

**THE MORALITY OF WONDER:
A POSITIVE INTERPRETATION OF SOCRATIC IGNORANCE**

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Abstract: This essay argues that there are several positive aspects of Socratic ignorance which have received insufficient scholarly attention: that Socrates' claim not to have knowledge of the 'highest things' raises the possibility that there is a body of truth to be discovered along these lines; that this possibility invigorates Socrates with a sense of wonder; and that several specific moral requirements can be generated from wonder and the knowledge of one's ignorance.

Introduction²

Philosophy is perhaps the only discipline where the profession of one's ignorance can signal progress and enlightenment, rather than failure and distress. The natural and social sciences are hardly unfamiliar with ignorance, but here it is usually the case that ignorance is simply a void, the absence of knowledge, and thus no more than a temporary placeholder for future discovery and understanding. The nineteenth-century mathematician Robert Leslie Ellis well-expressed the scientific attitude toward ignorance with the declaration, 'Mere ignorance is no ground for any inference whatsoever. *Ex nihilo nihil*'.³ With philosophy, on the other hand, very often is ignorance treated, not as the antithesis to knowledge, but rather, like knowledge, as a fertile foundation for action, argument, and ethical direction. Descartes' discovery of certainty in the doubting ego, the foundational moment of modern subjectivism and the experimental method, is an example of this productive relationship to ignorance. When reflecting on the origins of his philosophical acumen, Descartes surmised, 'It must have been by confessing my ignorance more freely than is usually the case among those who have studied a little, and possibly also by presenting my reasons for doubting many things that others deemed certain'.⁴ The philosophical approach to ignorance is also evident in political philosophy, where the democratic deference to majorities and fair procedures had to overcome the certainty of the single individual as the ultimate source of legitimacy. Hobbes, who urged this transition from subjective to systemic rationality, invoked the ever-present possibility of an individual's ignorance as a

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³ R.L. Ellis, *Mathematical and Other Writings* (London, 1863), p. 57.

⁴ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. L. Lafleur (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1997), p. 23.

reason to defer to the arbitration of the state.⁵ And in recent times, the effort to bring down the Cartesian edifice of subjective rationality has appealed to a willed and purposely cultivated ignorance as a form of resistance against the power dynamic inherent in the will to truth, whether through Nietzsche's call to 'rejoice in our ignorance [*Unweisheit*] from the bottom of our hearts' or Foucault's insistence that 'truth is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint'.⁶

Socrates, whose life offers what is likely the earliest, richest, and most explicit account of the philosophical engagement with ignorance, looms behind these pivotal moments in the history philosophy, for each in its own way is a productive application of the old Socratic maxim of knowing that one does not know. Yet the positive character of Socrates' *own* profession of ignorance — the nature of its creative function beyond the negation of knowledge — is exceptionally difficult to locate, let alone comprehend. Indeed, what has been called the *paradox* of Socrates' profession of ignorance has excited intellectual and scholarly attention since antiquity.⁷ The types of investigations that are carried out under the rubric of this paradox are so diverse, however, that it might be more accurate to speak in the plural of no less than five *paradoxes* of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge. Of these, the most general and most ingrained in the popular consciousness is how the wisest (according at least to the Oracle at Delphi) can be the one who understands himself to be in no way wise. Further, there is the puzzle of why Socrates responds to the Oracle with the desire to refute it and of how he derives from its pronouncement his lifelong mission to philosophize.⁸ A third paradox stems from the problem of how to account for Socrates' belief in his own relative virtue, given his doctrine that virtue is knowledge; for if Socrates understands

⁵ The very fact of disagreement, Hobbes suggests, is all the proof one needs that the human faculty of reckoning is unable to arrive at incontrovertible truth. 'The parties must by their own accord, set up for right Reason, the Reason of some Arbitrator, or Judge, to whose sentence they will both stand, or their controversie must either come to blowes, or be undecided, for want of a Right Reason contributed by Nature; so it is also in all debates of what kind soever.' *Leviathan*, ed. R. Tuck (Cambridge, 1991), ch. V, pp. 32–3.

⁶ F. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. P. Preuss (Indianapolis, 1980), § 1, p. 13; M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, trans. C. Gordon et al. (New York, 1972), p. 131.

⁷ Socrates' repeated insistence upon his lack of knowledge is one of the most consistently reported features of his thought. There is a virtual consensus among ancient sources that Socrates professed his ignorance. Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations*, 183b6–8; Aischines Socraticus, *Alcaeus*, 10C (Dittmar); Aelius Aristides, *Oration* 45.21 (W. Dindorff, II, p. 25), Cicero, *Academica*, 1.4.16, 1.12.45; Plutarch, *Adversus Coloten*, 117D.

⁸ See, e.g., M. Stokes, 'Socrates' Mission', in B. Gower and Stokes, ed., *Socratic Questions. The Philosophy of Socrates and Its Significance* (London, 1992); T. Brickhouse and N. Smith, *Socrates on Trial* (Oxford, 1989), sec. 2.5.

himself to be ignorant, yet at the same time believes virtue to be a function of knowledge, there would seem to be no basis for his high estimation of his own virtue in the face of his professed ignorance.⁹ A fourth puzzle, common within contemporary scholarship, is how to reconcile instances in which Socrates professes his complete ignorance (claiming, for example, that he is ‘wise in no way great or small’, *Ap.* 21b4–5) with occasional yet forceful remarks he makes elsewhere asserting the veracity of a few substantive claims.¹⁰

The fifth paradox, and the one I wish to confront in this essay, is Socrates’ claim to *know* his ignorance as an object in its own right. That is, Socrates is not only aware that he is ignorant about certain moral essences, but also claims to know ignorance itself. The alleged expertise about ignorance finds its clearest articulation in the *Apology*, where Socrates recounts his questioning of the artists and craftsmen, men who did possess actual knowledge of ‘many fine things’ (*polla kai kala*), but precisely because of their limited technical skill, unduly presumed to possess knowledge of the ‘highest things’ (*ta megista*).¹¹ Socrates compares his own situation to the artists and craftsmen:

I asked myself, on behalf of the oracle, whether I should prefer to be as I am, neither wise about wisdom [*sophos ten sophian*] nor ignorant about ignorance [*amathes ten amathian*] or to be like them in both of these. The answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was profitable to me to be as I am.¹²

The phrasing, though strange, is essential to understanding Socrates’ conception of his ignorance as a positive entity with a value beyond the mere negation of knowledge. One can be wise about wisdom, in the sense of possessing knowledge and having an understanding of ‘many fine things’; but one can also be wise about ignorance. Socrates identifies himself with the latter, yet does little in the *Apology* to elaborate what this means. The *content* of this knowledge about ignorance is left unarticulated.

Recent scholarly work on Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge tends to overlook this question, preferring to differentiate what Socrates knows from what he does not know, rather than pursue Socrates’ claim that he is knowledgeable

⁹ D. Graham, ‘What Socrates Knew’, *Apeiron*, 30 (1997), pp. 25–36, esp. 33, 36; J. Leshner, ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 25 (1987), pp. 275–88; C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology* (Indianapolis, 1989), pp. 148–59, 179; R. Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton, 1984), pp. 270–4; T. Brickhouse and N. Smith, *Plato’s Socrates* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 123–36.

¹⁰ G. Vlastos, ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge’, *Philosophical Quarterly*, 35 (1985), pp. 1–31; Leshner, ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge’, pp. 275–88; Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato’s Socrates*, pp. 30–72; Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology*, pp. 53–62, 144–50, 176–80.

¹¹ Plato, *Apology*, 22d7.

