.

76 Irwin 1977, 43; Nehamas 1987, 35; Beversluis 1987, 111; Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 54, 131 and 2000, 112, 117.

77 It should be clear enough that Socrates is seriously inferring not that Euthyphro and Meletus *are* wise, but only that they "trust" that they are, as he put it at *Lach.* 86c-d.

78 The distinction here between general and specific, I believe, adequately counters Benson's suggestion that Socrates' refusal to avow wisdom is a manifestation of shame (2000, 126). In any case, without begging the question at hand, we cannot here assume that disavowals are to be taken seriously.

79 Oddly enough, Benson actually uses the "very trying and intense circumstances" of Socrates' trial as a possible excuse for what Benson suggests may strictly speaking be a mistaken use of knowledge-terms in some of Socrates' knowledge-claims in the *Apology* (2000, 236; cf. Guthrie 1975, 99), as though the intensity of the circumstances might have made Socrates unintentionally misrepresent his knowledge.

80 Given the level of abstraction characteristic of the discussions in most of Plato's dialogues, it is no surprise and not significant that we do not find *many* examples of this sort. But it is telling that, in those that do involve Socrates' defense of particular actions (the *Apology* and the *Crito*), we do find Socrates' attitude to be fearless and shameless.

81 Since Socrates is committed to what I have called Autonomous Rationalism, his confidence in his decisions cannot be based on any kind of divine revelation or inspiration, as some have maintained (Brickhouse and Smith 1989, 106-107, 130, 133, 135 and 1994, 35-36, 132; McPherran 1996, 182; Kahn 1996, 96; Benson 2000, 126, 246-246 (esp. n. 88); Tarrant 2003, xxiv).

82 See also *Phaedo* 58e, 117c, and *Symp.* 221b. Vlastos notes his tranquility well, saying he is "serenely confident he has achieved both" genuine virtue and thereby happiness (1994, 43).

83 Kraut points out that at *Apol.* 37a Socrates claims never to have *voluntarily* done injustice. Kraut suggests that by saying this Socrates allows that he sometimes acts unjustly out of ignorance, since the qualification "voluntarily" would otherwise be pointless (1984, 213 n. 46; cf. Benson 2000, 242-243 and his n. 71). Presumably 37b is to be read with reference back to 37a (cf. Benson and Reeve 1989, 58 n. 66). But the other passages cannot be so easily accommodated on Kraut's interpretation: Unfortunately, *Apol.* 33a and *Gorg.* 521d are not even considered in this connection by Kraut, Reeve, or Benson. Stokes glosses 33a thus: "Soc[rates] means that he has always supported justice above all" (159); but by "supported", he must mean only "tried to support", since he concludes that, according to Socrates, "a human being can be sure

only of having done no intentional, deliberate, injustice” (26). Stokes recognizes *Gorg.* 521d, but concludes, “In this Plato’s *Apology* is more guarded than the *Gorgias*...” (26). In any case, by using the word “voluntarily” at 37a Socrates does have a point *even if* he thinks he has *never* done injustice (cf. Penner 1992a, 162 n. 51). Consider the context of the claim at 37a: The question there is over what kind of sentence Socrates deserves. He is stressing the point about voluntariness here, because he is reminding his judges that if he has not done injustice voluntarily then he must not deserve a very harsh punishment (37b) *whether or not* he has done any injustice involuntarily. He had already pointed out (26a) that according to law involuntary wrongdoers are to be subjected to private teaching and admonishment rather than punishment.

