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SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHIZING

INTRODUCTION

By ‘Socratic philosophizing’ I understand ‘the manner in which the character Socrates in Plato’s early dialogues engages in *philosophia*’. (Hereafter, I will refer to the character Socrates in Plato’s Socratic dialogues simply as ‘Socrates’. I will refer to the historical Socrates as ‘the historical Socrates’. By ‘Plato’s early dialogues’ I mean to include: *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Republic 1*, *Protagoras*. ‘*Philosophia*’ is the Greek ancestor of our ‘philosophy’. Socrates understands *philosophia* to be the pursuit of ethical knowledge. Socrates principally pursues ethical knowledge with others, his interlocutors, and principally by engaging them in arguments. For convenience, I will refer to the manner in which Socrates pursues *philosophia* as ‘Socrates’ method’ or ‘the Socratic method’.)

Mainstream Anglophone scholarship on Socrates’ method over the past quarter century has been galvanized by Gregory Vlastos’s 1983a article ‘The Socratic Elenchus’. My review of this literature begins with Vlastos’s article and includes the following contributions: Kraut (1983), Vlastos (1983b),

Brickhouse and Smith (1984a, 1991, 2002b), Polansky (1985), Benson (1987, 1990b, 1995, 2002), Adams (1998), Tarrant (2002), Carpenter and Polansky (2002), McPherran (2002b, 2007), Wolfsdorf (2003), Forster (2006), Santana (2007, 2009).

The conclusion to this chapter comments on the prospects for further study of Socrates’ method.

THE ‘SOCRATIC ELENCHUS’

‘Elenchus’ is a Latinization of the Greek *elenchos*, which often in its original context and usually in the recent literature on Socrates’ method means ‘refutation’. (I will use the Latin form throughout this discussion, except when the Greek form occurs in the title of articles or chapters, and despite the fact that a number of the most recent contributions prefer the Greek form.) Accordingly, the elenchus is conceived as an adversarial approach to claims or to people. Thus Vlastos understood the Socratic elenchus; the word ‘adversarial’ is his. A basic question is whether the elenchus, whatever precisely it is and however precisely it operates, exhausts Socrates’ method. Whereas Vlastos identifies Socrates’



method with the elenchus, many others hold that the elenchus is just one, albeit salient, method or means of Socratic philosophizing. In fact, Tarrant argues that Socrates' method is best characterized not as 'elenchus' but '*exetasis*'; and Wolfsdorf argues that Socrates' pursuit of ethical knowledge, specifically knowledge of ethical definitions, is cooperative rather than adversarial. Even so, most scholarship has focused on the elenchus; that is, most scholarship has focused on the means by which Socrates' *refutes* his interlocutors or their claims. But even given this focus, Carpenter and Polansky have suggested that Socrates employs various forms of elenctic argumentation, and Forster's discussion suggests that Socrates employs at least two forms of refutation: by exposing a thesis as self-contradictory and by other means. In short, it is questionable how heterogeneous Socrates' method is and in particular to what extent Socrates' method is elenctic.

Whether or not the elenchus is a uniform method of refutation, it is questionable precisely what Socrates endeavours to refute in general or in any given instance. Vlastos maintains that Socrates tries to refute a given moral thesis that his interlocutor asserts. In contrast, Benson argues that Socrates' immediate aim is to refute his interlocutor's claim to possess ethical knowledge and that Socrates does this by exposing inconsistency among a set of his interlocutor's ethical beliefs. Benson's position is a response to Vlastos's and arises from the view that the elenchus actually cannot refute a given ethical thesis, but only expose inconsistency among a set of beliefs. Indeed, Vlastos himself centrally raises this problem: how can the elenchus refute a thesis? Vlastos calls this 'the problem of the elenchus'. Most scholarship of the last quarter century has been devoted to solving, dissolving or criticizing attempts to solve or

dissolve the problem of the elenchus. This is true for Vlastos (1983a), Kraut (1983), Brickhouse and Smith (1984a), Polansky (1985), Benson (1987, 1990b, 1995), Adams (1998) and Santana (2007, 2009). Moreover, Brickhouse and Smith (1990, 2002b), Benson (2002), Wolfsdorf (2003) and Forster (2006) all treat the issue to some extent. This issue also enters McPherran's (2007) discussion, albeit as a secondary theme.

In short, the bulk of the discussion of Socrates' method in the last quarter century has been devoted to the elenchus and to the problem of the elenchus.

ORGANIZATION OF THE DISCUSSION

My discussion of the interpretations of Socrates' method of philosophizing will proceed chronologically, from Vlastos 1983a to Santana 2009. In this respect, the organization of the discussion in this chapter differs from the topical organizations of the other chapters in this companion. My justification for proceeding in chronological order is that this approach preserves the integrity of the contributions as well as illustrates their dialectical engagement within this vein of scholarship. However, for those who would appreciate some topical mapping of the terrain, I offer here a topical overview of the contributions.

Does Socrates have a single, uniform approach to philosophizing? Vlastos 1983a claims that Socrates does and, more precisely, that this approach is the elenchus. Again, Vlastos construes the elenchus as an adversarial method whereby Socrates targets his interlocutor's moral thesis for refutation and by means of a single argument claims to prove this thesis to be false.

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Not all papers discussed here weigh in on the question of whether Socrates has a single, uniform approach to philosophizing. Rather, a number of contributions focus more narrowly on the problem of the elenchus to which Vlastos's account of Socratic elenchus gives rise. Once again, the problem of the elenchus is the problem of how Socrates can claim to have refuted his interlocutor's thesis when it appears that all he has done is shown the interlocutor's thesis to be inconsistent with a premise set. Vlastos (1983a) argues that Socrates holds a number of *meta-elenctic* theses on the basis of which he can deploy the elenchus effectively. None of the other contributors accepts Vlastos's attribution of all of the meta-elenctic theses to Socrates. Several early contributions focus on arguing that Socrates does not or cannot hold some of these theses (Brickhouse and Smith 1984a; Kraut 1983; Polansky 1985). Indeed, in the wake of Kraut's criticisms, Vlastos (1983b) himself concedes that his conception of the Socratic elenchus is only true of one dialogue *Gorgias*. Consequently, Vlastos (1983b) rejects the view that Socrates has a single, uniform approach to philosophizing.

Granted this, a residual question from Vlastos (1983a) remains: Insofar as Socrates does attempt to refute his interlocutor's thesis, how can he do so? Many commentators contribute to this question (Adams 1998; Brickhouse and Smith 1991; Forster 2006; Kraut 1983; McPherran 2002b, 2007; Polansky 1985; Santana 2009). They variously suggest that Socrates uses premises he thinks are true or at least more likely to be true than the refuted thesis with which they are inconsistent. For example, Polansky suggests that Socrates uses endoxic premises. Brickhouse and Smith suggest that Socrates' confidence in the premises in part derives

from the fact that they have survived repeated elenctic testing. Forster argues that Socrates shows that his interlocutor's thesis is self-contradictory. Santana argues that the premise set has more evidential weight than the refuted thesis because both Socrates and his interlocutor agree to it, whereas only the interlocutor maintains the refuted thesis.

On the other hand, some scholars variously reject Vlastos's view that Socrates' approach is to target his interlocutor's theses for refutation. For example, Benson (1987, 1990b) argues that Socrates' primary aim is to expose inconsistency among his interlocutor's ethical beliefs and, assuming knowledge entails a consistent, topically relevant belief set, thereby to undermine his interlocutor's conceit of knowledge. Likewise, Tarrant (2002) maintains that Socrates aims to expose inconsistency and thus lack of knowledge in his interlocutor, but he emphasizes that Socrates' intent is to aid and encourage his interlocutor's pursuit of knowledge. Wolfsdorf (2003) argues that Socrates views his engagement with his interlocutors, specifically in the context of the search for definitions, largely as cooperative pursuits of truth.

As noted, Vlastos (1983b) abandons his idea (from 1983a) that Socrates has a single, uniform approach to philosophizing. A number of scholars emphasize this position. More precisely, they advocate one or the other of the following two theses: the elenchus is but one among several forms of argument Socrates employs (Benson 1995, 2002; Carpenter and Polansky 2002); the elenchus itself is a broad kind of argument with various forms or various purposes (Adams 1998; Brickhouse and Smith 1991; Forster 2006; McPherran 2002b, 2007). For example, Benson (1995) claims that it is simply a dogma of Socratic studies that 'the elenchus is Socrates' only method of argument'.

Brickhouse and Smith (2002b) go even further, denying that there is such thing as the elenchus.

VLASTOS (1983A)

Gregory Vlastos's seminal paper 'The Socratic Elenchus' was published in the first volume of *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* in 1983. (Vlastos criticizes some earlier views, in particular: Grote, 1865; Zeller, 1922; Robinson, 1941[1953]. Other predecessors are cited in particular at n. 14.) A revised version of this essay was published in a posthumous collection of essays *Socratic Studies* in 1994.

Vlastos proposes that Socrates' distinctive method is the elenchus. Vlastos emphasizes that while Socrates uses the word 'elenchus' and its cognates to refer to his philosophical activity, he does not define what elenchus is. Vlastos himself defines Socratic elenchus as 'a search for moral truth by adversary argument in which a thesis is debated only if asserted as the answerer's own belief and is regarded as refuted only if the negation of his thesis is deduced from his own beliefs' (1983a: 30). More precisely, Vlastos characterizes Socratic elenchus as follows:

- (1) Socrates' interlocutor asserts a thesis p , which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation.
- (2) Socrates secures the interlocutor's agreement to a premise set Q that includes one or more premises q , r and so on, relevant to p .
- (3) Argument is from Q not to it.
- (4) Socrates argues and the interlocutor agrees that Q entails not- p .
- (5) Socrates claims that not- p has been proven true, and thus p false. (39)

Regarding (1), note that Vlastos emphasizes that the interlocutor must assert p as his own opinion. This is connected with the 'existential dimension' of Socratic elenchus: 'elenchus has a double objective: to discover how every human being ought to live *and* to test the single human being that is doing the answering – to find out if *he* is living as one ought to live' (37). Regarding (5), note that the crucial text for Vlastos is *Gorgias* (479e): 'Has it not been proved (*apodeideiktai*) that what was asserted [by myself] is true?' More generally, as we will see, the main evidence for Vlastos's thesis derives from *Gorgias*.

For example, in *Charmides*, Charmides claims (p) that sound-mindedness is restraint. Socrates targets (p) for refutation. Socrates secures Charmides' agreement to the claims that (q) sound-mindedness is always a fine thing and that (r) restraint is not always a fine thing. The conjunction of q and r entails that sound-mindedness is not restraint (not- p). Socrates and Charmides conclude not- p . (More precisely, Vlastos characterizes this as 'standard elenchus'. Cf. Vlastos's brief discussion of 'indirect elenchus' at 39–40.)

A problem with (5), as with Socrates and Charmides' conclusion that sound-mindedness is not restraint, is that it is possible for the discussants to reject some component of the premise set Q rather than p . For example, Charmides could respond by suggesting that sound-mindedness is not always a fine thing (not- q) or that restraint always is in fact a fine thing (not- r). Thus, what the exchange reveals is simply that Q and p are inconsistent, not that p is false rather than Q or some component of Q . 'The [premise set Q] from which Socrates deduces the negation of the opponent's thesis are logically unsecured within the argument: no reason has been given to compel agreement to them' (40).

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Since, according to Vlastos, Socrates and his interlocutor inevitably conclude not- p , Vlastos wonders what justifies this conclusion. He calls this ‘the problem of the elenchus’. ‘*The problem of the Socratic elenchus: how is it that Socrates claims to have proved a thesis false when, in point of logic, all he has proved in any given argument is that the thesis is inconsistent with the conjunction of agreed upon premises for which no reason has been given in that argument?*’ (49). Vlastos’s solution to the problem of the elenchus is this. If the interlocutor chose to reject Q or some component of Q rather than p , Socrates would have the resources to show his interlocutor that p conflicts with some of the interlocutor’s other beliefs. This is because Socrates holds that:

(A) Anyone who ever has a false moral belief will always have at the same time true beliefs entailing the negation of that false belief. (52)

Vlastos emphasizes that, consistent with the lack of methodological discussion in the Socratic dialogues, Socrates never argues for (A). Rather, Socrates’ reason for maintaining (A) is that (A) ‘proves true in his own experience’ (53). In other words, Socrates has inductive evidence for (A).