¹² Plato, *Apology*, 22e. (Here, as in other instances where no translator is cited, the translation is my own.)

about ignorance.¹³ Here Vlastos' influential distinction between two levels of knowledge — absolute certainty (which is disavowed by Socrates' profession of ignorance) and a more limited standard of 'that which survives the *elenchus*' and is thus capable of being presented as a coherent account (which is in fact affirmed by Socratic ignorance) — is most noteworthy. It is true that this distinction does, in a sense, imply a positive representation of Socrates' profession of ignorance since the devaluation of knowledge as certainty elevates a proto-Popperian dialogic criterion for rejecting non-knowledge. What can survive elenctic investigation is not true in the absolute sense of term, but what *cannot* maintain itself in the face of public dialectic is definitely false. Moreover, the preconditions of participating in a conversation dedicated to finding truth in this dialectical fashion could themselves be said to dictate a certain type of conversational ethics — a point that was made a generation ago by Arendt in relation to Socrates, that continues to be explored by Socrates scholars today, and that finds profound theoretical elaboration in the work of theorists of *public reason* such as Rawls and Habermas.¹⁴ The profession of ignorance regarding absolute knowledge would thus be inseparable from an affirmation of the intersubjective dialectical search for truth and the individual ethics upon which this search depends.

But this positive reconstruction of Socrates' profession of ignorance suggested by Vlastos' distinction between two kinds of knowledge is by no means complete for it does not fully attend to the significance of Socrates' claim to be knowledgeable about ignorance as an object in its own right. To the question — what does Socrates know as a result of his knowledge of ignorance? — Vlastos' response, in effect, is that Socrates gains from his profession of ignorance an understanding that one cannot have certain knowledge about the highest things and must therefore pursue truth in such matters via a dialectical method of practical rationality. This answer, which I believe to be true, nonetheless marginalizes Socrates' claim, quoted above (*Ap.*, 22e) and implied throughout the quasi-historical dialogues of Plato and Xenophon, to possess a certain expertise in the art of ignorance. Vlastos understands the

¹³ Vlastos, 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge', pp. 1–31; Leshner, 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge', pp. 275–88; Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, pp. 30–72; P. Woodruff, 'Expert Knowledge in the *Apology* and *Laches*: What a General Should Know', in J. Cleary, ed., *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* (New York, 1987), vol. III, pp. 79–115; Woodruff, 'Plato's Early Theory of Knowledge', in S. Everson, ed., *Companions to Ancient Thought: Epistemology* (Cambridge, 1990), vol. I, pp. 60–84; Kraut, *Socrates and the State*, p. 273.

¹⁴ W.T. Schmid argues for precisely such a discourse-theoretical interpretation of Socratic ethics, claiming that the procedural preconditions of engaging in a dialectical search for truth — such as cooperation, fairness, and the willingness to be refuted — comprise the substantive ethics that emerge out of the recognition that one does not possess certain moral knowledge. *Plato's Charmides and the Socratic Ideal of Rationality* (Albany, NY, 1998), ch. 4, esp. pp. 73–4.

positive aspects of Socratic ignorance to inhere only in the fact that the disavowal of one criterion of knowledge (absolute certainty) has the effect of elevating another (the capacity of assertions to survive elenctic investigation). The positive character of Socratic ignorance is thus explained entirely in terms of knowledge. What is missing in such a reduction is the recognition of Socrates' deeper and more provocative suggestion that the experience of his ignorance vis-à-vis the highest things is itself conducive to moral enlightenment, regardless of any implications such ignorance might have for revising standards of truth claims.

What has not yet been sufficiently thought through, then, is the full meaning of Socrates' claim to have an understanding about ignorance — an understanding that *exceeds* the mere recalibration of the proper criteria for assessing assertoric truth claims in moral matters. The problem is not simply that Vlastos' line of investigation has interpreted the positive character of Socratic ignorance solely in terms of criteria of knowledge, but also that those studies that take up other aspects of Socrates' understanding about his ignorance tend to focus exclusively on the *negative* character of this strange form of wisdom. The negativity can be seen from three different perspectives. Epistemologically, Socrates' insight into his ignorance is said to produce an anti-hubristic recognition that human knowledge is necessarily deficient:¹⁵ that the pretensions to wisdom of the politicians and sophists are without justification and that the only form of ethical understanding available to humans is of a fundamentally imperfect nature.¹⁶ Psychologically, the coming to awareness of one's ignorance is said to be a sobering and disillusioning event in which pre-existing opinions dissolve in the face of confusion and perplexity.¹⁷ Ethically, the recognition that one does not possess an adequate

¹⁵ This view is basic and very widespread, but finds particular emphasis from the following: W. Guthrie, *Socrates* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 129; Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology*, pp. 21–8; R. Hathaway, 'Law and the Moral Paradox in Plato's Apology', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 8 (1970), pp. 127–42.

¹⁶ Vlastos ('Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge') interprets Socrates' recognition of his ignorance to mean that absolute certainty is unattainable in moral investigations and that one must be satisfied with the more limited certainty generated by claims that successfully pass through the *elenchus*. Reeve (*Socrates in the Apology*, pp. 37–52) similarly interprets Socrates' profession of ignorance as a challenge to certain moral knowledge.

¹⁷ D. Villa, for example, refers to the 'disillusioning political art of Socrates' and describes Socrates' undertaking as 'a consistently deflationary one, consisting in the systematic refutation of others' claims to moral wisdom'. Villa says that Socrates' 'philosophical activity consists essentially in the attempt to disillusion his interlocutors'. *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton, 2001), pp. 18, 19. This interpretation follows in the tradition of Hegel and Kierkegaard both of whom describe the Socratic position as one of 'infinite absolute negativity'. G. Hegel, *Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F.P.B. Osmaston (New York, 1975), vol. I, pp. 93–4, 217; S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Con-*

understanding of virtue is said to mean either that Socrates is not virtuous, or, at least, that he does not have a coherent answer about how to lead a virtuous life.¹⁸

There is something undeniably true about recognizing the negative character of Socrates' wisdom about ignorance, especially as it relates to the pretensions of the politicians, sophists, artists, and all others who spoke with an undeserved confidence and authority.¹⁹ Yet it is incorrect to reduce the profession of ignorance to a strictly negative dynamic whose only function is to deflate, oppose, and empty ungrounded beliefs and ill-considered actions. On epistemological, psychological, and ethical grounds, it can be said that there is a positive dimension to Socrates' knowledge of ignorance. First, Socratic ignorance reinforces and constitutes certain kinds of epistemological aspirations (the possibility of a higher knowledge), even as it quells and dissolves others. In claiming a privileged relationship to ignorance, therefore, Socrates affirms an equally privileged insight into the reality of the very knowledge he understands himself to lack. Second, the case of Socrates clearly demonstrates that the state of mind which accompanies the recognition that one does not possess knowledge of the highest things is not simply the paralysis of perplexity and confusion, but, additionally, the inspirational experiences of wonder (*thauma*) and love (*eros*). Thus, the realization of one's ignorance is not an altogether sobering or disillusioning event: one can legitimately speak of a kind of enchantment associated with coming to awareness that one is missing the highest wisdom. Third, there are substantive duties and obligations that emerge out of Socrates' knowledge of his ignorance. While it would be too much to extract a systematic dogma from his repeated invocation of ethical ignorance, a cognizable set of prohibitions and imperatives, grounded on his awareness of his ignorance, can be gleaned from the remarkable events of Socrates' life.

Other studies that have recognized the positive aspects of the Socratic enterprise — its capacity to promote a science of virtue, rivet the mind with a love for truth, and dictate principled action — have usually done so by in

tinual Reference to Socrates, ed. and trans. H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton, 1989), p. 269.

¹⁸ The radically undogmatic nature of Socrates' ethical 'teaching' is particularly emphasized by: H. Arendt, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', *Social Research*, 51 (1984), pp. 7–37, 23; G. Kateb, 'Socratic Integrity', *Nomos*, 40 (1998), pp. 77–114; Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, pp. 1–58.