84 Recall also his “private” battle “for what’s just” (*Apol.* 32a), discussed earlier.

85 Vlastos puts it well: “His avowals of epistemic inadequacy, frequent in the dialogues, are never paralleled by admission of moral failure; the asymmetry is striking” (1994, 43 n. 13). Brickhouse and Smith see the problem here well enough; but their solution leaves much to be desired. They think that *part* of the reason “Socrates has consistently managed to steer away from evil” is that “his elenctically produced convictions provide him with a number of fixed points for a theory of how humans ought to act” (1994, 60). Since this elenctic knowledge by no means constitutes complete “moral knowledge”, Brickhouse and Smith say that Socrates does not have—or even profess—“perfect assurance” that he has completely succeeded in avoiding misconduct (132). Rather, he has great confidence that he has never, “even unwittingly, done what he ought not”, because “the great frequency of his daimonic alarms gives him reason to think that he has avoided a host of other evils” (132); that is, apparently, Socrates is confident that his *daimonion* has come to the rescue when his own elenctically justified convictions fail him either in being incomplete or in being simply erroneous. More recently, however, they concede that “... Socrates is careful not to say that [the *daimonion*] always warns him away whenever he is about to do something evil. Thus, Socrates cannot infer from the silence of the *daimonion* that whatever it is that he is thinking about doing is actually permissible” (2000, 152). They conclude that “...Socrates has been *lucky* when he reaches the end of his life and realizes that he has managed to have harmed no one” (my emphasis). Needless to say, this still conflicts with the success-requires-wisdom doctrine. And there remains the other problem: how can Socrates “realize” that he has (“luckily”) done no injustice without definitional knowledge? In their 2006, they suggest that Socrates succeeded in avoiding injustice by “scrupulously manag[ing] to avoid allowing his appetites ‘to fill themselves up,’ “ thus keeping “them from interfering with his deliberations about what is best.” This still does not avoid the conflict with the success-requires-wisdom doctrine, or the problem of how Socrates can “realize” that he has avoided injustice.

Nor will Benson’s characterizing (2000, 245-246)

Socrates’ “policy” as one of “inaction” allow us to avoid the conclusion that Socrates thinks he has expert knowledge. If he lacks it, then the various choices Socrates made—avoiding a conventionally political life, refusing to put to a vote the decree concerning the generals at Arginusae, refusing to obey the order to arrest Leon, suffering injustice rather than doing it (all of which Benson characterizes as instances of mere inaction)—could, for all he knew, have been just as disastrous as the more “active” alternative in each case. Deciding not to act in situations that require knowledge that one lacks does not indemnify one against lots of error and injustice, even if one has complete self-knowledge of the extent of one’s abilities. If definitional knowledge is necessary for acting correctly and justly, then it would seem that it is no less necessary for deciding correctly when to *abstain* from action. (Benson believes (246-247 n. 88) that all the exceptions to Socrates’ “policy of inaction” involve Socrates’ daimonic voice or other divine sanction, and not knowledge.)

86 Nehamas sees this problem very well (1992, 69, 71 and 1998, 67-69; see too Morrison 2006, 108, 113). Nehamas admits not having a solution, but concludes (1992, 71-72 and 1998, 67, 86) that Socrates *himself* was puzzled by the fact that he consistently acted correctly throughout his life in spite of lacking the (supposedly necessary) knowledge. (I take it that this is the upshot of Nehamas’s point that “ironists can be ironical toward themselves as well.”) One might well wonder why one who took such great pains to persuade everyone that wisdom is necessary for doing well would make such a great deal of the fact that he was an exception to his own rule. Ironic and puzzling indeed—enough to strain markedly the credibility of Nehamas’ interpretation.

87 Despite accepting the “sincerity” of Socrates’ disavowals, Penner does allow that “[w]e may suspect, though Socrates never tells us so, that Socrates thinks himself rather farther along than anyone else in this attempt to grasp the whole [sc., to achieve comprehensive, substantive knowledge of good and bad]. But unless he thinks there is nothing left for him to figure out and fit together, he may still fairly claim to know only that he knows nothing” (1992, 145). And, quoting Frege, Penner maintains that “we never attain” the kind of maximal knowledge Socrates is striving for (147). Penner also offers some provocative suggestions as to what philosophical problems Socrates had not resolved (1992a, 146; 1992b, 24 n. 38). I feel that Penner is in a sense correct; but since he maintains (1992a, 146) that Socrates “says very little that is useful” about “the nature of happiness” (one of the things that, according to Penner, Socrates “still ha[s] to figure out”), I cannot accept his conclusions in detail.

88 So I am willing to agree with Matthews that Socrates may not even believe that he can posit a definition of virtue or goodness that will not generate philosophical problems (1999, 52; cf. Penner 1992a, 139ff.; 1992b, 23ff.). But such problems will, on my interpretation, be “only” philosophical problems, not practical ones that bar him from a (at least minimally) good life.