Furthermore, Socrates has inductive evidence, based on the successes of his past experience in debate and discussion, that:

(B) Socrates’ set of moral beliefs is consistent. (55)

The conjunction of (A) and (B) entails that:

(C) Socrates’ set of moral beliefs consists exclusively of true beliefs. (55)

(C) provides the solution to the problem of the elenchus. Since Socrates assents to the premise set Q from which not- p is deduced, Q must consist of true premises.

Vlastos appends to his account of Socratic elenchus a brief discussion of Socrates’ method in *Euthydemus*, *Lysis* and *Hippias Major*, in which he argues that in these three dialogues, which fall late among the early Socratic dialogues, Socrates abandons adversarial argumentation and thus the elenchus. Instead, Socrates both proposes and criticizes his own theses. Vlastos conjectures that at this point in his career Plato had lost faith in the elenchus.

KRAUT (1983)

The first response to Vlastos (1983a), by Richard Kraut, was published in the same volume of *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*. Kraut begins by praising Vlastos’s contribution as surpassing ‘every other discussion this topic has received’ (1983: 59). After this, Kraut criticizes Vlastos’s account of the problem of the elenchus and his proposed solution to it. Kraut’s criticism focuses on three main points:

- (1) The elenchus, as Vlastos describes it – (1)–(5) in the preceding section – can provide proof without Socrates’ commitment to (A) and (B).
- (2) Socrates does not rely on (A) and (B) to reach the conclusion that all his moral beliefs are true (C).
- (3) In fact, Socrates does not think that all his moral beliefs are consistent (B). (59)

Regarding (1), Kraut emphasizes that any argument must contain premises for which no argument is given. In that case, the reason

Socrates thinks his arguments are proofs is simply that he thinks his premises are true. Moreover, Socrates may not have reasons for thinking that some of his premises are true: ‘One can’t always give a reason for everything one believes, and this fact doesn’t deprive one of proof’ (62). Many of the premises in Socrates’ arguments, Kraut claims, are simply plausible and compelling at face value (63), for example, Socrates’ premise that doing well and doing badly are opposites. Moreover, this fact is compatible with Socrates’ willingness to revise any of his beliefs. But apparently compelling beliefs will only come to need justification if a good reason for challenging them is disclosed (65). In short, Socrates argues for not- p on the basis of Q , which is a belief-set that he holds; and the grounds of these beliefs may be nothing more than that they appear compelling to Socrates.

Regarding (2) and specifically Vlastos’s claim that Socrates is committed to (A), Kraut thinks that it would be astonishing and arrogant for Socrates to believe that if his interlocutor rejected Q or some component of Q , Socrates would always have the resources to argue against that rejection. Socrates has only a finite number of arguments: ‘therefore he cannot seriously believe that no matter how often his interlocutor demands that he start all over again from new premises, he will be able to find a new argument’ (65).

Furthermore, Kraut claims that there is no good textual evidence for attributing (A) to Socrates. Consider a Socratic claim such as the following from *Gorgias*: ‘But I know how to produce one witness to my assertions: the man against whom I am arguing’ (66). Kraut suggests that Socrates’ confidence that he will always be able to contradict the beliefs of his interlocutors

that conflict with his own beliefs is due to Socrates’ belief that there is a certain amount of psychological and moral fixity in human beliefs. Socrates’ view of such fixity is based on his past experience in debate and discussion. But this is a different claim from the claim that whatever adjustment Socrates’ interlocutor made to his belief-set, Socrates could always find the means to defeat his interlocutor’s position.

Finally, Kraut claims that (A) presupposes that Socrates has sorted out true from false moral beliefs. Thus, ‘whatever confidence [Socrates] has in his ability to recognize which beliefs are true [must be] independent of and prior to [a] belief in (A)’ (68). Accordingly, Socrates does not derive the view that his true moral beliefs are true because of (A) and (B). Indeed, Kraut argues that Socrates does not believe his moral beliefs are wholly consistent and true.

Regarding (3) and specifically Vlastos’s claim that Socrates is committed to (B), Kraut argues that Socrates’ various professions of perplexity and aporia regarding moral matters are not, as many have claimed, ironic, but sincere. Thus, Socrates’ moral beliefs are not wholly consistent. But such limitations to Socrates’ moral understanding do not, Kraut emphasizes, entail that Socrates lacks proofs of some moral theses. Socrates, therefore, does not need (A) and (B) to buttress his confidence that some of his moral views are true: ‘no argument loses its force merely because the speaker has, somewhere or other, inconsistent beliefs’ (70).

In short, as Kraut sees it, there is no problem of the elenchus; thus, there is no need to think – and indeed no compelling evidence for thinking – that Socrates has a commitment to (A) and (B) and so (C) that resolves the problem.

VLASTOS (1983b)

In the same volume of *Oxford Studies*, Vlastos briefly replies to Kraut and makes a major concession: outside of *Gorgias* there is no evidence from the Socratic dialogues for (A). Thus Vlastos maintains, consistently with Kraut, that in all the Socratic dialogues composed before *Gorgias* Socrates argues ‘for his views in much the same way as other philosophers have done before or since when trying to bring others around to their own view: he picks premises which he considers so eminently reasonable in themselves and so well-entrenched in his interlocutors’s system of belief, that when he faces them with the fact that these premises entail the negation of their thesis he feels no serious risk that they will renege on the premises to save their thesis – as in fact, they never do’ (1983b: 73).

In pre-*Gorgias* dialogues, then, Socrates does not question, as an epistemologist would, the justification of his elenchus. But in *Gorgias*, Plato’s own epistemological concerns lead him to question the justification of Socrates’ elenctic method. Plato’s answer, (A), is his ‘gift’ to Socrates; that is, Plato introduces (A) in defense of Socrates’ method. This solution is, however, short-lived, for Plato quickly comes to recognize ‘how hopeless it would be to justify [(A)] by the inductive evidence, which is all Socrates could have offered for it. [Consequently] . . . Plato loses faith in the elenchus and proceeds to extricate Socrates from it [in *Euthd.*, *Ly.* and *Hp. Ma.*]’ (74). In short, (A) and (B) and so (C) are one-off aberrations in Plato’s philosophical career – albeit aberrations motivated by a legitimate epistemological concern.

Vlastos concludes his reply with the suggestion that after abandoning the elenchus in *Euthydemus*, *Lysis* and *Hippias Major*, Plato’s introduction of the theory of recollection in

Meno provides a new means of justifying the elenchus. Thus, in *Meno*, a dialogue transitional between the early and middle periods, the elenchus returns.

BRICKHOUSE AND SMITH (1984a)

In the second volume of *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith criticize Vlastos’s revised view that (A), (B) and (C) operate in *Gorgias*. Brickhouse and Smith’s argument is brief, but taut and subtle. I will run through it momentarily. First, it may be helpful to offer a general description of their strategy. In Vlastos’s view, the problem of the elenchus is resolved by assuming (A) and (B), which yield (C). In particular, Socrates’ ability to prove not-*p* rests on his asserting Q as a set of true moral propositions, which entails not-*p*. Insofar as Q consists of moral propositions, (C), which claims that Socrates’ moral belief-set consists exclusively of true beliefs, ensures that the moral propositions of Q are true. Brickhouse and Smith’s strategy is essentially to argue that Socrates has no means of assuring and no good reason to believe that his moral belief-set is wholly true. Moreover, it is not merely moral propositions that serve in Q to entail not-*p*. But in that case the solution to the problem of the elenchus requires that all of Socrates’ beliefs, moral and non-moral, pertinent to not-*p* be consistent and true. But given that Socrates has no means of assuring and no good reason to believe that his moral belief-set is wholly true, a fortiori he has no means of assuring and no good reason to believe that his set of moral and non-moral beliefs pertinent to not-*p* is consistent and true.

Let us now turn to the details of Brickhouse and Smith’s argument, which focuses first on

(A) and subsequently on (B). Brickhouse and Smith first argue that Socrates could never justify (A) in the way that Vlastos claims, namely through induction in light of his prior discussions and debates. (A) concerns true beliefs, but the elenchus can only reveal inconsistency. Thus, Socrates would have no means by which to infer whether any particular one of his interlocutor's beliefs was true. Kraut (1983: n. 4) makes this point as well. Note also that Brickhouse and Smith's discussion at this point (1984a: 188–90) is slightly confusing insofar as it also incorporates the claim that Socrates could have no justification for (B) as well as (A). Nothing in their argument to this point tells against (B). If the elenchus exposes inconsistency, then the failure of inconsistency to appear in Socrates' moral belief-set in the wake of past discussions does support (B).

Second, Brickhouse and Smith argue that (A) cannot be used to justify (C) as Vlastos claims. Assume that Socrates has a false moral belief. (A) claims that anyone who has a false moral belief will have true beliefs that entail the negation of that false moral belief. Brickhouse and Smith astutely observe that (A) does not imply that Socrates' *moral* belief-set includes beliefs that entail the negation of the hypothesized false moral belief. (A) merely states that if one has a false moral belief, then one will also have true beliefs – not necessarily moral ones – that entail the negation of that false moral belief. Now, a belief-set can be consistent while containing some true and some false beliefs. Brickhouse and Smith give the following example: {'Socrates is married to Xanthippe', 'Socrates can fly'}. Therefore, Socrates could have a consistent *moral* belief-set, one of whose members was false, while having an inconsistent moral plus non-moral belief-set. In other words, one of Socrates' non-moral

beliefs could be inconsistent with one of his moral beliefs. Vlastos has, then, given no reason to assume that Socrates' *moral* belief-set includes beliefs entailing the negation of his hypothesized false moral belief. Given this, Brickhouse and Smith entertain the idea of amending (A) to:

(A1) Every person's belief-set always includes a subset of true *moral* beliefs that entails the negation of that person's false moral beliefs.

The problem with (A1), they argue, is that it is contradicted by textual evidence: 'Socrates sometimes uses . . . non-moral propositions . . . to gain his elenctic conclusions' (191). Consequently, Brickhouse and Smith entertain the idea of amending (A) instead to:

(A2) For any person who has a false moral belief, that person's belief-set includes a set of true moral beliefs that in conjunction with his relevant true non-moral beliefs entails the negation of the false moral belief.

But Brickhouse and Smith argue that (A2) also cannot be used to justify (C). This is because it is possible for the subset of true moral beliefs, which in conjunction with the relevant true non-moral beliefs entails the negation of the false moral belief, to be consistent with the hypothesized false moral belief. (Recall that a consistent belief-set can contain some true and some false beliefs.) *Ex hypothesi*, the subset of true moral beliefs would only entail the negation of the false moral belief *in conjunction with* non-moral beliefs. Finally, (A2) cannot be modified except as (A1), to justify (C).

Since emendations of (A) will not justify (C), Brickhouse and Smith now consider

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whether (B) might be amended to justify (C). They entertain the idea of amending (B) to:

(B1) All of Socrates' beliefs – not merely his moral beliefs – are consistent.

But Brickhouse and Smith reject the attribution of (B1) to Socrates on the grounds that 'there is no reason to suppose that Socrates, even on Vlastos's view, subjects all of his non-moral beliefs to the sort of rigorous scrutiny' to which he subjects his moral beliefs (192). Given this, they entertain a weaker version of (B1), namely:

(B2) Socrates' moral beliefs, plus whatever non-moral beliefs he may ever use in any elenctic argument (as per [A2]), are all consistent.

But Brickhouse and Smith find that textual evidence for (B2) is lacking. In support of (B), Vlastos cites *Gorgias* (482a5–b1), where Socrates claims to follow *Philosophia* and assert the things she says, which are always the same. Brickhouse and Smith accept this passage as evidence that at this stage in his career Socrates 'always maintains the same beliefs' (193). But they argue that this does not imply that Socrates' elenctically relevant beliefs are all consistent. Socrates' adherence to *Philosophia* is an adherence to the pursuit of moral knowledge by means of rigorous elenctic inquiry, and Socrates' current beliefs and assertions are the result of this inquiry. But, Brickhouse and Smith claim, it would be an 'extremely unrealistic overestimation' of the method to think that it would have yielded a fully consistent elenctically relevant belief-set (193). Polansky is not persuaded by this: 'Socrates might hold that his experience in elenctic encounters gives this modified version of (B) strong inductive support,

for where he does use non-moral premises they prove consistent with the moral beliefs he utilizes as the other premises and those moral beliefs that are his conclusions' (1985: n. 13). In short, Brickhouse and Smith criticize Vlastos's position on logical and textual grounds.