¹⁹ Compared to each of the politicians and sophists whom he examines, Socrates concludes himself to be wiser in the negative sense of having *not* attributed to himself something which he in fact lacks: 'It is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but [each of the politicians and sophists] thinks he knows something when he does not; whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.' Plato, *Apology*, 21d, trans. G. Grube (Indianapolis, 1975), p. 25.

some way rejecting or discounting the sincerity of Socrates' profession of his ignorance.²⁰ In fact, the oldest and most common interpretation of Socratic ignorance is that it is feigned,²¹ although recent scholarship has for good reason moved away from this line of thought.²² Taking Socrates' profession of

²⁰ L. Versényi, for example, argues that the profession of ignorance which usually ends the early Platonic dialogue 'does not mean that dialogues contain nothing positive since, in the first place, there is hardly a dialogue that does not arrive at solutions to the problems discussed. These conclusions are negated at the end merely to prevent the student from uncritically accepting them instead of going through reflection that would make them his own'. *Socratic Humanism* (New Haven, 1963), p. 118. Similar arguments are made by: F. Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides* (Indianapolis, 1950), p. 245; H. Teloh, *The Development of Plato's Metaphysics* (University Park, Penn., 1981), pp. 46–64; and N. Gulley, *The Philosophy of Socrates* (London, 1968), p. 39. Arendt, however, does provide a positive interpretation of Socrates' wisdom about ignorance, arguing that Socrates' awareness that he is missing important knowledge stimulates *thought* which is different from knowledge in that it is active rather than passive, seeks meaning rather than truth, and draws the subject out of the world rather than providing him with tools with which to succeed in it. *The Life of the Mind* (New York, 1978), esp. pp. 166–79. A similar argument is made by M. McAvoy, *The Profession of Ignorance: With Constant Reference to Socrates* (Lanham, MD, 1999). The interpretation in this essay follows in this Arendtian vein, elaborating some of the other positive features of knowing one's ignorance.

²¹ See, e.g., J. Dane, *The Critical Mythology of Irony* (Athens, GA, 1991), parts 1 and 2; Vlastos, 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge', p. 1; and A. Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley, 1998), p. 72. Dictionaries implicitly support this view when they define irony by invoking the example of Socrates' so-called pretended ignorance: thus, 'Irony' is defined in the *OED* as 'dissimulation, pretence; especially in reference to the ignorance feigned by Socrates as a means of confuting an adversary'. Scholars repeat this error when they translate *eironeia* as 'pretended ignorance', as is done, for example, in translations of Plato's *Symposium* by S. Groden (1970) and also E. Hamilton (1951). It is a lexicographical mistake, however, to confuse irony itself with an ironical profession of ignorance. It is possible that Socrates was an ironical thinker, who often did not say what he meant, but was nonetheless not being ironical when it came to his profession of his ignorance. And in fact, this is what I understand to be the case. Of course, from the very beginning, there have always been interpreters who have seen the entire content of Socrates' life, and thus his profession of ignorance, to be mere jesting and deception. Thrasymachus levels this charge at *Republic*, I. 337a4–7; Alcibiades is made to say as much in Plato's *Symposium*, 216e4; as does Cicero (*De Oratore*, 2.67); and, when Quintillian (*Institutio Oratorica*, 9.2.46) claims that irony can refer not simply to a speech, but also to an entire life (*vita universa*), Socrates is his only example.

²² G. Grote, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (London, 1895), vol. I, pp. 246–71; T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 39–40; W. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1975), vol. III, pp. 442–9; R. Allen, *Plato's Euthyphro and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (London, 1970), pp. 6, 89; P. Woodruff, *Plato's Hippias Major* (Indianapolis, 1982), pp. 142–3; S. Austin, 'The Paradox of Socratic Ignorance (How to Know That You Don't Know)',

ignorance as a serious and unironical feature of his philosophy, I argue that it possesses substantive content for epistemology, psychology, and ethics.

In what follows I elaborate each of these three aspects of the positive character of Socratic ignorance. My overall claim is not that the prevailing view of Socrates as the pioneer of a dissolvent, disillusioning, and sobering brand of rationality is incorrect, so much as that this perspective is incomplete. A rationalized morality as pioneered by Socrates may be the engine of an anti-metaphysical disenchantment — one which exposes the received tradition and inherited values as mere myth and contingent social construct — but the idea of morality is itself not free of metaphysical suppositions.²³ Socrates' profession of ignorance traverses both of these elements: at once denying as mythological and illusory non-rational sources of authority, yet at the same time, in its very elevation of reason and the possibility of an objective standard of right, contributing to the new chimera of a universal standard of human excellence and its attendant forms of enchantment. Moreover, as will become clear over the course of the argument, this enchantment — the wonder towards the prospect of a universal objective standard of moral conduct — is itself fraught with ethical possibilities and can itself be shown to provide a basic framework for ethical action in the absence of a direct knowledge of virtue.

Socratic Ignorance as Constitutive of Moral Knowledge

In the early dialogues, we witness the same repeated structure. Socrates searches unsuccessfully for the correct definition of universal virtue, or one of the several virtues, and out of this failure concludes that he is ignorant.²⁴ Yet it should be realized that the profession of ignorance which emanates from Socrates' investigations is hardly an altogether negative result. For Socrates, ignorance and knowledge, while opposites, are nonetheless necessarily inter-

Philosophical Topics, 15 (1987), pp. 23–35, 23–4; Vlastos, 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge'; Leshner, 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge'; Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, pp. 30–72.

²³ This places me in disagreement with scholars such as Kateb who says that 'there is nothing religious in Socrates' understanding of injustice' ('Socratic Integrity', p. 84), and Villa, who speaks of Socrates' completely 'secular form of conscience' (*Socratic Citizenship*, p. 41). In my view, the concepts of injustice and conscience can never free themselves entirely of the religious belief in a *higher* order — a necessity that Socrates implicitly acknowledges by his own appeal to an as-yet-unknown standard of universal human excellence.

²⁴ Dialogues that conclude in the profession of ignorance include: *Lysis*, 223b4–8; *Meno*, 71a1–7, 80d1–4; *Republic*, I. 354a–c; *Protagoras*, 360e6–361a3; *Euthyphro*, 15e–16a; *Theaetetus*, 210c.

connected and mutually reinforcing.²⁵ Specifically, Socrates suggests that one can be ignorant only of knowledge — an epistemological claim which, if true, would mean that Socrates' profession of his ignorance must be appreciated for the sense in which it defends the reality of certain forms of knowledge and brings this reality to bear upon the lives of his fellow Athenians.

A first step in recognizing the positive, constitutive element of Socratic ignorance is to recall that while Socrates *confesses* ignorance about many things — craftsmanship and natural science, for example — he *professes* his ignorance about only one object: 'the highest things' (*ta megista*), that is, the nature of a universal standard of human virtue. The non-moral topics of which he is ignorant receive only incidental attention. In fact, we have it from Xenophon that Socrates urged his companions to ignore their ignorance about the natural world and to avoid all speculation about the nature of the universe. He claimed that to trouble one's mind with natural phenomena was 'sheer folly' and that anyone who 'meddles with these matters runs the risk of losing his sanity as completely as Anaxagoras'.²⁶ Similarly, in the *Apology*, Socrates says it is better that he not bother overcoming his ignorance of craftsmanship and other technical skills, because doing so would make him lose sight of his ignorance vis-à-vis the 'highest things' — and it is better to recognize one is ignorant of the highest things than to lose this awareness in knowledge of the lower ones.²⁷ Socrates' ignorance is selective: it privileges one kind of unattained knowledge at the expense of others. To come under the sway of Socratic ignorance, therefore, is not simply to find oneself utterly bereft of cognitive content. On the contrary, each kind of ignorance carries with it a reference to a particular kind of knowledge. In professing his ignorance of the highest things, Socrates defends the pursuit of a universal standard of human excellence against the competing concerns of natural science and artisanship.

If the 'highest things' privileged by Socrates were an uncontested entity, whose reality and nature were both clearly established, then Socratic ignorance would be constitutive of a knowledge of the highest things only in the sense that it favoured study of ethics over investigations into the material world. But this does not do proper justice to the moral productivity of Socrates' insistence that he was ignorant about morality. Socrates does not simply rely upon a pre-existing conception of 'the highest things', but himself pioneers a new conception of the highest things as the universal standard of human excellence. A generation after Socrates, with the benefit of hindsight, Aristotle could clearly perceive Socrates' significance as the progenitor of a

²⁵ The mutual dependence of ignorance and knowledge, and especially of omniscience and nescience, is pursued by A. Martin, *The Knowledge of Ignorance: From Genesis to Jules Verne* (Cambridge, 1985).