89 Brickhouse and Smith (1989, 41) and Benson (2000, 179) acknowledge this possibility too, but they share Vlastos's worries about accepting it.

90 Brickhouse and Smith (1989, 40ff.) and Bett (2011, 218) likewise think the disavowals in the *Apology* take on special significance.

91 Irwin 1977, 39-40; Kraut 1984, 247 n. 7; Nehamas 1987, 54-55 n. 37; Brickhouse and Smith 1989, 100 n. 85; Benson 2000, 178; Forster 2006, 14-15; Wolfsdorf 2004, 124.

92 As Vlastos explains, this kind corresponds to "the primary use" of the English word "irony" (43). He makes it clear that the possibility (or fact) of a listener's missing such irony does not mean it is not irony (22-23, 41, 42, 138). So he likewise makes it clear that this kind of irony is perfectly consistent with pretending (27), feigning (29), even dissimulation (28 n. 24) or insincerity (26 n. 18) or concealment (28 n. 24, 37), so long as the agent is not intentionally attempting to deceive. (Vlastos also seems to discern a difference—too subtle however for me to see—between "dissimulation" and "dissembling", since, he holds, puzzling irony can fairly be described as "dissimulation" (28 n. 24), but *not* as "dissembling" (25 n. 13, 28 n. 24).)

93 Many scholars have suggested that, on Gulley's sort of interpretation, since Socrates in the *Apology* is not even engaging his audience in an examination or refutation, he has no clear motive for the disavowals there (Reeve 1989, 178; Brickhouse and Smith 1989, 101 n. 90; 1994, 32; 2000, 65; C. Taylor 1998, 48; Benson 2000, 178-179; Bett 2011, 218). A related idea is that there is no motive for *continuing* to dissemble at the *end* of a successful refutation (Vlastos 1994, 41-42; Woodruff 1990, 88; Benson 2000, 178).

94 Brickhouse and Smith dismiss ironic interpretations of Socrates' statements in the *Apology* because, they believe, he takes his defense seriously (1989, 40ff., 89-90). So, similarly, Reeve's contention that Socrates "makes the majority of his defense hinge on" the truth of his disavowals (1989, 177) presumes that Socrates takes his "defense" entirely seriously. As I have said (and as I pointed out in Senn 2012, 23, 27 n. 74), there are powerful reasons for thinking he does not. In any case, given what, I argue, is the complete transparency of Socrates' sarcasm in the *Apology*, there is little "risk" of "causing some jurors to believe what is false", which Brickhouse and Smith take such pains to show Socrates' desire to avoid.

95 Nehamas acknowledges this, but says it "is no reason for refusing to take his own disavowal...at face value" (1998, 66). True enough; it is by itself no reason. But Nehamas seems to miss a crucial point. Alongside Plato's making Socrates consistently disavow wisdom, Plato consistently depicts almost everyone as not taking them at face value. The latter, I believe, is at least part of Plato's "literary" attempt to get us too to see that the disavowals are not to be taken seriously.

96 See further Burnet's notes on *Apol.* 19d4, 28a4. Guthrie makes some of the same observations, without wholeheartedly accepting Burnet's view that the

exordium is a deliberate parody (1975, 74ff.). De Strycker and Slings agree with Riddell and Burnet, and they cite additional parallels with the Orators (1994, 32ff.). They also agree that Socrates' claim to be unable to use forensic diction is "irony": "This claim, surely, we cannot take at face value" (38-39).

97 Riddell and Burnet cite Isocrates, *Antidosis* 15.179 and Demosthenes, *Against Aristogeiton* 1, 25.14. Burnet explains, "...The exordium is, amongst other things, a parody, and the very disclaimer of all knowledge of forensic diction...is itself a parody" (67).