Finally, while their discussion is almost wholly critical, Brickhouse and Smith conclude with one constructive suggestion: an adequate account must 'allow us to make sense of [the elenchus] as a method [of moral inquiry that] Plato or Socrates would prescribe' (194). On Vlastos's view, which requires (C), the elenchus is in fact not a method that even Socrates can use.

POLANSKY (1985)

Polansky's discussion also criticizes Vlastos's solution to the problem of the elenchus. Polansky's criticism proceeds in two related parts. First, Polansky refers to Vlastos's rejection of the view that Q may consist of self-evident or endoxic premises. While Vlastos simply denies that Q may consist of self-evident premises, he argues that Q does not consist of endoxic premises. Polansky suggests that 'none of Vlastos's [three] arguments aiming to prove that Socrates cannot rely exclusively upon endoxic premises is effective' (1985: 249). Second, Polansky criticizes Vlastos's use of (A), (B) and (C) to resolve the problem of the elenchus. I will discuss Polansky's criticisms in the order in which they are presented.

As evidence that Socrates' arguments do not rely on endoxic premises, Vlastos first claims that Socrates never says that Q consists of endoxic premises. But Polansky argues that we should not expect 'to find Socrates

pointing out to the interlocutor that the proposed premises are generally accepted' (249). Since, as Vlastos claims, Socrates expects the interlocutor to say what he believes, it 'would be counterproductive for Socrates to proclaim that the premises are common beliefs' (249). Moreover, it would be unnecessary since the interlocutor rarely questions the proposed premises.

Vlastos's second argument that Socrates does not employ endoxic premises relates to Socrates' rejection of Polus' view (at *Grg.* 472b–c and 474a–b) that everybody disbelieves what Socrates is saying (that doing wrong is worse than suffering it). But here, Polansky notes, Polus is rejecting Socrates' conclusion, not his premises.

Vlastos's third argument is that Socratic doctrines are often contra-endoxic and that Socrates could not have arrived at contra-endoxic conclusions from endoxic premises. Polansky rejects this claim: 'Quite unusual conclusions, surely, may derive from most ordinary premises' (251). Socrates' refutation of Polus is precisely one such example. Furthermore, Polansky argues that Vlastos has an 'impoverished' conception of endoxic views. Endoxic views are not equivalent to conventional views. Endoxic views are the views of the wise and such views may be resisted by the 'mass of men' (252). Finally, Polansky shows that the premises of an argument in *Republic* (1, 335b–c), which Vlastos takes to be non-endoxic, can be interpreted as endoxic. (Note that Polansky's position is professedly relevant to Xenophon's understanding of Socratic method as involving endoxa: 'Whenever Socrates himself argued something out he proceeded from the most generally accepted opinions, believing that security in argument lies therein'; *Mem.* 4.6.15.)

Polansky's refutation of Vlastos's arguments, thus, prime the possibility that

Socrates' arguments are based on endoxa. At this point, Polansky turns to (A), (B) and specifically (C) and proposes that this set of assumptions has three serious problems.

The first problem is that (C), which concerns only Socrates' moral beliefs, does not cover all of the premises Socrates uses in his elenctic arguments: 'there are many cases in the dialogues in which Socrates appeals to non-moral premises' (256). Polansky emphasizes that this point differs from Brickhouse and Smith's 'more difficult' point that (C) will not readily follow from (A) and (B): 'I am making the very straightforward point that (C) will not accomplish what Vlastos thinks it will, that is, guarantee for Socrates the truth of his premises. So long as Socrates employs non-moral premises it will hardly be adequate for him merely to have assurance that all his moral beliefs are true' (n. 14). But given this, it is not readily open to Vlastos to expand (C) to include all of Socrates' elenctically relevant beliefs. That is because Vlastos would then have to abandon his view that Socrates is 'solely a moral philosopher'. (Cf. Vlastos, 1983a: 32–4, 56.)

The second problem is that (C) already covers what is supposed to be shown. Vlastos claims that the elenchus is a method of inquiry, that is, a method by which Socrates may acquire new moral beliefs. But since Socrates believes Q and Q entails not- p , what new positive moral belief is Socrates acquiring? Rather, the elenchus seems to be 'a means . . . to convey the results of [Socrates' prior] research to his interlocutors' (257). In fact, in a footnote Polansky suggests that the early dialogues 'seem to show us a Socrates confirming his moral doctrines to others rather than developing his moral doctrines for himself' (257).

The third problem is that (C) has relatively little significance vis-à-vis Socrates' elenctic

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activity. Vlastos's account focuses on what a single elenctic demonstration achieves. But, Polansky argues, Socrates' central moral tenets are 'never established by a single elenctic argument and could not be so established' (258). Among Socrates' central moral tenets that Polansky lists are the importance of caring for the soul over the body, the identity of virtue and knowledge and the view that the wisest man is one who is aware of his ignorance. Insofar as we conceive of Socrates' central moral tenets as central to (C), Socrates' elenctic activity, precisely, single elenctic demonstrations, have relatively little significance to (C). Above all, single elenctic demonstrations demonstrate not- p . Must we then hold, Polansky rhetorically questions, 'that Socrates' . . . set of moral beliefs prominently includes numerous [negative] views . . . ?' (258).

BENSON (1987)

In this paper, Benson draws a distinction between two interpretations of Socratic elenchus: constructivist and non-constructivist. On the constructivist view, endorsed by Vlastos, the elenchus demonstrates as well as persuades the interlocutor that p is false. (Note that the distinction between demonstration and persuasion is important for Benson's discussion. It is, after all, possible to demonstrate that p is false while failing to persuade an interlocutor of the falsity of p by means of that demonstration. For example, although the premises that entail not- p may be true, an interlocutor need not believe that they are. Benson characterizes the aim of demonstrating not- p as 'impersonal' and persuading an interlocutor that not- p as 'personal'.) On the non-constructivist view,

which Benson endorses, the elenchus demonstrates and persuades the interlocutor merely that Q and p are inconsistent. Against the constructivist view, Benson argues that given the formal structure of the elenchus plus two theoretical constraints that Socrates places upon it, which Benson calls the 'availability' and 'doxastic' constraints, the problem of the elenchus is insoluble. But since the solution of the problem of the elenchus is required for the elenchus to be constructive, the elenchus cannot be constructive – regardless of what Socrates may think. The insolubility of the problem of the elenchus, thus, gives some reason for favouring a non-constructivist interpretation of the elenchus.

Benson's account of the formal structure of the elenchus is more complex than Vlastos's (1987: 69). But I see no harm in simplifying Benson's account at this point and saying that according to the formal structure of the elenchus, the conjunction of p and Q – which I will hereafter refer to as 'K' – is false. So both the constructivist and non-constructivist hold that K is false. But the constructivist additionally holds, while the non-constructivist does not, that all but one of the elements of K – namely p – is either true or, as Benson puts it, 'has some other property that can plausibly be seen to be associated with truth' (69). Note that the constructivist's reason for holding that all but one of the elements of K are plausibly truth-associated, if not true, is that it allows Socrates to endorse elements of Q because they are, say, *prima facie* plausible or endoxic (cf. 69). The constructivist requires that all but one of the elements of K is either true or plausibly truth-associated because that justifies Socrates' conclusion that p is false.

Given this account of the constructivist and non-constructivist's disagreement over the formal structure of the elenchus, the

remainder of Benson's discussion is devoted to showing that Socrates places availability and doxastic constraints on the formal structure of the elenchus. The availability constraint holds that the interlocutor must understand the argument from Q to not- p . Benson argues that Socrates maintains the availability constraint because 'the goal of the elenchus is to persuade the interlocutor of his ignorance as a necessary first step in the attainment of knowledge' (75). (Benson finds evidence for this view of the goal of the elenchus at *Men.* 84a3–c6, *Sph.* 230c3–d4 and *Grg.* 471d3–472c4.) Although the elenchus might achieve this goal in various ways, an obvious way is to soundly argue that a proposition an interlocutor thought he knew, namely p , is inconsistent with other premises to which the interlocutor is committed and to argue in such a way that the soundness of the argument is available to the interlocutor. In short, 'Socrates will be justified in believing that a particular elenchus has succeeded in establishing the falsehood of a particular conjunct, [namely K] insofar as Socrates is justified in believing that the argument [from Q to not- p] is sound and the interlocutor has access to its soundness' (77).

According to the doxastic constraint, the interlocutor must believe all the propositions that constitute K, namely p and Q. For example, in *Crito* (49d), when Socrates asks Crito whether one ought ever to return a wrong or treat anyone badly, he reminds Crito to be careful never to agree to anything contrary to his opinion (79). (The remaining evidence Benson cites for the doxastic constraint can be found at 78–80.)

But since the doxastic constraint requires that the interlocutor believe all the elements of K – which implies that the interlocutor believes the truth of p – and the availability constraint requires that the interlocutor

understand and endorse the soundness of the argument from Q to not- p , the elenchus cannot persuade the interlocutor that p is false. Instead, the elenchus can only persuade the interlocutor that he holds contradictory beliefs, p and not- p . Thus, the elenchus can only be non-constructive.

BENSON (1990B)

In this piece, Benson develops his non-constructivist interpretation of the elenchus vis-à-vis a problem known as the Socratic Fallacy. The Socratic Fallacy, first articulated in 1966 by Peter Geach, claims that Socrates cannot rationally pursue knowledge of definitions, given his commitment to the following two epistemological principles:

- (P) If one lacks knowledge of the definition of F , then for some property P , one cannot know whether F has P ;
- (D) If one lacks knowledge of the definition of F , then for some particular x , one cannot know whether x instantiates F .

(P) and (D) entail:

- (PD) If one lacks knowledge of the definition of F , one cannot know anything about F .

In other words, (PD) expresses what has been called the 'epistemological priority of definitional knowledge'. But given the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge, how is one to rationally pursue definitional knowledge of F ? One cannot use instances of F since one cannot know what entities instantiate F , nor can one use properties of F since one cannot know what properties

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F has. Geach, thus, concludes that (PD) is fallacious.

A number of scholars respond to Geach's charge by attempting to show that Socrates is not committed to (PD), mainly because he is not committed to (D). But Benson here argues that Socrates is committed to (PD).

Socrates' commitment to (PD) compounds the problem of the constructivist interpretation of the elenchus. Assume that Socrates asks his interlocutor to define some virtue *F*. Not only is the elenchus unable to prove false the interlocutor's proposed definition of *F*, but Socrates' commitment to (PD) makes the pursuit of definitional knowledge of *F* impossible.

Benson's non-constructivist interpretation of the elenchus can handle the Socratic Fallacy somewhat more effectively. Benson argues that the immediate aim of the elenchus is to test the interlocutor's knowledge. Benson suggests that a necessary condition of one's knowledge of *F* is that one's beliefs about *F* are consistent. 'In this case, Socrates and the interlocutor can come to know that the interlocutor fails to have the knowledge that he thinks he has merely by determining that the interlocutor's beliefs concerning the relevant *F* are inconsistent' (1990: 58). But to determine this, neither Socrates nor his interlocutor needs to know what properties *F* has nor whether *x* instantiates *F*. 'Thus, Socrates can hold (PD) and think that his elenchus can succeed in testing the knowledge of his interlocutors without being confused' (59).

Thus, Benson's view of the immediate function of the elenchus enables his non-constructivist interpretation more effectively to handle the Socratic Fallacy than a constructivist interpretation. But the non-constructivist interpretation cannot handle the Socratic Fallacy entirely effectively. Although the

immediate aim of the elenchus is to test the interlocutor's claim to knowledge, the ultimate aim of the elenchus, Benson holds, is for its user, Socrates, to acquire knowledge, say, of the definition of *F*. Benson recognizes 'that it is difficult to understand how Socrates hopes to acquire knowledge of the nature of *F* by [means of the elenchus], especially since he has long ago come to the realization that he is not likely to come across anyone who does know what they think they know' (63, Benson refers to *Ap.* 22a.). Even so, Benson digs in his heels: 'it is, nevertheless, the method that Socrates employs' (63). He also mentions that Plato introduces the theory of recollection 'at just the point at which the early dialogues had come to an end. The theory is *Plato's* answer to how to go on once conceit has been eliminated short of seeking someone who knows' (n. 85).