²⁶ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I, i. 11; IV, vii. 6.

²⁷ Plato, *Apology*, 22e.

new concept of morality: ‘Socrates . . . was occupying himself with morality [*ethike*], neglecting the world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in ethical matters; he was the first to concentrate attention on definitions.’²⁸ Much is contained in this deceptively simple rendering of Socrates’ founding contribution to moral philosophy.

In searching for universal moral definitions, Socrates departed from previous tradition and shaped moral philosophy in at least three important respects. First, by seeking the universal in moral matters, Socrates could make morality the study of right and wrong generally. This is the meaning that morality tends to have today where it refers to a general virtuous quality. But for the pre-Socratic ancient world, there was no concept of virtue in this all-encompassing sense. Rather there were virtues, different ones for different people and different ones for the same people: such as courage, wisdom, temperance, and justice. Against this disparate and multiplicitous conception of virtue, Socrates pioneered the notion of virtue itself: i.e., a universal standard of right and wrong that could be applied to all people in all situations. As he explains in the *Meno*, he is not interested in the virtue of man, woman, slave, but rather what all these virtues have in common;²⁹ likewise, he is not interested in discussion of the individual virtues, such as courage or temperance, so much as he is in the general goodness all these virtues, as a consequence of being called virtue, share.³⁰ Second, if there were such a thing as a universal standard of excellence, it was a matter or course that this generalized conception of morality would predominate over all other values.³¹ Vlastos has well described this Socratic principle — in which all competing considerations, including wealth, health, and even life itself are subordinated to the supreme obligation of being good in the universal sense — as the ‘Sovereignty of the Good’.³² Third, the search for universal definitions of virtue meant that virtue could no longer be conceived simply as an instrumental skill or talent. From the pre-Socratic perspective, morality never ceased to be a goodness *at* this or that; virtue was always the excellence in performing a certain task or goal. To be courageous was to fight well, wisdom was to speak well and persuade

²⁸ *Metaphysics*, 987b1–4. Also see, 1078b7–32 and 1086b1–12. Xenophon (*Memorabilia*, I, i. 16) confirms this, maintaining that Socrates’ distinctive contribution was to ask ‘what is’ this or that virtue.

²⁹ *Meno*, 72a–b, 73c.

³⁰ For the Socratic doctrine of the unity of virtues, see, e.g., Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, III, viii. 5; Plato, *Laches*, 194c8–d3; *Protagoras*, 358d5–7, 360c6–d5, *Meno*, 74a–b. Also see, T. Penner, ‘The Unity of Virtue’, *Philosophical Review*, 82 (1973), pp. 35–68; and Penner, ‘Socrates and the Early Dialogues’, *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. R. Kraut (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 127, 141–2.

³¹ *Critias*, 48c6–d5; *Apology*, 28b5–9.

³² Vlastos, ‘Happiness and Virtue in Socrates’ Moral Theory’, *Topoi*, 4 (1985), pp. 3–22.

others, justice was to know how rule a city and properly distribute its goods.³³ But for Socrates virtue was reconceived as a quality of soul, referring to a general human excellence rather than to a specific skill at a particular task.³⁴ The search for the abstract essence of virtue — embodied in Socrates' repeated question 'what is virtue itself?' — was simultaneously the affirmation that the human had an abstract essence, or soul, which had to be cared for and protected from an over-emphasis on the accumulation of mere skills.

It was with good reason, therefore, that Socrates has been credited as the progenitor of moral philosophy.³⁵ Socrates made ethics into a general quality of goodness, that was to predominate over all other human values, and that had a meaning beyond mere functional excellence so as to refer to a general excellence of soul. This reconfigured conception of ethics is precisely what Socrates has in mind by the 'highest things'. But Socrates never claimed to know this virtue — a disavowal substantiated first and foremost by the fact Socrates wrote nothing, leaving no direct record of this thought.³⁶ In the *Apology*, he distinguishes himself from Sophists, such as Evenus, who are reputed to have the wisdom by which to make others fine and good.³⁷ In the *Laches*, a dialogue on education, the conversation ends with Socrates turning down an invitation to become the teacher of two youths and with him clarifying the misconception that he actually possesses the ethical knowledge he has just shown the other discussants to lack: 'Well, it would be a terrible thing, Lysimachus, to be unwilling to join in assisting any man to become as good as

³³ It has been well-argued, however, that Hippias and Protagoras were transitional figures, bridging the gap between the instrumental morality of the ancient world and the transcendent Socratic variant. See, e.g., Versényi, *Socratic Humanism*, pp. 8–39. Moreover, some Presocratic thinkers — such as Xenophanes and Heraclitus — did have a conception of general moral excellence. See, e.g., Xenophanes' description of the kind of conduct required for 'excellence' (*arete*) in B1, and Heraclitus' remarks about the nature of the 'best' in B24, 29, 49, and 118. Yet, if there are in fact precursors to Socrates' generalized sense of 'virtue' and 'moral excellence', Socrates nonetheless can be credited as the first to clearly distinguish the demands of justice from what is customarily said or done and from what possesses a merely instrumental value.

³⁴ As Xenophon reports: 'Speaking ability, efficiency in day-to-day affairs, and ingenuity were not the kinds of characteristics he was intent on developing in his friends.' *Memorabilia*, IV, iii, 1.

³⁵ Aristotle (*Magna Moralia*, 1182a) claimed that but for Pythagoras, Socrates was the first to 'speak about virtue [*arete*]' and to make a science out of virtue. Hegel, in his history of philosophy, similarly places Socrates at the very beginning of moral philosophy, writing that 'all succeeding babblers about morality and popular philosophy constituted him their patron and object of adoration, and made him a cloak which should cover all false philosophy'. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. Haldane (London, 1962), vol. I, p. 388.

³⁶ During his last days in prison, however, Socrates is said to have written a hymn to Apollo and put some of Aesop's fables to verse. *Phaedo*, 60c–d.

³⁷ Plato, *Apology*, 20a–b.

possible. If in the conversations we have just had I had seemed to be knowing and the other two had not, then it would be right to issue a special invitation to me to perform this task; but as the matter stands, we were all in the same difficulty. Why then should anybody choose one of us in preference to another? What I think is that he ought to choose none of us.³⁸ Rather than teach, Socrates presents himself as but another student in search of an education. And in the *Meno*, one of those transitional dialogues likely to contain elements of both an historical and literary Socrates, we have Socrates' starkest denial of ethical knowledge. Disabusing Meno's presumption that Socrates knows any more than he, Socrates says: 'You must think I am singularly fortunate, to know whether virtue can be taught or how it is acquired. The fact is that far from knowing whether it can be taught, I have no idea what virtue is.'³⁹

From the perspective of the scientific pursuit of virtue, then, Socrates is both founding father and complete failure. He is the progenitor of moral philosophy who nonetheless claims to be utterly dumbfounded about the nature of virtue. Both of these elements — the reality of the new, universalized notion of moral goodness and Socrates' failure to know it — are contained in Socrates' disavowal of moral knowledge. In professing his ignorance about the highest things, therefore, Socrates is actually asserting two things:

- 1) There is a knowledge of the highest things: an objective standard of universal right.
- 2) Neither I nor anyone I have met possesses this knowledge.

There is an obvious tension, if not outright contradiction, between these two claims. How can Socrates be sure a higher knowledge exists, if no one has ever attained this knowledge? Socrates' profession of ignorance raises the paradox of an 'unknown knowledge': the non-objective commitment to the possibility of objectivity. It is one thing to express the unknown in terms of known quantities, as is done in an algebraic equation. But Socrates lacks a clear criterion for recognizing when the ethical knowledge which he seeks is discovered. This problem was not lost upon his interlocutors. Meno, for example, asks: 'But how will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up something you don't know as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know?'⁴⁰

³⁸ *Laches*, 200e, trans. R. Sprague, *Laches and Charmides* (Indianapolis, 1992), pp. 48–9.

³⁹ *Meno*, 71a, trans. W. Guthrie, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton, 1961), p. 354. Also see, *Meno*, 71b1–3.