98 Brickhouse and Smith object to Burnet's reading the passage as parody; they argue that Socrates is being completely sincere (1989, 49-59). But their objection is based in part on misunderstanding: Burnet never claims that Socrates' words in this passage are "only" a parody or "only" an attempt to ridicule; nor does he deny that some of Socrates' remarks in the passage are true; nor does he maintain that Socrates is claiming to lack "any experience whatever" with usual courtroom diction. Burnet's point is that Socrates presents a masterful (and completely conventional) disavowal (not of "experience" but of *mastery* of courtroom diction (just as a "foreigner" is no master of local dialect); Burnet's point is that it must be ("amongst other things") a parody because the disavowal is so transparently conventional among professionals. (Reeve's objections (1989, 5ff.) to an "ironic" interpretation of Socrates' exordium can be dismissed on similar grounds.) Perhaps more significantly, in interpreting the passage, Brickhouse and Smith crucially beg the question (52, 56-57) against Burnet and in favor of their view (40ff.) that Socrates has a "moral commitment" to tell his audience the truth (see my note 94 above). And perhaps most significantly, Brickhouse and Smith's interpretation of the passage does not take sufficiently into account Socrates' claim that he is going to be "speaking at random, with any chance terms" (17c2-3), not in "expressions and terms that've been systematized" like those of his prosecutors (17b9-c2). This claim *precedes* significant parts of what Riddell and Burnet have pointed out as typical of courtroom rhetoric: begging leave to speak in one's accustomed way (17d5-18a1), claiming unfamiliarity with the courtroom (17d1-3), exhorting the judges to "instruct each other" about the facts (19d2ff.), warning the judges about setting bad precedents (35c5-6). So it is hard to accept Brickhouse and Smith's contention that Socrates' promise (17b7-8) to tell the judges the truth refers only to what they "*will hear*" (55, their emphasis). De Strycker and Slings' answer (1994, 32-33 n. 16) to Brickhouse and Smith's criticism of Burnet's interpretation is worth considering too.

99 It is worth noting that the elaborate story of the oracle's role in Socrates' peculiar "practice" is also aimed largely at mockery, as I argue at length in Senn 2012.

100 To the extent that Socrates—though knowledgeable enough for "practical" purposes—himself desires to have more knowledge and so to keep philosophizing (see the previous section of this paper), he has a personal stake in inducing others, particularly those with lots of philo-

sophical potential, to join with him in the pursuit of maximal wisdom. Recall that, on my account, the “elenchus” is not where Socrates thinks substantive philosophical discovery is made; the “elenchus” is not “constructive”, as many would have it. (Some even go so far as to suggest that the “elenchus” is Socrates’ *only* method of attaining the truth: Vlastos 1994, 55-56; Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 12, 68; Irwin 1995, 18. Contrast Irwin 1977, 37; C. Taylor 1998, 49-51; Benson 2000, 31; McPherran 1996, 191.) On my account, its purpose is rather purely “protreptic”, an inducement to *begin* philosophizing.

101 I cannot confidently conclude that what Vlastos calls “simple”, “puzzling” irony is what Socrates engages in *every* time he disavows knowledge in Plato’s dialogues. Over and above his conscious efforts at mockery, I think there is some reason to think that Socrates may have been just *disposed to reticence* about *explicitly* avowing wisdom, and that his “*eirōneia*” may indeed have been to a certain degree “habitual (*eiōthuaia*)”—as both friend (*Symp.* 218d7) and foe (*Rep.* 1.337a4) had described it. His reluctance to respond to Glaucon and Adeimantus, as though he were knowledgeable, may be a good example. (The *Republic*, especially what follows book 1, is often considered a marked departure from the aporetic, doubtful Socrates typical of the “earlier” dialogues (so, e.g., Matthews 1999, 74, and Vlastos 1991, 248-249). But Socrates does later express doubt and lack of knowledge several times, throughout the dialogue (368b-c, 394d, 427d-e, 450c-451a, 497e, 506c-d, 517b, 533a).)

The Greek word *eirōneia* can mean dissimulation/evasiveness which is, depending on the context, malicious/deceitful or playful or neither (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1108a21-23, 1127a22-23, 1127b22-31; *Eudemian Ethics* 1233b39-1234a1; *Rhetoric* 1379b31-32). But it may be a mistake to use the English word “irony” to describe *all* of Socrates’ disavowals or his overall demeanor. The reason is that the English word suggests something rather more *calculated* than what Socrates seems to be doing in some of his disavowals. I think Burnet’s insight is worth considering; Socrates, he says, “did not like to commit himself further than he could see clearly, and he was apt to depreciate both his own powers and other people’s. That was not a mere pose; it was due to an instinctive shrinking from everything exaggerated and insincere. ... To a very large extent, we gather, ‘the accustomed irony’ of Sokrates was nothing more or less than what we call a sense of humour which enabled him to see things in their proper perspective.” (1914, 132)