BRICKHOUSE AND SMITH (1991)

In this paper, Brickhouse and Smith articulate a more robust conception of the elenchus, distinguish various of its functions and show how Socrates effectively deploys them. Central to their account is the view that the elenchus tests not merely propositions but human lives. Socrates sees himself 'as doing something more than just attempting to display the falsehood of his interlocutors' propositions . . . Through the elenchus Socrates examines the manner in which his interlocutors live' (1991: 135). Moreover, Socrates is interested in testing his own life as well as those of his interlocutors.

Socrates tests lives by examining moral propositions. Moral propositions and lives are connected in the elenchus for the following

two reasons. First, the elenchus requires that in an exchange the interlocutor say what he believes: ‘Only if the interlocutors answer his questions with their sincerely held beliefs can Socrates be confident that he is really testing at least some aspect of how they think they should live’ (137). Second, Socrates is committed to intellectualism, according to which ‘agents [never] act against what they believe is best for them, for . . . all people always desire what is best for them. [Thus], one will always act in such a way as to follow one’s beliefs about how it is best for one to live’ (140–1).

Given the preceding, one function of Socrates’ elenchus is ‘destructive’: it is to destroy an interlocutor’s false conceit of moral knowledge. ‘Thus, if he is to make progress, Socrates must first attack the beliefs that hinder inquiry, thereby inducing in the interlocutor an openness to reconsideration of what he thought he already knew’ (140). The elenchus achieves this objective by exposing inconsistency in an interlocutor’s moral belief-set. At the same time, Brickhouse and Smith also emphasize a ‘constructive’ aspect to the destruction: exposure of inconsistent moral beliefs shows the interlocutor that his pursuit of the good life ‘is likely to be or has actually been in some substantial way self-defeating’ (141). Thus, Socrates’ exposures of inconsistency are lessons in and provocations toward self-knowledge.

Through elenctic examination an interlocutor comes to see more clearly what he believes. But Brickhouse and Smith do not think this is limited to the exposure of inconsistency in a moral belief-set. Instead, the elenchus often reveals that some moral beliefs are more deeply held than others. Given this, an interlocutor does not merely wind up in a state of perplexity, unsure of

which beliefs to jettison and which to retain. Rather, the interlocutor jettisons less firmly held moral beliefs.

In this respect, the elenchus could be dangerous; for example, if an interlocutor’s less deeply held moral beliefs were right, while his more deeply held moral beliefs were wrong, the elenchus would lead him to be more immoral. It must be ‘a feature of the “examined life” not just that we clarify what we really believe, but that in doing so we invariably come to see that we believe what is right, and not what is wrong’ (144). But Socrates holds that people’s most deeply held moral beliefs are in fact right. Socrates’ evidence for this view is based on his past elenctic experience. Those who have attempted to maintain moral beliefs contrary to Socrates’ have, through elenctic testing, invariably yielded to Socrates’ beliefs. In other words, past elenctic examinations have revealed that people’s basic moral beliefs tend to be the same. Moreover, ‘to the extent that he has generated inductive evidence through previous elenctic examinations for the necessity of his own view concerning a coherent [life], Socrates can claim to have established a truth applicable to all men’ (146). Socrates’ confidence in the truth of his moral beliefs derives from their having survived elenctic testing, their consistency with the deeply held moral beliefs of others, their relative coherence and the character and integrity of his life. Additionally, Brickhouse and Smith emphasize that Socrates derives support for the truth of his moral beliefs from the Delphic Oracle and Socrates’ own divine sign. Both divine sources encourage Socrates’ perception that he is a gift from god and thus that his mission is moral (144; here Brickhouse and Smith cite *Ap.* 30e1). Consequently, ‘another use to which Socrates may put the

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elenchus is to generate and to defend moral propositions, for he has reason to think that those he generates and defends in this way are of value to everyone' (148).

The Delphic Oracle also stresses the limitations of Socrates' wisdom, and the divine sign often prohibits Socrates from some course of action. Thus, the divine sources also indicate that Socrates' moral understanding is imperfect. Brickhouse and Smith emphasize this point in discussing Socrates' pursuit of definitional knowledge. This arena of moral inquiry illustrates the general point that Socrates has, as they put it, good moral judgement, but not wisdom (151). Although Brickhouse and Smith recognize that Socrates is committed to the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge in some sense, they do not accept Benson's view that Socrates is strictly committed to (PD) (n. 25). In this paper, however, they do not examine the principle of the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge. Accordingly, as noted above, Socrates does not merely deploy elenctic testing on others, he continues to subject himself to it.

One final function that Brickhouse and Smith attribute to Socrates' elenchus is 'hortative': Socrates does not merely try to persuade people to believe certain things, he uses the elenchus to persuade people to 'do the right thing' (154). For example, in *Apology* Socrates tries to get the jurors to acquit him; and in *Euthyphro* Socrates tries to get Euthyphro to desist from his prosecution. 'It follows that the elenchus is a tool for normative persuasion intended to make a real difference in the actions people undertake . . . Thus, it is not merely intended to further one's understanding of moral concepts' (156). In this context, shame can play a salient role. The

shame that one feels after the effects of the elenchus provides a powerful incentive to rectify the shameful condition. In short, Socrates 'hopes to shame his interlocutors into positive action' (153).

Brickhouse and Smith's final point picks up on the requirement for an adequate account of the elenchus that they express at the end of their critique of Vlastos's 1983a discussion in their 1984 piece. Recall that an adequate account must 'allow us to make sense of [the elenchus] as a method [of moral inquiry that] Plato or Socrates would prescribe'. Accordingly, they argue here that Socrates' elenctic practices are not unique to Socrates, but available to others. Moreover, even those who lack the capability to perform elenctic tests can benefit by subjecting themselves to elenctic testing (159).

In sum, Brickhouse and Smith's account of Socrates' 'elenctic mission' is well encapsulated in the following concluding passage:

... On our account of the elenchus, moral philosophy for Socrates is not a matter of demonstrating which propositions in the moral sphere are true and which false. Rather, it is a rich and complex enterprise in which one must purge others of their pretence of wisdom, undertake to determine what kinds of things people must believe about how to live if their lives are to be happy, test and refine definitions of the virtues, deliberate about right action, and when the nature of right and wrong action is clear enough, exhort others to pursue what is right and shun what is wrong. (159)

(Brickhouse and Smith's account of Socrates' elenctic mission here is to be compared with their treatment in Brickhouse and Smith 1994a: 3–29.)

BENSON (1995)

This paper develops Benson's non-constructivist view of Socrates' elenchus. Benson observes that prior treatments of Socrates' elenchus 'have taken place at the level of generalities or by focusing on one or two examples, supposed (with little argument) to be paradigmatic' (1995: 48). Benson endeavours to rectify this defect by examining in more detail the individual elenchi (plural of 'elenchus') that Socrates deploys in *Euthyphro*, *Charmides* and *Laches*. Benson takes these dialogues to be paradigmatic of the method Socrates describes himself as practicing in *Apology*, the dialogue which can be most confidently relied upon to represent the Socrates with whom he is concerned (49). On the basis of his examination of the elenchi in these three dialogues, Benson concludes that Socrates shows his interlocutor's beliefs merely to be inconsistent. Thus, in conformity with the conclusions of his 1987 and 1990 pieces, Benson maintains that Vlastos's 'problem of the elenchus' does not arise in these texts. I will not discuss further this aspect of Benson's paper, which is by far the bulk of his discussion (50–100).

Benson devotes the remainder of his paper to examining two potential sources of evidence that might undermine the preceding conclusions (100–12). The first derives from passages in *Gorgias*. The second consists of Socrates' own moral views and the assumption that Socrates must derive these from the elenchus.

Regarding the *Gorgias* passages that seem to show Socrates proving moral tenets, Benson holds that *Gorgias* is 'not a paradigmatic elenctic dialogue' (101). 'The *Gorgias* reads much less like an examination of the knowledge-claims of Gorgias, Polus, and

Callicles, than like a defense of a Socratic thesis against the views of Polus and Callicles' (101). (Recall that on Benson's view, the immediate aim of the elenchus is to test the knowledge-claims of the interlocutor.) But, he argues, Socrates does not employ elenchi in *Gorgias* to establish the falsity of his interlocutors' moral beliefs. Rather Socrates shows that Polus' and Callicles' central theses are inconsistent with their other beliefs (100–9).

Granting this, one may wonder about the source of the justification of the views Socrates defends in *Gorgias*. Benson offers three responses to this question in the short, penultimate section of his paper (109–11). First, he suggests that it is simply a dogma of Platonic or Socratic studies that 'the elenchus is Socrates' only method of argument' (109). Instead, 'Socrates may have arrived at his strong moral commitments as a result of non-elenctic arguments' (109). For example, Benson cites the following non-elenctic argumentative passages among the early dialogues: the argument of the Laws in *Crito*; much of *Apology*; the stretch of *Gorgias* following the refutation of Callicles. Second, Benson endorses the suggestion of Brickhouse and Smith's 1991 paper that 'repeated [as opposed to single] elenctic examinations [of a variety of interlocutors] can confirm the untenability of an opposed view, and thus give Socrates grounds for claiming that leading the examined life [i.e. pursuing the elenctic method] provides substantive and constructive doctrinal consequences' (111; the quotation is from Brickhouse and Smith 1991: 146, with Benson's italics). Third, Benson stresses that Socrates tends to emphasize his lack of moral knowledge. Thus, whatever method or methods he uses to achieve his moral beliefs, Socrates does not take these beliefs to be

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proven. (Benson's conclusion in this paper and in those of 1987, 1990a, 1990b are to be compared with Benson 2000).

ADAMS (1998)

Adams begins by drawing two distinctions. One is between 'hypothetical' and 'categorical' interpretations of Socrates' elenchus. According to the hypothetical interpretation, Socrates does not conclude not-*p*, but rather if *Q*, then not-*p*. 'Perhaps Socrates affirms only the conditional claim, and does not also affirm the antecedent of the conditional. Perhaps Socrates is pointing out to Charmides not that his definition is false, but only that his admissions are inconsistent with his definition' (1998: 288). According to the categorical interpretation, Socrates does conclude not-*p*. Although Adams does not put the point this way, hypothetical and categorical interpretations of the elenchus clearly correlate with non-constructivist and constructivist interpretations of the elenchus à la Benson.

Adams's second distinction, which principally pertains to a constructivist interpretation of the elenchus, is between 'internal' and 'external' interpretations of the justificatory strength of the elenchus. According to an internal interpretation, Socrates' justification for the conclusion of an elenctic argument derives primarily from information internal to the elenchus. According to an external interpretation, Socrates' justification for the conclusion of an elenctic argument derives primarily from information external to the elenchus (290). For example, according to Vlastos's original conception of the elenchus, Socrates' justification for not-*p* in a particular elenchus depends upon (A) and (B), which are external to a particular elenchus.

Adams defends an internal interpretation of Socrates' elenchus. As we will see, his internal interpretation of Socrates' elenchus entails a complex view of whether Socrates' elenchus is hypothetical or categorical.

Adams's internal interpretation rests on what he calls 'Socratic evidentialism'. He never explicitly defines evidentialism, but claims that its spirit is captured in Hume's slogan: 'A wise man . . . proportions his belief to the evidence' (292, citing Hume, *Enquiry*, sect. 10 [part I §4]). In view of the broader context of Adams's discussion, one can interpret this to imply that a belief-evidentialist holds those beliefs that the weight of the evidence available the believer favours. Adams also distinguishes action-evidentialism, which may be understood to entail that, in the appropriate circumstances, one acts on those practical beliefs that one holds as a belief-evidentialist. Adams argues that Socrates is a belief-evidentialist and an action-evidentialist. Thus, for example, in *Crito* Socrates says: 'We must consider whether we ought to do what you suggest or not. For I have always been the sort [of person] who is persuaded by nothing other than the argument which appears best upon reflection' (*Cri.* 46b, cited at 293).