⁴⁰ *Meno*, 80d, p. 363.

I do not think that Socrates adequately answers this objection.⁴¹ Socrates is searching for moral knowledge, rather than mere beliefs about morality. Yet his certainty that such knowledge exists — that there is such a thing as a universal standard of human goodness — is itself a form of belief: different, to be sure, from the unjustified beliefs of the sophists who thought they possessed a clear knowledge of human values, yet a belief nonetheless. Socrates has *faith* that an objective moral knowledge exists — and this faith in morality is disclosed by his very ignorance of its nature.

And, so, while on the most immediate level Socratic ignorance stands for the exposure of belief as belief and as the injection of cool-headed rationality into a pre-existing context of non-reflective conjecture and prejudice, the fact remains that Socratic ignorance is also constitutive of belief: the faith that a universal and objective standard of morality exists and might properly be brought to bear upon humankind. The profession of ignorance is therefore not entirely in the service of disenchantment and disillusion. Complete disenchantment and disillusion would result in the untempered materialism of Thrasymachus or Callicles who altogether reject the concept of a universal moral standard. (Consider the observation of Nietzsche, a modern admirer of Thrasymachus and Callicles, that ‘objectivity and justice have nothing to do with each other’.⁴²) Insofar as it insists upon the existence of ‘the highest things’, an existence that is beyond verification, Socratic ignorance may properly be called an instrument of moral enchantment.

Sting-Ray and Gadfly

In order to further elaborate the positive character of Socratic ignorance — and, specifically, how professing ignorance had the effect of *disclosing* the very objective moral knowledge Socrates lacked — it is worth repeating the

⁴¹ Certainly the imaginative and profound solution that is offered in the *Meno* — that all learning is recollection — belongs to Plato, not Socrates, for it depends upon notions of the soul’s immortality that are widely understood to indicate the influence of Pythagoras, and not Socrates, upon Plato. See, e.g., Penner, ‘Socrates and the Early Dialogues’, p. 125. The most common modern solution to this so-called ‘Meno’s paradox’ is to reject it for being facile and superficial, and for resting on mere word-play rather than actual epistemological difficulties. See, e.g., P. Shorey, *What Plato Said* (Chicago, 1933), p. 157; A. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (New York, 1952), p. 137; J. Klein, *A Commentary on Plato’s Meno* (Chicago, 1965), p. 92. While this dismissal may have merit insofar as the paradox attempts to call into question the possibility of *any* sort of knowledge, the force of the paradox vis-à-vis the specific object of *moral knowledge* remains enduring and meaningful. Even Nehamas, whose highly judicious reading of the paradox provides an interesting solution to it, admits that Socrates ‘had no clear answer to [the] question’ of how to prove the existence of the moral objects for which he searched. *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton, 1999), p. 16.

⁴² *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Preuss ed., § 6, p. 35.

two claims contained within Socrates' disavowal of knowledge of the highest things: 1) 'there is a higher knowledge of the most important things, namely virtue and general human excellence', and 2) 'Neither I nor anyone I have met possesses this knowledge'. Holding these two claims simultaneously placed Socrates into conscientious conflict with two different constituencies. The first and most familiar challenge was presented by all those who presumed to have a knowledge of the highest things: the sophists and politicians, who believed themselves to be wise, and also the artists and craftsmen whose real technical skill led to an undue confidence in their knowledge about the most important, ethical matters. It is against these people that the paralyzing function of the Socratic *elenchus* shows its true worth. Through conversing with Socrates about questions of virtue, the conversant comes to recognize and accept that there is more complexity to the question than he had realized and that, consequently, he is not as wise about such matters as he had believed himself to be. It is this role that those who have noted the dissolvent and disillusioning function of Socratic philosophy tend to emphasize.⁴³

But the other, less prominent obstacle is the belief that there is no such knowledge of the kind that Socrates claims he is looking for. This attitude of indifference towards and disbelief in the highest things was not the primary target of Socrates' conversations as they are portrayed in most of the Platonic dialogues, only because these dialogues were a relatively elite affair, occurring between cultured gentlemen already interested in theories of human excellence. To deny the very existence of the highest things for which Socrates searched, and, thus, to invalidate the entire Socratic project on the grounds of its futility, was a complaint much more likely to be made by the uneducated who figure little in the dialogues or within the rare and remarkable anti-philosophical diatribes of Calicles, Thrasymachus, and Hippias. Nonetheless, near the end of the *Apology*, which of course was Socrates' defence speech before an angry, unphilosophical mass, Socrates identifies his quest for ethical knowledge as a quest to awaken the Athenian people from their slumber of thoughtlessness. Even if he could be acquitted of the charges against him on the condition of ceasing to philosophize, Socrates says he would refuse, for 'I shall not cease to practise philosophy, to exhort and in my usual way to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honours as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to

⁴³ See, e.g., M. Stokes, *Plato's Socratic Conversations: Drama and Dialectic in Three Dialogues* (Baltimore, 1986), pp. 1–35, 440–3; H. Benson, 'A Note on Eristic and the Socratic *Elenchos*', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 27 (1989), pp. 591–9; Vlastos, 'The Socratic Elenchus', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1 (1983), pp. 27–58.

wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul'.⁴⁴ If Socrates is likened to a sting-ray for the paralysis he brings upon those who had thought they knew about the highest things, he is described in quite opposite terms as a gadfly, who rouses a sleepy horse to consciousness, for this second role of bringing the very question of ethics into the lives of those who had previously given no thought whatsoever to the nature of human excellence.⁴⁵

It is against this second group, the morally indifferent and apathetic, that Socrates' knowledge of his ignorance can most easily be appreciated as a positive force. Here to know one's ignorance is to affirm the reality of the thing about which one is ignorant. Socrates' invitation to accept one's ignorance about wisdom and virtue is an invitation to realize that such concepts have meaning and are worthy of pursuit. Socrates expands the horizon of previously conceived ethics through claiming ignorance of the new morality he pioneers. He affirms the reality of a universal moral standard through the very gesture of his failure to understand it.

Socrates is both sting-ray and gadfly, therefore, because his faith in an unknown moral knowledge drew him into two very different forms of struggle.⁴⁶ Against those who claimed to know the highest things, Socrates stuns and paralyzes, draining the hubristic of their pretensions. Against the soporific and unreflective mass, Socrates is instigator and inciter: bringing a newly fashioned, universal conception of morality to bear upon the Athenian populace. Both of these postures are contained in the postulate of an unknown knowledge of the highest things.

The Passions of Ignorance: Perplexity, Wonder, Love

Sigmund Freud, no doubt influenced by the case of Socrates, recognized just this dynamic of believing in the existence of unknown knowledge as the quintessential form of philosophical thinking, but, at the same time, also saw it as partaking in the same general structure as a paranoid delusion.⁴⁷ Freud's

⁴⁴ *Apology*, 29d–e, trans. Grube, p. 32.

⁴⁵ Xenophon similarly distinguishes between two effects of Socratic ignorance: a negative, paralyzing effect upon the pretensions of the would-be wise, and an inspiring, motivating effect upon private companions to pursue goodness and virtue. *Memorabilia* I, ii. 2–3, I, ii. 18, I.iv.1.

⁴⁶ Here I depart from the interpretation of Arendt ('Thinking and Moral Considerations', p. 23) and more recently Villa (*Socratic Citizenship*, p. 20) that the sting-ray and gadfly refer to the *single and same* act of thinking — which to the outside observer appears like paralysis, but to the thinker himself is experienced as the height of stimulation and wakefulness. I have no doubt that this interpretation is a good one, but I think the opposing images of sting-ray and gadfly refer also to the two different social struggles initiated by Socrates' profession of ignorance.