So, on Burnet’s account, Socrates’ “irony” is really, “to a very large extent”, just reflexive modesty, or even diffidence, rather than calculated feigning or dissembling. This *could* perhaps be why Plato sometimes makes Socrates add his usual disclaimer apparently only as an afterthought (*Gorg.* 509a, *Rep.* 1.354b-c, *Meno* 98b), which some have claimed are actually *un-Socratic* (on *Gorg.* 509a see Dodds 1959, 341; on *Rep.* 1.354b-c see Matthews 1999, 74). Partly on the basis of Aristophanes’ portrayals of the ordinary Athenian and on Demosthenes’ *First Philippic* 7 and 37, Burnet thought the trait was

not peculiar to Socrates but actually “in the Athenian character” (1911, lv-lvi)—which, if true, would constitute further reason to think Socrates’ disavowals were in no danger of being misunderstood by Socrates’ or Plato’s immediate audience. It goes some way toward corroborating Burnet’s opinion of “the Athenian character” if we recall two examples from Plato’s early dialogues. One is in the *Charmides*: Socrates asks the already illustrious adolescent if he has sound-mindedness (*sōphrosunē*), and the youth blushes and says that although it would be “out of place” to deny it, it will “perhaps/probably appear onerous” if he praises himself by avowing it (158c-d). And in the *Protagoras*, even the very ambitious and wealthy youth Hippocrates helplessly blushes (312a) at having to admit the possibility that he is willing essentially to pay someone (a foreigner no less!) to make him a professional wise man (*sophistēs*). His shame came in part, no doubt, from the fact that the Athenian people were largely hostile towards those who made a living from professing to teach wisdom (*Euthyphro* 3c-d, *Prot.* 316c-d, *Rep.* 492a), partly due to their being almost viscerally wary of overly “clever/formidable (*deinos*)” speakers (*Euthyphro* 3c; *Lach.* 197d; *Apol.* 23d5-7; also Thucydides 3.37.4-5, 8.68.1; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.31; Aristophanes, *Clouds* 94ff., 882ff.). (In addition to the examples of Charmides and Hippocrates, one might find further support for Burnet’s idea of the “ironic”, noncommittal “Athenian character” at *Meno* 71a, where Socrates claims that any Athenian would, if asked, claim not to know whether virtue is teachable or even what its nature is. However, the passage *may* not count, if Socrates is in fact just dissembling somehow “on behalf of” his fellow-citizens.) An anonymous referee for this journal objected to the suggestion that any of Socrates’ disavowals can be explained by positing “habits” for Socrates: the referee argued that such a suggestion involves the confusion of literary characters, “who have no habits at all”, with actual persons; the representation of literary characters must, the argument goes, be “*motivated*” in every respect (presumably by their creator). Without here taking a position on just how “literary” any of Plato’s dialogues really is, I believe the objection overlooks the natural possibility that a writer of literature may be motivated, for a variety of reasons, to depict his or her *human* characters as having certain habits—if only because actual persons really have them. Plato’s characters have certainly *seemed* real to many readers, regardless of whether they actually represent historical persons. That, I venture to think, is largely due to Plato’s remarkable skill at *making* his characters seem real, through a number of devices; rendering them with habits may well be one.

102 To avoid confusion, let me clarify here that the kind of irony that I have above attributed to Socrates differs from what Brickhouse and Smith refer to as “mocking irony” (2000, 60ff.), “in which the mockery is achieved through deception” (99 n. 9). According to my interpretation, Socrates has little or no interest in merely making an “inside” joke, i.e. little interest in deceit. Rather, he is genuinely interested in making the arrogant interlocutor

himself feel shamed, whether or not he always succeeds. Again, the kind of irony that I have attributed to Socrates is of the kind that Vlastos characterizes as "simple", potentially "puzzling", but not deceitful.

103 Indeed, Brickhouse and Smith seem to be aware of this; for, shortly after the assertion that I just quoted, they seem to weaken their inference considerably, saying only that Socrates' mock-praise of others "does not *require*... that Socrates actually supposes that he possesses the knowledge and wisdom he claims to lack..." (63, emphasis added).