Adams argues, on the basis of *Charmides*, *Laches* and *Euthyphro*, that the primary evidence upon which the conclusions of Socrates' elenchi depend is internal to the elenchi. For example, Socrates' refutation of Charmides' first definition of temperance as calmness depends upon numerous examples of calmness not being finer than vigour. (Adams discusses this at 294. Note that earlier in the chapter I translated *hēsychiotēs* as 'restraint', my preference, but here following Adams's rendition.) In short, Socrates draws his elenctic conclusions because they 'have more evidence

[drawn from the elenchus itself] in their support' (295).

This would seem to suggest that Adams favours a categorical interpretation of the elenchus. But Adams emphasizes that although Socrates may be resolute about the conclusions of elenctic arguments, he is not close-minded. He 'accepts that all the evidence does not infallibly prove that his [conclusion] is right' (294). Thus, for instance, although he concludes his argument with Crito that he ought not to escape from prison, he concludes by saying: 'Know well that if you have anything to say against these arguments, you will speak in vain. Nevertheless, if you think you have something more, speak' (*Cri.* 54d, cited at 293). In short, Socrates always remains open to the disclosure of further evidence that would outweigh his present belief. 'Socrates is not naïve about evidence; Socrates realizes that it is always possible for an interlocutor to re-think the evidence upon which a particular refutation is based, and if he can make the case that the evidence is spurious, then Socrates is willing to reconsider the claim he tried to refute' (296). This, Adams suggests, explains why Socrates speaks of his conclusions and beliefs sometimes in categorical and sometimes in hypothetical terms: 'evidentialism explains why the Socratic elenchus gives the dual appearance of reaching conclusions which can appear simultaneously categorical and hypothetical' (296; cf. also the first two full paragraphs on 296 for a summary of this conclusion).

Adams concludes his discussion by examining manifestations of Socrates' evidentialism 'beyond the elenchus', specifically in view of Socrates' apparently conflicting avowals and disavowals of knowledge, Socrates' apparently conflicting views about the priority of definitions and the apparent conflict between

Socrates' disavowals of moral knowledge and 'unquestioning confidence in his own moral rectitude' (297). I will not discuss this final section of Adams's paper here, beyond saying that he resolves the appearances of conflict in these cases along the same lines as he resolves the apparent conflict between the hypothetical and categorical nature of the Socratic elenchus. That is to say, the appearances of conflict in these cases are explicable according to Socrates' evidentialism.

Finally, it must be mentioned that in a footnote midway through the paper Adams says: 'I am not arguing that the elenchus has only one purpose. I agree . . . that Socrates uses the elenchus for many purposes. I am trying to identify what we would call one of its epistemological uses' (n. 13. Adams is here agreeing with Woodruff 1987: 83–8, and Brickhouse and Smith 1991.) In that case, one must understand the scope of Adams's argument as limited to some, unclearly specified range of Socratic elenchi, but at least including some of the elenchi in *Euthyphro*, *Charmides* and *Laches*.

SCOTT (2002)

Scott's book is the first and to date sole assemblage of papers devoted to the subject of Socrates' method. The book divides into four sections: Historical Origins of the Socratic Method, Re-Examining Vlastos's Analysis of the 'Elenchus', Socratic Argumentation and Interrogation in Specific Dialogues and Four Interpretations of the Elenchus in the *Charmides*. Each section consists of four chapters. The fourth chapter in each section is a commentary on the preceding three papers. The third paper in the section entitled 'Historical Origins of the Socratic Method'

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is in fact an interpretation of the Socratic method and precisely an interpretation critical of Vlastos's view. So, in my view, it belongs in the second section. I will discuss this piece and the four papers in the section entitled 'Re-Examining Vlastos's Analysis of the "Elenchus"'

TARRANT (2002)

Tarrant's chapter begins by arguing that Vlastos's description of Socrates' method as 'elenchus' is inaccurate. Tarrant reviews all instances of the word 'elenchus' and its cognates in pre-*Republic* dialogues. On the basis of this, he concludes that 'elenchus' refers to a competition among rivals and that Socrates rarely describes himself or is described as engaging in elenctic activity. Thus, 'if elenchus had been the term for Socrates' activity, then both Socrates and Plato seem to have been curiously unaware of it' (2002: 68).

In an effort to identify a more suitable term to describe Socrates' discursive activity, Tarrant rejects Vlastos's focus on *Gorgias* on the grounds that it is a late early dialogue and that the concept of elenchus is specifically suited to the sphere of rhetoric, a central topic of this dialogue. Instead, Tarrant turns to *Apology* and in view of *Apology* argues that 'exetasis' is the 'preferred term' for Socratic interrogative activity for two reasons. First, 'Socrates represents himself as the friend and benefactor of those being examined, not as their opponent'. Second, 'exetasis is specially associated with the examination of the extent of somebody's knowledge' (72).

Tarrant emphasizes that both elenchus and exetasis primarily concern people rather than propositions. Thus, exetasis in particular 'does not appear to lead to the

discovery of truth and falsehood; at best it gives us an indication of those whose leadership might ultimately help us to distinguish the one from the other' (74). Apparently, then – although he does not explicitly say so – Tarrant views Socrates' characteristic activity as non-constructive à la Benson, yet, as Tarrant emphasizes, with a beneficent intent.

Tarrant concludes with a discussion of *Gorgias*. He argues that 'insofar as the arguments with Callicles [in *Gorgias*] imply something different and speak of a binding process for propositions that can apparently be valid [*sic*] without an interlocutor's nod, Plato has already moved away from his Socratic heritage into a dialectical world that brings us logically to Aristotle' (61). It is not clear to me what Tarrant intends by 'valid' here. Arguments may be valid regardless of one's attitude toward them. Perhaps Tarrant simply means that Socrates is less concerned with his interlocutor's attitude toward propositions and arguments in *Gorgias*, and this distinguishes his activity in this dialogue from his activity in other early dialogues. (It is worth noting that a short chapter by Young (2002) concludes the section entitled 'Historical Origins of the Socratic Method' and comments on Tarrant's piece as well as the other two chapters in this section. Young is dubious of 'conclusions drawn from word counts or other stylistic features' (85). But granting Tarrant's distinction between 'elenchus' and 'exetasis', Young takes it that the only difference between these terms is that the former refers to interrogation directed toward rivals. In that case, Young suggests that Socrates merely uses 'exetasis' out of politeness or 'some equivalent' when interrogating non-rivals. In that case, Young concludes, there is little substantive distinction between elenchus and exetasis.

CARPENTER AND POLANSKY (2002)

Carpenter and Polansky argue that Socrates 'has no single method of refutation or cross-examination. He uses a variety of approaches based on the needs of the particular interlocutor and conversational setting' (2002: 90). Moreover, Socrates does to some extent reflect on his method, yet his reflection is not of a general nature; it 'tends to be restricted to the immediate context of the argument' (90). Thus, they argue that the aim of determining a general theory of Socratic elenchus is misguided.

Carpenter and Polansky's discussion begins by indicating that Socrates 'must not be credited with originating refutative argumentation, and [that] he is not even the only one to practice elenchus in the dialogues' (91). Thus, they underscore that the elenchus is not per se a Socratic method. This point is actually not directly relevant to their thesis. But it is part of their general strategy of exploding a narrow view of the scope, form and function of elenctic argumentation in the dialogues.

Given this, they turn to consider the variety of 'contexts' in which Socrates deploys the elenchus. They argue that Socrates sometimes refutes not only definitions, but also responses to the request for definitions that are formally inadequate. They then argue that sometimes Socrates refutes his interlocutors' proposed procedures for deliberation. 'Such argumentation about decision procedures seems rather unlike what is often supposed the usual practice of Socrates, to refute proposals of substantive beliefs' (95). In short, these elenctic contexts indicate that Socrates' elenchi do not simply target substantive moral theses.

Finally, Carpenter and Polansky 'turn to more direct review of the variety of

approaches to refutation' (95). They argue on the basis of four texts that Socrates has a variety of approaches to elenctic argumentation. First, they argue that in a passage in *Alcibiades I* Socrates refutes his interlocutor's view 'not by showing it is *false* but only by showing that it has bad results' (97). (Carpenter and Polansky acknowledge that the authenticity of *Alc. I* is controversial.) Second, they argue that in *Apology* Socrates' refutation of Meletus is intended to exemplify to the jury the 'sorts of elenctic encounters for which he is brought to trial' (97). Third, they argue that in *Republic 1* Socrates, while explicitly dispensing with appeals to conventional belief, refutes Thrasymachus' eccentric view that injustice is profitable, fine and strong. Finally, in his refutation of Polus in *Gorgias* the fact that Socrates' argument that doing injustice is worse than suffering injustice is deliberately fallacious, as Carpenter and Polansky hold, is supposed to 'illustrate the very case he is making. Socrates does injustice through arguing unfairly, and Polus is made to suffer injustice' (99).

Given this variety of approaches to refutation and the variety of contexts in which refutation occurs, Carpenter and Polansky conclude that 'the project of establishing a general method or logic for the elenchus' is unlikely to succeed, and they encourage 'expanding reflection upon Socrates' methods beyond too narrow a view of the logic of elenctic refutation' (100).

BENSON (2002)

Benson's paper begins with an elegant review of Vlastos's conception of the problem of the elenchus. Benson also briefly reiterates his dissolution of the problem. In response to

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those committed to a solution rather than a dissolution of the problem of the elenchus, particularly on the grounds that Socrates often speaks of aiming at the truth in his philosophical inquiries, Benson also emphasizes that ‘we should not suppose that whenever Socrates behaves philosophically – whenever he engages in philosophical discourse – he must be behaving elenctically’ (2002: 107). In other words, Benson reiterates his view that the elenchus is not Socrates’ only philosophical method.

Although this movement occupies about half of the chapter, Benson states at the outset that his objective here is ‘to turn our attention away from [the problem of the elenchus] once and for all’ and instead ‘to focus our attention on two other problems with the Socratic method that Socrates explicitly discusses in the early dialogues and that [Benson thinks] are more fundamental to Socrates’ philosophical enterprise’ (101). These two problems derive from Socrates’ goal of attaining truth and knowledge. In this short chapter, Benson merely introduces the problems; he makes no attempt to solve them.

The first problem relates to Socrates’ attempt to acquire knowledge from those who possess it. Socrates holds, explicitly in *Charmides*, that in order to determine whether someone possesses some expertise, for example, that someone is a doctor and thus possesses knowledge of health, one must oneself know what health is. Benson does not claim here to fully understand why Socrates so commits himself, but he suggests that Socrates’ ‘conviction is related to his commitment to the priority of definitional knowledge’ (111). In some sense, this epistemological problem is mitigated by the fact that Socrates nowhere in the early dialogues

claims to have recognized someone who does know what he Socrates does not (111). Benson recognizes that *Apology* 22d–e is an exception to this claim, but he does not place much weight on this passage (n. 33). But this is limited solace since it remains fundamental to Socrates’ mission to pursue truth and knowledge and thus to seek out those who know.

The second problem relates to Socrates’ attempt to acquire knowledge in the company of an interlocutor who, like himself, lacks knowledge. This problem emerges most explicitly and acutely with Meno’s paradox in *Meno*. Plato’s response to it is the theory of recollection.

Benson emphasizes that both problems are independent of the elenchus. Finally, insofar as Benson regards both problems as more general and fundamental to Socrates’ philosophical enterprise than Vlastos’s problem of the elenchus, it follows – although Benson does not explicitly say this – that Benson thinks that the Socratic elenchus plays a relatively limited role in Socrates’ philosophical mission.

MCPHERRAN (2002B)

McPherran’s chapter focuses on Socrates’ response to the Delphic Oracle’s pronouncement that he is the wisest Greek. McPherran claims that Socrates’ reaction to the oracle, including his interpretation of it, is ‘the most explicit instance in Plato’s dialogues of what has been termed “elenctic interpretation”’ (2002b: 126). Consequently, McPherran proposes that a close examination of Socrates’ reaction to the oracle will ‘clarify more general aspects of the elenchus’ (127).