⁴⁷ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey (London, 1957–74), xii, p. 14; xiii, p. 73; xiv, p. 96.

observation at once condemns Socrates' belief in the reality of unobserved 'knowledge of the highest things' as the symptom of an illness, yet, by linking such delusion to philosophy itself, also offers a way of making amends with the unification of Socrates' two seemingly conflicting claims. If the purely scientific perspective can satisfy itself entirely with the small and particular observations of single experiments, dismissing as unscientific all grand theories which unite the findings of numerous experiments into a coherent whole, philosophy stems from precisely this urge to find meaning through articulating large and comprehensive views. The problem with such grand theories, of course, is that the arrival of new knowledge has a habit of making them appear incorrect, obsolete, or simply foolish:

Philosophy is not opposed to science, it behaves like a science and works in part by the same methods; it departs from it, however, by clinging to the illusion of being able to present a picture of the universe which is without gaps and is coherent, though one which is bound to collapse with every fresh advance in our knowledge. It goes astray in its method by over-estimating the epistemological value of our logical operations and by accepting other sources of knowledge such as intuition.⁴⁸

But what Freud suggests is that anyone who, in the face of these obstacles, continues to believe that the intelligibility of the world consists in more than a mere aggregation of minute observations, and therefore searches for a yet unrealized comprehensive explanation by which to make sense of an otherwise meaningless flow of isolated events, would be following in the Socratic tradition of committing oneself to unknown knowledge of the highest things.

We do not have to accept Freud's latent suggestion that philosophy is a form of madness to recognize that a knowledge of ignorance can be powerfully productive of energized subjective states. To be aware that one does not possess a higher form of wisdom is not, as some have claimed, merely an emptying and deflationary device that quells passion and de-motivates action.⁴⁹ The intuition of a missing wisdom is also a psychic stimulant which generates passion and enthusiasm.

The subjective state most commonly associated with Socrates' knowledge of his ignorance — the one which receives most attention within contemporary scholarship and has most basis within the ancient texts — is *aporia*: that is, puzzlement, confusion, perplexity, the experience of being at a loss. As it is employed in the Platonic dialogues, *aporia* refers to the inability to understand something which can be understood or at least something widely believed to be capable of comprehension. It is the subjective state that results when someone who thinks he knows something is suddenly made to realize

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xxii, p. 160ff.

⁴⁹ Villa for example links Socratic ignorance to the introduction of 'intellectual sobriety' as a fundamental moral obligation. *Socratic Citizenship*, p. 2.

that he in fact does not. Therefore, *aporia* is most properly linked to the negative aspect of Socrates' profession of ignorance: its capacity to drain interlocutors of their epistemic pretensions. Ion suffers *aporia* as to why he can only speak well about Homer and not other poets, at first thinking it was due to special art or knowledge.⁵⁰ Something similar happens to Euthyphro's effort to defend his alleged knowledge of piety, as the negative force of the Socratic *elenchus* leads Euthyphro to exclaim: 'Now, Socrates, I simply don't know how to tell you what I think. Somehow everything that we put forward keeps moving us in a circle, and nothing will stay where we put it.'⁵¹ This exasperation at no longer knowing what one thought one knew is repeated by Laches who is driven to anger by his inability to articulate what he had thought was his expertise regarding courage: 'I am getting really annoyed at being unable to express what I think in this fashion of talking. I still think I know what courage is, but I can't understand how it has escaped me just now so that I can't pin it down in words and say what it is.'⁵² There are of course many more examples of Socrates' reduction of others to a state of *aporia*;⁵³ and, in the *Apology*, Socrates goes so far as to say that it is this engendering of a state of confusion and perplexity in his interlocutors that is the real source of the charges against him.⁵⁴

Socrates' defence against the anger and frustration of those whom he confounded was always that he was subject to the very same state of *aporia*. As he explains in the *Meno*, 'It isn't that, knowing the answers myself, I perplex other people. The truth is rather that I infect them also with the perplexity I feel myself.'⁵⁵ While it is clearly the case that Socrates did not possess the knowledge he demonstrated others to lack, there is something unsatisfying about equating Socratic perplexity with that of his most hostile interlocutors. The main difference lies in the fact that Socrates never seems to have been distressed or wounded by the recognition that he did not know. His prevailing mood, by all accounts a profoundly cheerful and equanimous one, appears to have suffered not at all from the pains of ignorance.⁵⁶ One likely reason for this difference is that whereas most of the interlocutors had to witness their

⁵⁰ *Ion*, 532b–c; 533c–d.

⁵¹ *Euthyphro*, 11b–c.

⁵² *Laches*, 194a–c.

⁵³ See, e.g., *Lesser Hippias*, 369a–c; *Lysis*, 213c–d; *Meno*, 72a.

⁵⁴ *Apology*, 23c–e. Also see, *Hippias Major*, 304c, trans. B. Jowett, *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Hamilton and Cairns, p. 1559, where Socrates says: 'I wander about in unending perplexity, and when I lay my perplexity before you wise men, you turn on me and batter me with abuse.'

⁵⁵ *Meno*, 80a–d, trans. Guthrie, p. 363. Also see, *Hippias Major*, 304c.

⁵⁶ Accounts of Socrates' good-cheer can be found in Xenophon (*Memorabilia*, I, ii. 1), Alcibiades' witty encomium of Socrates (*Symposium*, 216e, 219e–220B), and Aristotle (*Posterior Analytics*, 97b16–24).

privileged dogmas evaporate in the face of the Socratic *elenchus*, Socrates himself, bereft of any explicit teaching, lost little in the recognition that he did not in fact have knowledge of the highest things. Having never claimed to understand virtue in the first place, and having never met anyone who did, ignorance for Socrates could be experienced optimistically as a point of departure, as a clarion call for future thought and exploration, rather than as an unseemly terminus for false wisdom.

In fact, the negative concept of *aporia* — the confusion and perplexity felt in regard to something one could, should, or used to know — is insufficient to adequately describe both the intensity and the positive character of the subjective state associated with Socrates' disavowal of knowledge. In addition to *aporia*, Socrates' knowledge of his ignorance is also constitutive of *thauma*, or wonder. Socrates makes the connection between ignorance and wonder in the *Theaetetus*, a dialogue which extols the educational and social benefits of maintaining and tolerating a sense of one's ignorance, with the famous remark that wonder is the origin of philosophy.⁵⁷ We can distinguish *thauma* from *aporia* in the following respect: whereas *aporia* is a general kind of perplexity or puzzlement that refers to any kind of confusion, regardless of its object, *thauma* is the sense of amazement that is felt in the intuition that there is a greater purpose and order than can be grasped or understood. This greater purpose may refer to a yet-undisclosed objective order operating within the universe or, what appears more likely in Socrates' case, to a rational potential embedded in human speech and speech inquiry. But in either case, what arouses wonder is neither the completely intelligible (as in a mathematical problem that has been correctly understood) nor what partakes not at all in intelligibility (as in the Deist's God), but what exists between the two: what is not understood but nonetheless gives the powerfully strong impression that it is capable of being so. The term Kant used to express his wonder towards the beauty of nature — 'purposeless purposiveness', i.e. the experience of the presence of a purpose without any further understanding of its content — is in fact a decent proxy for the structure of all wonder.⁵⁸ And it has been well argued that the difference between the two means that *aporia* always contains the hope of being overcome through knowledge, whereas wonder is the sheer amazement at an order that may never be properly understood.⁵⁹

Socrates' perplexity can be characterized additionally as wonder both because of the grandeur of its object — the universal moral standard — and because of the sense in which this object remains inaccessible despite Socrates' best efforts. The topics which aroused Socrates' investigations were always 'the highest things', and although he was certain that no one had as yet

⁵⁷ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d.

⁵⁸ *Critique of Judgment*, § 10.

⁵⁹ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, pp. 114, 141–51.

unlocked their nature, he never despaired that they might someday somehow be known.⁶⁰ The recognition that no one possessed a knowledge of universal virtue could have led Socrates to conclude that no such knowledge and no such virtue existed. Yet, as we have seen, in professing his ignorance of virtue, Socrates attests to the reality of the universal ethical knowledge he lacks. This faith, the wondrous premise of an objective and all embracing standard of human excellence, is both the object of his search, yet at the same time the precondition of it. And so while in most cases it would be proper to separate *aporia* from *thauma*, in the case of Socrates, and perhaps that of any genuine philosopher, the two come together. His quest for unprecedented ethical knowledge combines the confusion of perplexity with the inspiration and amazement borne from the intuition of a higher order by which human conduct might objectively be judged.

