

BOOK REVIEWS

Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher. By Gregory Vlastos. Cornell University Press, 1991. Pp. xii + 334. \$16.95.

Prof. Vlastos' long-awaited book on Socrates has finally been made available to the general public. It will not disappoint, and will surely have a significant effect on Platonic studies for years to come, as Prof. Vlastos has offered a clear and often powerful defense of many of the views that are currently popular in Platonic scholarship. Vlastos sets out to demonstrate that the Socrates of the early dialogues (S_E) differs in important ways from the Socrates of the middle dialogues (S_M). To this end, Vlastos proposes "Ten Theses" (47–48) that exemplify this development of thought, and further argues that the philosophy of S_E is essentially that of the historical Socrates (49–51, 91–106). The chronological distribution of the dialogues is based "solely" on their philosophical content (46f.), but is in close agreement with the results at which Brandwood arrived on stylometric grounds (46 n.2). Unfortunately, the author fails to address any of the numerous objections that have been raised against both these methods of arrangement.

Thesis I states that while S_M is concerned with the whole of philosophical science, S_E is "exclusively a moral philosopher" (47f.). This thesis does not receive special treatment, however, since Vlastos believes that it will prove itself throughout the course of the book (53). He therefore proceeds immediately to Thesis II, which is "the most powerful of the ten" because the "irreconcilable difference between Socrates $_E$ and Socrates $_M$ " can be established by this criterion alone. This thesis deals with the Theory of Ideas and with the separable soul (53–80). In order to understand the different roles played by the *eidōs* or *idea* in S_E and S_M , we must consider the "work" which the *eidōs* does in each (56). According to Vlastos, the *eidōs* in S_E is "strictly definitional," supplying the answer to the question "What is F?" Yet Vlastos recognizes that what Socrates seeks is the "essence" of F (56f.), and that this undoubtedly involves S_E in "a substantial ontological commitment." Still, the author insists that this does not falsify Thesis I, since Socrates makes this commitment unreflectively (58ff.). It is only with S_M that the metaphysical commitments are made explicit, and that emphasis is placed upon the novelty and the difficulty of this new position (63f.). The *eidōs* of this middle period is inaccessible to the senses (66–68), unchangeable (68–71), incorporeal (71–72), and separately existing (72–76, 256–264). This yields a two-world theory climaxed by the soul's "mystical" vision of the Forms (76–80). Many will no doubt find this account persuasive. But the fact remains that, apart from the *chorismos*, most of the language used to describe the "metaphysical" Forms of the middle period is already present in connection with the "logical" or "definitional" Forms of the early dialogues, together with an implicit "ontological commitment" (cf. Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy*, 214 n.128; P. Shorey, *What Plato Said*, 75f., 458). All that is really absent from the early dialogues is the occasion of a metaphysical discussion that would force Plato to take notice of the *ontological* status of the Forms. Vlastos also believes the transmigratory soul first appears in the *Meno*, while the soul of S_E is but the psychological self (54–56). This, however, forces the author to discount clear hints to the contrary found in the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Gorgias* (see A. Tulin, review of M. L. Morgan, *Platonic Piety*, in *American Journal of Philology* 114, no. 1 [1993]).

Thesis IV (86–91) argues that the middle period's tripartite division of the soul, leads S_M to abandon the denial of *akrasia* found in S_E . But the doctrine that all vice is ignorance, that virtue is knowledge, and that no one willingly does what is wrong, is not abandoned

after the early dialogues (see P. Shorey, *The Unity of Plato's Thought*, p. 9f.); and the discussion is further marred by a doubtful interpretation of *Rep.* 437D–438A (86f.), which simply states that unqualified relatives correlate only with unqualified relatives, and qualified only with qualified (cf. 438A7–B2 with P. Shorey, *Plato's Republic* [Loeb], ad loc.).

Theses III, V, and X deal with the elenchus and with the paradox of Socratic Ignorance. Vlastos thinks the disavowal of knowledge frequently made by S_E sits poorly with other passages in which S_E does make implicit or explicit knowledge claims (3ff., 82–86, 236ff.), and like many other writers, both modern and ancient, Vlastos is troubled by the apparent deceit involved in Socrates' admission of ignorance. To solve this "problem," Vlastos offers a reevaluation of Socratic irony (ch. 1). In simple irony, while there is no intention to deceive, what is said simply is not what is meant. Socratic irony, by contrast, is "complex" in that what is said both is and is not what is meant (31). And so, Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is true in one sense, but not in another. To see how this is so, we must consider the elenchus (111–16, 266–71). While the primary role of the elenchus is "peirastic" and adversative, S_E does expect to discover truths with this method. Strictly speaking, all the elenchus can do is show inconsistency. But S_E "assumes" that side by side with all of their false beliefs, all his interlocutors carry about some true beliefs that entail the negation of their false beliefs. This is a "Tremendous Assumption" based solely on the experiential evidence that whenever S_E argues, this appeared to be the case. Because of this "assumption," the results of the elenchus fall short of "epistemic certitude," so that Socrates' disclaimer of knowledge means what it says. At the same time, S_E thinks that a truth may be "coaxed" out by the elenchus by uncovering the entailing true beliefs, and that such a truth, if not a certainty, is at least "elenctically justified." In this sense, Socrates' disclaimer of knowledge does not quite mean what it says. This elenctic method is eventually replaced as a result of Plato's exposure to mathematics, which leads S_M to seek knowledge demonstratively (116–31). One should compare the similar views of Brickhouse and Smith, *Socrates on Trial* (1989), and the opposing views of L. Tarán, "Platonism and Socratic Ignorance" in *Platonic Investigations*, ed. D. O'Meara (1985), pp. 85–109.

Finally, since Vlastos thinks the elenchus may have positive results, he claims that S_E does not intentionally use fallacious arguments (ch. 5). Chapter 6 then deals with Socratic piety; chapter 7 with Socrates' rejection of retaliation; and chapter 8 with the problem of Socratic Eudaimonism. While some will dispute the views which Prof. Vlastos has offered, all of his readers will profit from the author's clarity of mind, as well as from his deep and abiding commitment to discovering the true interpretation of the Platonic writings.

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