The crux of Socrates' initial puzzlement at the oracle is the conflict between the oracular claim that Socrates is the wisest Greek and Socrates' view of himself as not wise at all. McPherran maintains that Socrates had been practicing elenctic inquiry prior to the oracular pronouncement, on the grounds that it was Socrates' intellectual capacities that first incited Chaerephon to visit the Oracle (120–2). Accordingly, McPherran assumes that Socrates would not have regarded himself as wise, on the grounds that he had failed to survive his own elenctic testing. However, 'Socrates had yet to hit upon the idea that recognition of ignorance could count as a form of wisdom' (127). On this point, McPherran suggests that 'we can hypothesize that he attempted (unsuccessfully) to define various virtue terms and then interrogated himself regarding the coherence of those definitions with his other beliefs' (127–8). At the same time, Socrates' piety would have powerfully motivated him to affirm the truth of the oracle. Consequently, 'for his method of discovery, of interpretation, Socrates turns to his customary elenctic method, attempting to refute, to show *false*, the *apparent meaning* of the oracular pronouncement taken at face value, not . . . the oracle or god' (129). Specifically, Socrates attempts to 'uncover the god's meaning by trying to discover a *counterexample* to the [oracular claim that he is the wisest Greek]' (130). Thus, Socrates interrogates his allegedly wise fellow citizens.

At this stage in his interpretation of the oracle, McPherran suggests, Socrates must have recognized that there were two senses of 'wisdom', a familiar one that he himself associates with understanding of 'the greatest things' – cf. (2a') at 124 – namely virtue, and the puzzling one attributed to him by the

oracle. Accordingly, Socrates interrogates his allegedly wise fellow citizens to determine whether they in fact possess moral wisdom. The result of these interrogations, of course, is that Socrates comes to believe that his fellow citizens do not possess moral wisdom. But since Socrates recognizes his own lack of moral wisdom, he comes to the conclusion that the wisdom that the oracle attributes to him is precisely recognition of lack of moral wisdom. Accordingly, Socrates distinguishes his 'human' wisdom from his lack of 'divine' moral wisdom.

At this point Socrates would seem to have solved the puzzle of the oracle. Yet Socrates' interrogations of others do not cease. McPherran maintains that Socrates persists in testing others because he remains 'driven by a concern for piety and justice to confirm to the highest degree of truth possible his account of what the oracle [means], and from his perspective that [entails] piling up as much evidence as he [can] so as inductively to warrant [the oracle's claim that Socrates is the *wisest* Greek]' (134). This does not, however, merely mean testing one allegedly wise person after another to ensure that no undisclosed possessor of wisdom comes to light. At this point in his philosophical mission, McPherran hypothesizes, Socrates had also come to distinguish between knowing that something is true and understanding how it is true. Thus, even where Socrates might meet someone who, like himself, admitted his lack of moral wisdom, Socrates would be wiser than that person because he, Socrates, would not merely know that, but understand how, this was true (135).

Finally, McPherran argues, Socrates continues to philosophize 'after nailing down the probable truth that he is the wisest [Greek]' because he comes to the view

that ‘he is probably being used by the god as a *paradigm* to deliver the message that any person is wisest who, like Socrates, has become cognizant that he is in truth worth nothing in respect of wisdom’ (136). Thus, whereas prior to the Oracle’s pronouncement, Socrates would have had a secular motivation to philosophize, namely because he would have viewed it as a common good to rid his fellow citizens of hubristic false-conceit (cf. 130–1), in the wake of his response to the oracle he comes to see that his elenctic activity is valued by god.

McPherran’s account of Socrates’ response to and interpretation of the oracle occupies most of his chapter. In the last three and a half pages he applies the results of this discussion to consideration of Socrates’ elenchus generally. McPherran’s conception of the elenchus follows Vlastos. (Cf. claims (1)–(4) at 142.) The central point McPherran here makes can be conceived as combining Adams’s view of Socrates’ belief evidentialism and Brickhouse and Smith’s view that Socrates’ beliefs are secured through induction. (McPherran cites Adams at n. 73.) Specifically, premise set *Q*, to which Socrates is committed and his interlocutor agrees has more evidential weight than thesis *p*, which the interlocutor proposes and Socrates targets for refutation. What are the evidential grounds of *Q*? Analogously to the way repeated elenctic testing justifies Socrates’ belief that he is the wisest Greek, the premises constitutive of *Q* have survived Socrates’ repeated elenctic testing. ‘Those propositions that he does assume, we are assured, are those every prior attempt to overturn which has resulted in self-contradiction, while every argument where they serve as leading premises has either furthered inferences to similarly resistant apparent truths or contributed to the unmasking of a self-professed expert who

. . . cannot make his words “stand still” (2002: 144).

BRICKHOUSE AND SMITH (2002B)

In this chapter Brickhouse and Smith comment on the contributions of Carpenter and Polansky, Benson and McPherran. Here I restrict myself to their central conclusion. They begin with the claim that ‘despite the intense and extensive attention the subject has received . . . [they] find no general agreement about precisely what the elenchus is’ (2002b: 145). But Brickhouse and Smith do not try to rectify this problem by clarifying what the elenchus is. Instead, rather in the spirit of Carpenter and Polansky, although in a much more deflationary spirit, they maintain that ‘there can be no solution to “the problem of the elenchus” and no single analysis of elenctic arguments, for the simple reason that there is no such *thing* as “the Socratic *elenchus*”’ (147). ‘The very idea of “the Socratic elenchus” – and thus the notion that there is some very special “problem of the elenchus” – is an artifact of modern scholarship’ (147).

Brickhouse and Smith suggest that the first response to Vlastos, that of Kraut, was basically correct: Socrates has no special method or means of arguing; he just does ‘what we all do when we try to argue well’ (156). In this respect Socrates is ‘like us’ (157). Similarly, the so-called problem of the elenchus is not a problem unique or distinctive to the way Socrates refutes his interlocutors’ theses; it is just the basic epistemological problem of what secures the premises that entail a given conclusion. What distinguished Socrates from his contemporaries was his awareness of his ignorance. This did not yield a ‘tool

or craft by which to advance one's cognitive condition' (157), but, they emphasize, it did make Socrates outstandingly courageous.

WOLFSDORF (2003)

Wolfsdorf's paper focuses on the manner in which Socrates pursues definitions in the early definitional dialogues (*Charmides*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Major*, *Meno* and *Republic* 1). As such, the discussion 'intersects the . . . topic of Socrates' method in the early dialogues' (2003: 273). Wolfsdorf views Socrates' pursuit of definitions with his interlocutor as a cooperative pursuit of truth. Thus, Wolfsdorf rejects Benson's dissolution of the problem of the elenchus.

Wolfsdorf argues that Socrates pursues true definitions by introducing what Wolfsdorf calls '*F*-conditions'. *F*-conditions are conditions for the identity of the *definiendum F*. More precisely, an *F*-condition is an essential property of *F* that Socrates believes a satisfactory definition of *F* must satisfy. For example, in *Charmides* Socrates suggests that *F* is always fine. Proposed definitions are, then, rejected insofar as they fail to satisfy the given *F*-conditions Socrates introduces. For example, the proposed definition of sound-mindedness as restraint is rejected insofar as restraint is not always fine. (Note that Wolfsdorf also argues, contra Brickhouse and Smith 1991, that Socrates is principally concerned with investigating definitions or propositions rather than lives: 305–8.)

Wolfsdorf reviews all the *F*-conditions introduced in the early definitional dialogues, and he claims that the pursuit of definitions in individual dialogues progress insofar as they successively satisfy successive

F-conditions – and even though all the definitional pursuits ultimately end in aporia. Furthermore, Wolfsdorf claims that the form of Socrates' pursuit of definitions is broadly consistent through all the definitional dialogues. Thus, contra Vlastos, there is no demise of the elenchus, that is, in this case, no demise of Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions in *Lysis* and *Hippias Major* in particular.

With respect to the cognitive status of *F*-conditions, Wolfsdorf claims that Socrates is committed to the truth of the *F*-conditions on various grounds: self-evidence, their endoxic status, experience, deduction from premises to which he is committed on the basis of any of the previous three. As such, Wolfsdorf's position vis-à-vis the problem of the elenchus is equivalent to Kraut's: 'we must agree with Kraut . . . that when he develops his arguments Socrates "picks premises . . . he considers . . . eminently reasonable"' (293).

But granting this, Wolfsdorf raises the question: 'If Socrates develops arguments using premises that he considers eminently reasonable, . . . why then does he so frequently disavow ethical knowledge?' (293). Observe that this question has a special force in the context of an examination of Socrates' pursuit of definitions as opposed to non-definitional ethical propositions. Wolfsdorf maintains with Benson that Socrates is committed to (PD), the epistemological priority of definitions. (Cf. also Wolfsdorf 2004b.) In that case, it is not open to Wolfsdorf to say simply that Socrates holds that one cannot know some non-definitional ethical proposition in the absence of relevant definitional knowledge. The question is above all why Socrates lacks definitional knowledge. Wolfsdorf's response to the problem here is general and to some extent vague. He maintains that Socrates' pursuit of definitions is

‘theoretically and methodologically naïve’ and that Socrates is in some sense sensitive to these limitations. It is such lack of knowledge that Socrates thinks an expert would have and that he does not. Wolfsdorf appears to be claiming that Socrates needs some sort of meta-ethical, specifically meta-definitional theory. This appearance is supported by Wolfsdorf’s discussion of whether Socrates has a theory of definition (304–5). There he says: ‘the [‘What is *F*?’] question arises prior to the conceptualization of metaphysics. But methodologically the pursuit of the [‘What is *F*?’] question requires such conceptualization’ (305). As such, Wolfsdorf thinks that such a meta-definitional theory would be a metaphysical theory. I still agree with this view, particularly since I maintain, as most do, that Socrates pursues real definitions. However, I would add and stress that such a theory must be semantic and epistemological as well as metaphysical.

Insofar as Socrates’ pursuit of definitions is not based on a theory of definition, Wolfsdorf maintains that Socrates does not have a method *per se*. On the other hand, since Socrates is committed to (PD) and pursues definitions using *F*-conditions, Wolfsdorf admits that Socrates has a ‘manner’ of pursuing definitions. Insofar as Socrates’ cooperatively pursues true definitions with his interlocutors, Wolfsdorf maintains that Socrates’ manner of pursuing definitions is not elenctic, where ‘elenctic’ saliently has the sense of ‘adversarial’ or ‘refutative’. In short, Wolfsdorf thinks it is misguided to speak of Socrates’ ‘elenctic method’.

Finally, Wolfsdorf considers whether, given his commitment to (PD), Socrates’ pursuit of definitions commits the Socratic fallacy à la Geach. Wolfsdorf claims that Socrates does not commit the Socratic fallacy because he never claims to know the instances of *F* or,

in particular, properties of *F* that he employs in his pursuit. But, granted this, it seems that Socrates’ pursuit of definitions can only reasonably aspire to some sort of justified putatively true belief.

(Wolfsdorf’s 2003 discussion here should be compared with Wolfsdorf 2008: 121–96. Another paper that advances a constructivist position with respect to Socrates’ pursuit of definitional knowledge is Hope May 1997.)

FORSTER (2006)

In his 1941 *Plato’s Earlier Dialectic*, Richard Robinson proposes that Socrates refutes his interlocutor by showing that his thesis *p* is self-contradictory (1953: 28, cited by Forster at 2006: n. 6). In his 1983a article Vlastos mentions Robinson’s position only to reject it as an earlier misguided attempt to explain the Socratic elenchus (1983a: 29, cited by Forster at n. 7). In this 2006 piece, Forster resurrects and defends Robinson’s view. Precisely, Forster argues for three related theses. First, ‘at least sometimes [Socrates understands] his refutations as attempts to reduce a thesis to a self-contradiction without the aid of independent premises’ (9). Second, Socrates’ conception of his refutations as such is ‘reasonable [in a] significant number’ of cases (9). Third, ‘it is not implausible of [Socrates] to suppose that theses of the sort those refutations attack are in fact self-contradictory’ (9).

Forster begins with what he calls a *prima facie* case for Socrates understanding some of his refutations as attempts to reduce a thesis to a self-contradiction without the aid of independent premises. Here he cites evidence from *Phaedo* (101d–e), where Socrates speaks of examining a hypothesis

to see if the propositions that ‘rushed forth from it’ agreed or disagreed with one another (10), and *Euthyphro* (11b), where Euthyphro complains that his theses won’t stand still, and Socrates compares them to the self-moving statues of Daedalus. Forster emphasizes that the analogy of statues moving ‘by themselves’ suggests that the theses are self-contradictory (10–11), and he appeals to the fact that Zeno of Elea earlier presented such self-contradictory refutations and suggests that in his youth the historical Socrates was influenced by Zeno (11–13).