In order to further understand the nature of this wonder born from the profession of ignorance, it is worth noting that the one great exception to Socrates' disavowal of knowledge was his repeated claim to be knowledgeable about love (*eros*).⁶¹ Given the Platonic/Socratic conception of *eros*, this claim is less audacious than it might at first seem. According to the theory of *eros* outlined in Plato's *Symposium*, love arises neither from complete possession of an object nor from complete obliviousness towards it, but rather from the unsettling and stimulating awareness that one does not hold something that one values. Described as the child of resource (*poros*) and poverty (*penia*), *eros* is the passionate energy that is produced when one recognizes that one lacks something good. The *Symposium* includes a description of a personified incarnation of love. Among his numerous traits, this personified love is said to be 'a philosopher' and someone who is 'resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence'. Moreover, in loving wisdom, it is said of this personified love that 'he is between wisdom and ignorance': since a fully wise person would be wise rather than love wisdom, and a completely ignorant person would have no

⁶⁰ That Socrates did not despair that objective moral knowledge was unattainable does not mean that he unambiguously asserted such knowledge could in fact be attained. What we have, rather, is a profound ambivalence between, on the one hand, Socrates' claim that human wisdom is necessarily deficient and inherently unable to access the highest things (see, e.g., Plato's *Apology*, 23a–b) and, on the other hand, Socrates' lifelong pursuit of ethical knowledge (especially in dialogues such as the *Meno*, where the question 'what is universal virtue?' is explicitly asked and investigated) which would appear to imply a faith in the attainability of such knowledge. The ambivalence can be resolved to some extent if it is said that Socrates' profession of ignorance involves merely the *possibility*, and not the certainty or confident faith, that such knowledge could someday be attained.

⁶¹ See, e.g., *Symposium*, 177d–e: 'I cannot see how I might refuse to speak on the subject of love, seeing that I claim to have no knowledge at all other than that of matters concerning love [*ta erotika*].' Also see, *Symposium*, 212b5–6; *Charmides*, 155d–e; *Lysis*, 204b5–c2; *Phaedrus*, 257; *Theages*, 128b1–4; Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, II, vi. 28.

relationship to wisdom at all. And so the connection between love and philosophy is twofold. Both share the same general structure of combining an absence and a presence, or an awareness that something important is missing. And, second, it is said of love specifically that he is himself a philosopher: 'It follows that Love *must* be a lover of wisdom and, as such, is in between being wise and ignorant.'⁶²

When Socrates claims to have knowledge of love, therefore, he is not refuting his profession of ignorance so much as reiterating it. As someone wise in matters of love, Socrates does not possess knowledge, but rather only the sense that knowledge is missing. And it is this feeling of lack which instils Socrates (and other lovers) with passion and inspires him to find what he does not have. The important point for our purposes is that a positive subjective state — the philosophical passion for true wisdom — is released and given its distinctive, dialectical form by Socrates' profession of ignorance. It is not the case, therefore, that in disavowing knowledge, Socrates is taking on the *ataraxia* or *epoche* of the ancient sceptics. Socrates' fixation on his ignorance did not stand for the eradication of passion in the name of reason, but rather the substitution of some passions for others. In quelling the passion for seeming to know, Socrates propagated the new enthusiasm of wonder at an unknown ethical order and the resulting ardour to bring this new order to light.

The Acts of Ignorance (or the Ethics of Wonder)

Socrates' profession of ignorance was more than the mere absence or negation of knowledge, but was positive in the sense that it constituted a new conception of universal morality and produced a sense of wonder and philosophical passion. And, so, at the very least, the profession of the philosopher — its necessity and attractiveness — arises from the profession of ignorance. What remains to be discussed is how this double profession of ignorance and philosophy was also productive of virtuous action. To be sure, on the most basic and explicit level, Socrates' admission that he does not possess an understanding about virtue, when combined with the doctrine that virtue is knowledge, must be seen as an admission that he has not attained the highest standards of morality. But there are good reasons for moving beyond this simple rendering of Socrates' relationship to virtue. The most important of these is that it is well established in the texts that Socrates considers himself a virtuous person — or at least more virtuous than most others.⁶³ Numerous

⁶² *Symposium*, 203c–204b.

⁶³ In the *Gorgias*, 522d, for example, Socrates says he will face the last judgment confident 'he has never wronged man or god in word or deed'. And in the *Apology*, 37b3–4, Socrates says he is convinced 'he does no wrong to anyone'. Also see, *Apology*, 30c6–d1, 34e3–35a1, 36b9–c1, 36d1–3, 36d9–e1, 37a5–6, 37b2–4, 41c8–d2; *Gorgias*, 521b4–6; and *Phaedo*, 118a, where Socrates is described, upon his death, as 'the best of

scholars, trying to reconcile the Socratic doctrine that virtue is knowledge with Socrates' profession of his ignorance and his simultaneous belief in his own goodness, have persuasively argued that Socrates, although unable to claim complete virtue, is still less unvirtuous than those who are unaware of their ignorance.⁶⁴ In the *Apology*, Socrates clearly calls for conceiving of virtue as a matter of degree. He admits his own ignorance, but distinguishes it from 'the most blameworthy kind of ignorance [*eponeidistos amathia*]',⁶⁵ of thinking one knows what in fact one does not know. Socrates thus acknowledges for himself a limited kind of superiority, what he calls 'human wisdom', which is precisely his awareness that he does not possess the superhuman wisdom, or knowledge of the nature of virtue, that is inappropriately claimed by the sophists, politicians, artists, craftsmen, and no doubt many others.

What is usually left out of the scholarly account, however, is the precise way in which Socrates is more virtuous than those with pretensions to a complete wisdom. It is one thing to state that Socrates is relatively more virtuous, quite another to describe the ethical substance (i.e. the behaviours and actions) that constitutes this superiority.⁶⁶ Part of what obstructs the effort to concretize Socratic virtue is the long-standing prejudice that whatever virtue Socrates possesses must be of an intellectual and purely theoretical nature. Aristotle criticizes Socrates on this very basis: claiming that Socrates preferred to know the nature of goodness rather than how to be good and that,

all those we know, and also the wisest and most upright'. Xenophon's version of Socrates' defence speech includes even more blatant assertions of Socrates' high estimation of his own moral character: e.g., 'My entire life I have been guiltless of doing evil', *Apology*, 3. And also: 'I refuse to admit that any person has lived a better life than I, for all my life has been conducted in righteousness toward God and man', *Apology*, 5. Also see, *Apology*, 15–17, 34.

⁶⁴ Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, pp. 125–6; Graham, 'What Socrates Knew', pp. 33, 36; Leshner, 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge', pp. 275–88; Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology*, pp. 148–59, 179.

⁶⁵ *Apology*, 29b1.

⁶⁶ Reeve for example is vague when he says Socrates 'avoids both "the most blameworthy ignorance" of thinking he has expert craft knowledge of virtue when he does not and the blameworthy vice to which such ignorance often gives rise'. *Socrates in the Apology*, p. 179 (see also p. 150). A similar vagueness occurs at Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, pp. 126–30. To say, as Kateb ('Socratic Integrity') and Villa (*Socratic Citizenship*, pp. 1–58) do, that Socrates' virtue consists in his absolute refusal to do injustice raises a somewhat different set of problems. Most of all it begs the question: what is justice? Kateb suggests that it means avoiding harm, while Villa assumes that it accords with a commonsensical consensus on the matter. Since Socrates is in large part the progenitor of the idea of a universal standard of right and wrong, however, it is unsatisfying to argue that Socrates is relying on a pre-established or commonsensical notion of one. The nature of the vice and injustice that Socrates avoids by professing his ignorance must therefore be pursued.

accordingly, Socratic moral philosophy misses out on the foundational importance of *ethos* and habit to moral life.⁶⁷ Of the many problems with this interpretation the most serious is that Socrates never claimed to possess ethical knowledge: therefore, if we want to speak about Socrates' relative virtue, and Aristotle himself suggests that he understood Socrates to be an especially virtuous man,⁶⁸ we must find the substance of this relative virtue not in the *episteme* or doctrine for which Socrates unsuccessfully searches, but rather in the *ethos* and actual behaviours that arise from the perpetual quest for objective moral knowledge.