Forster then raises three problems for his position and spends most of the paper answering them. (Problems one and two are discussed at 13–29; problem three is discussed at 30–54.) The first problem is that none of the elenchi in the early dialogues works by exposing a thesis as self-contradictory (15). A second, related problem is that Socrates’ refutations employ ‘a multiplicity of premises in order to generate a logical difficulty’ (15) and that Socrates is aware of this multiplicity. As evidence of this Forster cites *Gorgias* (498e–499b), *Protagoras* (332d) and *Charmides* (164c–d, 165a–b). A third problem is that the way that Socrates conceives of his refutations as exposing self-contradiction is implausible. (This third problem is introduced at 30.) Forster’s solution to the first two problems depends upon ‘certain implicit assumptions about meaning’ that Socrates makes and that are ‘alien to us’ (14). Precisely, Forster proposes that in the case of the self-contradictory elenchi, Socrates understands the premises he generates to be ‘internal to the sense of the thesis’ (16).

As an initial explication of sense-internality, Forster refers to the concept of analytic implication, according to which one proposition is derived from another on the basis of the

meaning of the logical as well as non-logical vocabulary of the latter. For example, from ‘Jones is a bachelor’, ‘Jones is unmarried’ is analytically implied. But Socratic sense-internality differs from analytic implication. In particular, Socratic sense-internality concerns the ‘speaker-meaning’ of an interlocutor’s claims, not the ‘meaning-in-the-language’ of the claim (52). It is for this reason that when an interlocutor proposes a thesis *p*, Socrates sometimes asks what the *speaker* means by ‘*p*’ (16–17). Forster cites as evidence *Euthyphro* (7a), and *Hippias Minor* (369d). Consequently, ‘the sense of any given belief statement that someone utters is in part constituted by, and hence only determinable by investigation, a network of related beliefs which he has . . . [And] cross-examinations of the sort Socrates performs have the function of uncovering this network’ (23). Moreover, ‘this network of sense-internal beliefs . . . is quite broad (somewhat broader than the semantic intuitions of most modern philosophers would be likely to allow)’ (23). Accordingly, Forster argues, ‘if Socrates sometimes understood all of the essential assumptions employed in a refutation to be internal to the sense of the thesis, then both [of the first two] . . . problems would disappear’ (16). That is, the refutations would expose the theses as self-contradictory, and Socrates’ use of various premises to expose the self-contradiction would be legitimate. An additional virtue of Forster’s interpretation is that it provides a solution to Vlastos’s problem of the elenchus. Socrates is able to refute his interlocutor’s theses precisely because he exposes them as self-contradictory (29). Forster’s introduction of the problem and rejection of, in particular, Benson’s dissolution occurs at 25–9.

In an effort to resolve the third problem, that is, to defend Socrates’ conception of

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sense-internality and thus the plausibility of Socrates' view that he sometimes refutes his interlocutors by exposing their theses as self-contradictory, Forster takes a leaf from the later Wittgenstein and from empirical research of ordinary language use to suggest that distinctions such as those between analyticity and syntheticity, meaningfulness and meaninglessness, synonymy and non-synonymy are in fact more vague and mutable than modern philosophers of language typically admit (32). Accordingly, Forster suggests that Socrates draws the analytic/synthetic distinction 'in a different place from us' (33). Moreover, Forster proposes that there is no 'good reason to assume in advance that' the modern distinction is more advantageous than Socrates' (34).

This is the gist of Forster's argument. In addition, Forster argues that due to the 'highly unstable state of ethical thought in fifth-century Athens' (35), Socrates had good reason to expect that his interlocutors' ethical beliefs would be contradictory and thus, given his conception of sense-internality, self-contradictory. (Forster discusses this topic at 35–7.)

Finally, in the penultimate section of the paper, Forster considers a common objection to Socrates' elenchi, namely that they fallaciously turn on ambiguity and related linguistic phenomena. This topic relates to Forster's conception of Socratic sense-internality insofar as appeal to Socratic sense-internality is crucial to Forster's defense of Socrates against the charge. The gist of the defense on this front is that although terms may appear ambiguous or in fact be ambiguous in 'the language as a whole,' an individual speaker is less 'likely to use a single expression in different senses or to use two apparent synonyms in different senses [within a given argument]' (52). Forster's defense of Socrates against the

charge of fallacies of ambiguity is considerably more elaborate than I can or should explain here. Forster begins with the argument that Socrates is sensitive to ambiguity and in particular to eristic uses of ambiguity such as occur in *Euthydemus* (38–47). He then discusses Socrates' commitment to the principle of univocity, according to which 'whenever a single general term is involved there is just a single meaning involved as well' (48). But Forster recognizes that the univocity principle and Socrates' focus on speaker-meaning are at odds with one another, for the univocity principle 'entails uniformity in the meaning attached to [a general term] by *different* individuals' (54, with my italics). Finally, Forster suggests that 'it is not altogether clear whether Plato's Socrates perceives this tension between or has a way of reconciling these two opposing sides of his position' (54).

MCPHERRAN (2007)

McPherran's important paper begins with Aristotle's report in *Metaphysics* (1078b7–32) that epagogic or inductive argumentation was one of two distinguishing features of Socratic philosophizing. Likewise, McPherran claims, Plato and Xenophon 'target *epagōgē* as an innovative, distinguishing mark of Socratic methodology' (2007: 348). Several earlier scholars, in particular Richard Robinson, discuss Socratic *epagōgē*. (Cf. Robinson 1953: 33–48. McPherran also cites Gully 1968; Santas 1979: 136–55; Vlastos 1991: 267–8, is a more recent, exceptional example.) Yet, McPherran suggests, their accounts of epagogic argumentation conflict. No article prior to McPherran's is devoted to the subject. Thus, McPherran offers a welcome and

much needed ‘fresh, critical account’ (349) of the topic.

Beyond the introduction, the paper divides into two parts: ‘*epagōgē* and induction’ and ‘Socratic epagogic induction’. The former occupies most of the paper and begins with Robinson’s classification of three types of *epagōgē* in Plato’s dialogues. These are arguments from a single proposition or set of coordinate propositions that serve as premises to:

1. Another proposition superordinate to the premise set (e.g. the opposite of beauty is only ugliness; the opposite of goodness is only badness; therefore, every opposite has only one opposite. *Prt.* 332c–d, cited by McPherran at 349).
2. Another coordinate proposition (e.g. expert pilots have the best success at sea-faring; therefore, expert builders have the best success at building (*Ap.* 27b; *Hp. Ma.* 284a–b, cited by McPherran at 349).
3. Another proposition superordinate to the premise set followed by an inference back to a subordinate proposition (e.g. men are mortal; thus, human beings are mortal; thus, women are mortal (*Euthphr.* 10a–d, cited by McPherran at 349).

Robinson suggests three conceptions of epagogic movement to a universal:

- (i) intuition of the universal through a sample of coordinate cases (thus obtaining certainty);
- (d) complete enumeration of a set of coordinate cases followed by trivial deductive inference to a universal;
- (g) probable inductive generalization employing a survey of coordinate cases that lead to a probable generalization that may be overturned by the discovery of a disconfirming instance.

(Note that McPherran uses the symbols ‘(A)’, ‘(B)’ and ‘(C)’. I have avoided these to avoid confusion with the symbols Vlastos uses to refer to Socrates’ meta-elenctic commitments.)

Robinson has little to say about (i). He claims that (d) is the most conspicuous form of *epagōgē* in the dialogues (1941: 36, cited by McPherran at 351). And he claims that there is no clear case of (g) (1941: 37; cf. McPherran 350 and n. 11). In contrast, McPherran maintains that ‘Robinson provides no convincing evidence that Socrates *ever* – let alone frequently – conducted his *elenchi*’ according to (d) (2007: 351). Instead, McPherran argues that (g), somewhat modified by (i), ‘gives us the correct account of one sort of Socratic *epagōgē* – one that resembles what we would call “inductive generalization”’ (350).

Before turning to the defense of his positive view, McPherran devotes the remainder of this section to consideration of Vlastos’s endorsement of a position akin to, but importantly distinct from, (i) as the most characteristic form of Socratic *epagōgē*. (Vlastos 1991: 267, cited by McPherran at 352.) Vlastos maintains that Socrates uses *epagōgē* to ‘communicate the meaning of’ rather than to ‘provide empirical support for’ some general claim. Accordingly, Socrates’ epagogic method is not a method of inference, but rather amounts to what is sometimes called ‘intuitive induction’ or what Vlastos calls ‘explicative *epagōgē*’ (353; cf. McPherran’s remark at n. 22: ‘Thus, the term “intuitive induction” does not designate what I . . . termed intuition of the universal [(i)]’). Consider the following abbreviated argument from *Ion* (540b–d):

- (p) The pilot is one who knows best what should be said to the crew of a storm-tossed ship.

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- (q) The doctor is the one who knows best what should be said to the sick.
- (r) The master of a craft is the one who knows best matters falling within its subject matter

McPherran (352), following Vlastos (1991: 267–8), presents the *Ion* argument more fully.

In this case, (r) is not being derived from (p) and (q) as an inductive generalization. Rather, (p) and (q) serve to explain the meaning of (r). In other words, the argument does not assume that (r) might be falsified by some empirical evidence, say, encountering someone who is not a master craftsman yet who best knows matters falling within a craft. That person would in fact be a master craftsman. (Cf. McPherran's discussion at 352–3, with Vlastos's quotation at 1991: 268, cited by McPherran at 353.) On Vlastos's view, then, we should 'think of Socrates as always or almost always obtaining an interlocutor's assent to the premises of an *elenchus* not by persuasion but by mere explanation – a form of explanation that helps the interlocutor to recall and state his or her actual beliefs, beliefs held prior to his . . . encounter with Socrates' (353; this is McPherran's summary of Vlastos's view. Observe that Vlastos's position here is significant for his view of Socratic *elenchus*, specifically for his view that argument is from Q not to it [= (3)]. In other words, Vlastos's view that Socrates employs intuitive induction, rather than (i) or (g), is consistent with the view that Socrates never tries to *persuade* an interlocutor of the truth of a premise. Note that McPherran argues (at 354–5) that we can reject Vlastos's premise (3), while still following Vlastos's defense of an anti-constructivist interpretation of Socratic *elenchus*. More generally, the relation

between persuasive epagogic argumentation and anti-constructivist interpretations of Socratic *elenchus* is a secondary concern of McPherran's in this paper. Consider his concluding sentence: 'I have indicated how advocates of anti-constructivist interpretations of the *elenchus* need to provide a better account of the place of Socratic *epagōgē* in what they allege to be Socrates' single-minded use of the *elenchus* to pursue knowledge-testing of knowledge-professing interlocutors' (364).

McPherran grants Vlastos that in some cases, including *Ion* (540b–d), Socrates employs intuitive induction. (McPherran discusses another instance from *Grg.* 460a–e at 356, contra Santas 1979: 151.) However, he questions whether intuitive induction is Socrates' representative, let alone only, form of *epagōgē*. Contra Vlastos, McPherran argues that there is a 'considerable presence of probabilistic, inductive, persuasive *epagōgē* in [Plato's and Xenophon's works]' (359). McPherran's presumptive argument for this position occurs at 357–9. The final section of the paper (359–64) elaborates. The presumptive argument enlists Aristotle's views of *epagōgē* and their resemblance to certain Platonic passages, in particular *Euthydemus* (279d–80b). The heart of McPherran's argument occurs in the final section of the paper; it is based on an argument from *Charmides* (159b–160d).

McPherran argues that in the *Charmides*, Socrates infers, from a number of instances of agile and robust and slow and restrained actions, the general claim that agile and robust actions are finer than slow and restrained ones. More precisely, the general claim, that is, the universal, is inferred probabilistically, not with certainty. Thus, McPherran maintains that in the *Charmides* argument Socrates reasons epagogically in accordance with (g), somewhat modified by

(i). That is to say, the *Charmides* argument exemplifies probabilistically inductive generalization employing a survey of coordinate cases (= [g]), from which the universal is intuited (= [i]), but not with certainty.

McPherran buttresses his interpretation of this *Charmides* argument, and concludes his discussion by considering a second *Charmides* argument (167c–168b) and an argument from *Memorabilia* (1.2.9), in which he maintains that Socrates reasons by means of probable inductive generalization.

SANTANA (2007)

The aim of Santana's paper is rather modest: to vindicate a constructivist conception of the elenchus just to the extent of defending the constructivist assumption that:

(CA) Socrates thinks some of his elenctic arguments prove that the interlocutor's thesis is false. (2007: 252)

I emphasize that Santana does not endeavour to solve Vlastos's problem of the elenchus, merely to confirm, say, against Benson, that it is a genuine problem. Relatedly, Santana is not concerned with whether Socrates is justified in thinking that certain of his elenchi prove the falsity of the interlocutor's thesis.

Two further preliminary points deserve mention. One is that in deriving evidence for his thesis, Santana deliberately ignores *Gorgias*. (Cf. 253) The other is that Santana admits, with Carpenter and Polansky, that Socrates' elenctic arguments are to some extent heterogeneous. Thus, Santana writes, 'we can recognize a [constructivist] pattern in a sub-set of elenchi without conceiving it to be *the* definitive account of the elenchus' (254).

In arguing that 'there are constructive elenctic elements in early dialogues other than the *Gorgias*' (254), Santana specifies three properties that an elenctic argument may have, some combination of whose presence would indicate that Socrates thinks his elenchus establishes the falsity of his interlocutor's thesis. These properties are as follows:

- (1) Before his elenctic argument, Socrates makes statements indicating that he aims to establish that the interlocutor's thesis is false.
- (2) After his elenctic argument, Socrates makes statements indicating that he has established that the interlocutor's thesis is false.
- (3) Socrates expects his interlocutor to abandon his thesis and accept the conclusion of the elenchus (255. Santana emphasizes that of the three properties taken individually, (3) has the strongest evidential weight.)

Given these properties, Santana discusses three elenchi: at *Crito* (44c–48b), *Republic* 1 (335b–336a) and *Euthyphro* (8b–e). Santana argues that the *Crito* elenchus has properties (1)–(3) and that the *Republic* 1 and *Euthyphro* elenchi have properties (2)–(3), thus vindicating (CA). (Santana summarizes these conclusions at 263.)

In the remainder of the paper, Santana discusses four possible objections that may be made to his preceding conclusions (264–6). The first possible objection would be to claim that Socrates has only argued that if the interlocutor accepts premise set Q, then not-*p* follows. Santana maintains that the presence of (3) in the elenchi undermines this possibility.

The second possible objection would be that Socrates qualifies the conclusions of some of his elenchi by claiming not to know

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the conclusion for which he has argued. Santana acknowledges that Socrates lacks moral knowledge of the relevant claims, but responds that ‘one can be a fallibilist yet still give proofs of which one is confident’ (265).

The third possible objection relates to Benson’s doxastic constraint, namely that only the interlocutor must affirm Q; and in that case, Socrates could only conclude that the interlocutor’s thesis was inconsistent with Q. But Santana argues that given (3), ‘Socrates must *himself* affirm the truth of [Q] and therefore believe [Q]’ (265).

Finally – again with Benson in mind – one might object that Socrates must hold that the premises of Q have an epistemic property more plausibly related to truth than the initial thesis. Santana simply acknowledges this as a problem that a defender of (CA) must answer. He defers his own answer to another paper (Santana 2009).

SANTANA (2009)

Santana’s 2009 paper picks up where his 2007 paper leaves off, with the problem of defending the view that premise set Q must have an epistemic property more plausibly related to truth than the interlocutor’s initial thesis *p*: ‘The purpose of this paper is to address the . . . controversy [about whether there is a genuine problem of the elenchus], part of which centers around an important but ambiguous assumption which seems to require that Socrates give or have *particular* epistemic reasons for the truth of the premises he uses to refute the interlocutor’ (2009: 41). The assumption to which Santana here refers he calls ‘the epistemic assumption’ or ‘(EA)’. (Santana gives, as I will shortly, a more precise description of the contents of [EA].)

After presenting (EA), the paper discusses two prior interpretations of (EA), those of Kraut’s 1983 response to Vlastos 1983a and Santas (unpublished manuscript), and how these interpretations are responsible for ‘serious objections . . . to the legitimacy and scope of the problem [of the elenchus]’ (42). Santana then argues that (EA), properly understood, avoids these objections and is in fact justified (42). Finally, given his interpretation of (EA), Santana briefly explains how to solve the problem of the elenchus.

In presenting (EA), Santana introduces a distinction between two components of the problem of the elenchus. The ‘formal’ problem is that because agreement to Q is ad hoc, which is to say, the premises of Q are logically unsecured, Socrates cannot validly conclude not-*p*. This is because although the interlocutor agrees to Q, he also believes *p*. The ‘epistemological’ component of the problem of the elenchus is that ‘because Socrates secures only the interlocutor’s agreement to the [premises of Q], their epistemic status remains *undisclosed*’ (43). Thus, it is unclear how Socrates and his interlocutor can validly conclude not-*p* from Q because it is unclear how Q has a ‘weightier epistemic status’ than the interlocutor’s original thesis *p* (43). This raises, what Santana regards as the ‘central’ question of the problem of the Socratic elenchus: ‘How does Socrates think he and the interlocutor are justified in thinking that [the premises constitutive of Q] in his elenctic arguments are true?’ (44). Finally, the view that Socrates thinks that he and his interlocutor are so justified, in other words, the view that there is a problem of the elenchus, assumes that:

(EA) Socrates must give or have epistemic reasons for how the interlocutor and he are justified in thinking that the premises of Q are true. (44)

Santana now turns to interpretations of (EA). He notes that (EA) is ambiguous between:

(EA1) Socrates must give or have *particular* epistemic reasons for the truth of every premise of Q he uses in his elenctic arguments.

(EA2) Socrates must give or have *particular* epistemic reasons *not* for every premise but for *some* of the premises of Q, namely those that need such reasons.

If one interprets (EA) as (EA1), then, as Kraut had argued, an infinite regress will follow, for every premise in an argument will require reasons to support it. (Santana discusses this at 44–5.) Thus, (EA1) is unjustifiable; and, given the rejection of (EA1), the problem of the elenchus is resolved. If, instead, one interprets (EA) as (EA2), then, as Santas has argued, there are ‘at least piecemeal solutions’ to the problem of the elenchus. This is because Socrates at least sometimes meets the requirement of (EA2). Precisely, arguments for at least some of the premises needing epistemic reasons are scattered among the early dialogues. So although in one elenchus Socrates may use a premise *q* without securing it, an argument for *q* may be found elsewhere. (Santana discusses this at 45–6.)

Santana argues that both (EA1) and (EA2) are misinterpretations of (EA) and thus of Vlastos’s problem of the elenchus. Although Socrates may have particular epistemic reasons for particular premises constitutive of Q, Vlastos construes the problem of the elenchus as a ‘*general*’ methodological problem that seeks to reveal Socrates’ background methodological assumptions regarding the epistemic status of [the premises of Q], *what-ever these may be*’ (47; recall the nature of

Vlastos’s assumptions (A) and (B)). Thus, Santana interprets (EA) as:

(EA3) Socrates must give or have *general* epistemic reasons for the truth of the premises of Q. (47)

Granting that (EA3) is the correct interpretation of (EA), Santana now proposes the following response to (EA) and thus solution to problem of the elenchus. Socrates’ general epistemic rationale for the truth of the premises of Q, which lends them more evidential weight than his interlocutor’s thesis *p*, is that Socrates *and* his interlocutor agree to Q, whereas only the interlocutor agrees to *p*. In short, the mutual agreement of Socrates and his interlocutor to Q corroborates the truth of Q (50).

Santana appeals to this notion of justification by ‘corroborative agreement’ (phrase first used at 51) as a common one. For example: if two people aim to identify a person at a distance, the fact that each asserts that the person is, say, Jones, gives the other more reason to believe that it is Jones (52). But granted that epistemic justification by corroborative agreement is common, it is important to note that in the course of arguing for this conception of epistemic justification, Santana distinguishes corroborative agreement within the context of an elenchus from ‘mere agreement’ in non-elenctic and specifically certain conventional discursive contexts. In particular, the discursive contexts Santana has in mind include those whose methods are rhetorical and whose aims are not the truth (51). The importance of the distinction between such mere agreement and corroborative agreement in an elenctic context is that Socrates himself dismisses the mere agreement of others as a reason for thinking a claim is true. In other words, Socrates dismisses the popularity of

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a claim as a reason for thinking that claim is true. (This point is introduced and discussed by Santana at 50–2.) Thus, corroborative agreement in elenctic contexts has a special weight that tips the evidence in favour of Q and so not- p .

PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER STUDY

A theory of Socrates' method depends upon the interpretation of arguments and as such to some extent falls within the domain of logic. But as we have seen, the interpretation of Socratic arguments is not limited to their logical form; it also requires interpretation of the psychological attitudes of the participants, in other words, the pragmatics of argumentation. For example, we may need to know Socrates' or his interlocutor's attitudes toward premises and conclusions. Likewise, we may need to know Socrates' or his interlocutor's attitude toward the development of or engagement in an argument or in argumentation itself. In that case, it is necessary to survey and clarify the evidence that informs our knowledge of the relevant psychological states of the characters. Some of this work has indeed been done. But it has not been done so carefully or systematically as it should be. In particular, one should be wary of generalizing within and across dialogues. It is possible, for various reasons, that Plato employs Socrates and his interlocutors variously in different argumentative contexts.

As far as the elenchus is concerned, Benson's dissolution has not won much support. Indeed, the most recent contributions to the debate, Santana's, reaffirm that there is a problem of the elenchus. Santana's proposed solution, that corroborative agreement carries greater evidential weight than

the interlocutor's sole assertion, is open to debate. In short, Vlastos's problem remains alive and invites further reflection.

At the same time, as other scholars have suggested, we should broaden examination of Socrates' arguments beyond the elenchus and the problem of the elenchus. Not all of Socrates' arguments aim at or achieve refutation. But even among those that do, not all pursue or accomplish this objective in the same way. For example, some arguments operate through some form of *reductio*; some by analogy; some are epagogic; some use certain premises as dialectical expedients; some are deliberately fallacious and variously so. It may be useful to consider to what extent Socratic arguments, both critical and constructive, can be classified. Here again, I recommend sensitivity to variation across dialogues. For example, it may be useful to consider whether some forms of argumentation are prominent in or unique to some dialogues. In short, between Vlastos's monolithic conception of the elenchus as Socratic method and Kraut's general claim that Socrates argues by picking premises he considers eminently reasonable, a good deal of middle ground lies open for investigation of details and specifics.

In considering Socratic arguments, it may also be valuable to compare these with the arguments and discursive manners of his interlocutors. Likewise, it may be valuable to compare the forms of Socratic argumentation in Platonic dialogues with those in non-Platonic Socratic texts such as Xenophon's and in particular pseudo-Platonic dialogues such as *Alcibiades II*, *Eryxias* and *Axiochus*. Sporadic and partial considerations of this kind occur among the secondary literature surveyed in this chapter, but a great deal of sustained and systematic work remains to be done.

The primary data or domain of evidence on the basis of which a theory of Socrates' method is to be constructed is Plato's early dialogues. But there are controversies surrounding which Platonic dialogues are early and which were composed by Plato. For example, many scholars simply reject developmentalism. And some of those who accept developmentalism deny, for instance, that *Euthydemus* is an early dialogue. Similarly, some scholars deny that Plato composed *Hippias Major*; and it is debatable whether, for instance, *Theages* and *Alcibiades I*, which have tended not to be regarded as authentic, should be. Insofar as we are serious about studying Socrates' method in the *early* dialogues of *Plato*, we must be prepared to defend the view that a certain set of dialogues is early and Platonic. To this it may be objected that it suffices to focus on a set of dialogues uncontroversially identifiable as Platonic and perhaps early. But this would only be acceptable if there were

a uniform Socratic method. Why should we presume that? Since questions of chronology and authorship are extremely difficult to settle, it may be prudent simply to examine Socrates' method in a set of dialogues and allow our results to encourage or discourage the view that the method is consistent or continuous among these texts. Finally, insofar as we are concerned with the method of the favoured character, if not the authorial mouthpiece, in a group of Platonic texts, why should we speak of 'Socrates' method' rather than 'Plato's'?

Scholarship of the last quarter century on the philosophical method or methods portrayed in a set of Platonic dialogues has been an unprecedentedly vibrant period in the history of the subject. The foregoing survey of central contributions should help to advance the discussion still further.

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