I have already referred to *wonder* vis-à-vis the possibility of a universal moral standard and the philosophic passion to discover this standard as two such positive consequences that emerge from a negative relationship to knowledge. Yet my discussion of wonder thus far has been limited to the interior world of the *psyche* and has not addressed the key question of what actions, obligations, and concrete commitments emerge out of the wondrous recognition that one is missing knowledge of the highest things. Of course, that wonder *does* contain an ethical function, that it *is* conducive to engendering good individuals and a good city, is the clear if unelaborated suggestion that runs throughout the Socratic dialogues. People react differently to the infection of wonder and amazement via their contact with Socrates. Protagoras is ashamed when he realizes that the nature of virtue is more puzzling than he had thought.⁶⁹ Laches gets annoyed once he no longer can define courage.⁷⁰ Euthyphro walks away when he is faced with perplexity, induced by Socrates, over the meaning of piety.⁷¹ Despite this diversity of reactions, however, the clear message of the Platonic dialogues is that the admission and acceptance of one's ignorance is a morally noble act, while repressing knowledge of one's ignorance is strongly linked to a failure in ethics. In general, those who admit and accept their perplexity vis-à-vis the highest things tend to be positively portrayed in the dialogues, whereas those who refuse to accept it are often the greatest criminals and tyrants of Athenian society. For instance, Euthyphro, who I have just mentioned as someone who ultimately walks away in denial of his perplexity rather than remaining with Socrates to investigate it in conversation, is on his way to bring dubious murder charges against his own father. Similarly, in the *Charmides*, Critias, who will go on to become the tyrannical leader of the Thirty, overseeing a reign of terror, is described as being unable to admit the perplexity Socrates has aroused about

⁶⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b26–28, 1144b18–28; *Magna Moralia*, 1182a, 1183b10, 1198a10; *Eudemian Ethics*, 1216b2–b25.

⁶⁸ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 97b16–24.

⁶⁹ *Protagoras*, 348c.

⁷⁰ *Laches*, 194a–c, trans. Sprague, p. 37.

⁷¹ *Euthyphro*, 15e.

the nature of temperance: ‘Since his consistently high reputation made him feel ashamed in the eyes of the company and he did not wish to admit to me that he was incapable of dealing with the question I had asked him, he said nothing clear but concealed his predicament.’⁷² The implication, from Plato at least, is that Critias’ inability to admit his ignorance about the nature of a certain virtue, his failure to publicize his sense of perplexity, is a moral failing.

If the *Euthyphro* and the *Critias* suggest that the repression of one’s perplexity about the nature of virtue indicates moral corruption, other dialogues provide the corollary: that an awareness of one’s ignorance in the form of wonder marks an ethical advance. In the *Theaetetus*, a dialogue about the nature of knowledge, Theaetetus says about himself what we have been saying about Socrates: that he is ignorant about the topic under discussion and that this has produced in him a sense of wonder.⁷³ At the end of the rather lengthy dialogue, Theaetetus is left with the feeling that all the ideas he and Socrates have expressed about knowledge are but ‘mere windbags and not worth rearing’ to further development. Socrates is in agreement about the ultimate fruitlessness of their efforts to discover the nature of knowledge, but he ends the dialogue by insisting that the recognition of this very fruitlessness — Theaetetus’ awareness that he does not know what knowledge is and his attendant sense of wonder — is in fact valuable. Socrates tells Theaetetus that this awareness of his ignorance not only will facilitate future efforts to generate worthwhile thoughts, but, even if Theaetetus never produces thoughts again, the conscious experience of his ignorance will serve him well on moral grounds: ‘If you remain barren, you will be gentler and more agreeable to your companions, having the good sense not to imagine you know what you do not know.’⁷⁴ This moral interpretation of self-aware ignorance and perplexity is echoed in the *Sophist*, where the Stranger says that the act of being refuted and forced to face one’s ignorance ‘produces the most lasting good effect on the person who is the subject of the operation’.⁷⁵

I have still not addressed the key question of what kind of concrete behaviours and commitments might be fostered by a sense of wonder vis-à-vis the highest things. If the Platonic dialogues clearly moralize the capacity to sustain confusion, admit perplexity, and cultivate amazement at the notion of a universal ethical standard, the content of such a morality of wonder still needs to be clarified. The question remains, therefore: besides the duty to philosophize, what are the actions, obligations, and concrete commitments that emerge out of a recognition that one is missing knowledge of the highest

⁷² *Charmides*, 169c, trans. Sprague, p. 84.

⁷³ *Theaetetus*, 155c.

⁷⁴ *Theaetetus*, 210c.

⁷⁵ *Sophist*, 230b, trans. F. Cornford, *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Hamilton and Cairns, p. 973.

things? What is the provisional morality that arises when one recognizes one does not possess knowledge of the true morality? Such a provisional code would not be provisional if it provided absolute and certain answers, yet this does not change the fact that Socrates' profession of ignorance is sufficiently positive so as to guide and direct his action in at least two important respects.

The first of these is a prohibition on bringing high-minded, metaphysically-grounded charges against others. Although he does not say so explicitly, it is clear that Socrates' awareness of his ignorance about the nature of virtue prevented him from engaging in aggressive persecution of others for being unvirtuous. This seems to be the implicit message of the *Euthyphro*, in which the recognition that neither Socrates nor Euthyphro can define the nature of piety places Euthyphro's prosecution of his father for the crime of impiety in an even more morally dubious light. Someone who knew his ignorance, as Socrates did, would be incapable of bringing charges of impiety against another person, and still less able to sentence another person to death on such a basis. In other words, the event of Socrates' own trial and execution would be prohibited by a proper awareness of ignorance towards the highest things. Moderation and toleration towards others would be the inevitable result of truly knowing that one does not know the good, virtue, piety, and so forth.

But second, at the same time that an awareness of ignorance would prevent the persecution of others for religious and moral offences, it would also lead those who suffered from such abuse to accept it and not flee death as the worst of fates. This, at least, is the argument that Socrates makes in the *Apology* in a brief but enlightening remark: 'To fear death, gentlemen, is nothing but to seem to be wise when you are not', since 'it is to think you know what you do not know'.⁷⁶ To fear death is to fall into the trap of false wisdom, since fearing death implies that one knows it is a bad thing, which it may or may not be. As hard as it is to stomach on emotional grounds, such an argument makes perfect sense. Death is an unknown, and someone who admitted this agnosticism would be less likely to flee from death and, consequently, more likely to be courageous.⁷⁷

Taken together, the vices that are avoided by knowledge of ignorance are the twin vices of inflicting and fleeing from death. Death ought not be inflicted upon others (at least for abstract moral notions such as irreligion and impiety) since one does not possess the certainty about such matters required for something as final as the infliction of death. Similarly, one ought not escape death at all costs, for its real value is a mystery. And, in fact, a brief catalogue of the defining moments of Socrates' own life supports the conclusion that it was a refusal to flee from death or inflict death that unites the

⁷⁶ Plato, *Apology*, 29a4.

⁷⁷ Graham ('What Socrates Knew', p. 36) makes a similar argument.

remarkable events that have earned Socrates ethical praise for over two millennia. These include:

(i) Socrates' bravery as a soldier is a well-attested fact and one of the most basic expressions of his courage in the face of death. It should be noted that the valour which earns Socrates praise is always of a defensive nature: whether the fact that he did not flee during the rout at Delium during the eighth year of the Peloponnesian War,⁷⁸ or for his endurance and good-cheer during the siege of Athens in the last year of the war, with all of its attendant poverty and deprivation.⁷⁹ In either case, Socrates wins military acclaim not for winning a battle (by inflicting death and destruction), but for holding his ground in the face of defeat.

(ii) Chosen by lot to preside over the trial of the ten generals in 406 BC, Socrates stood up to the whole Assembly, almost being lynched,⁸⁰ when he upheld the constitutional requirement that the generals be tried individually, rather than collectively.⁸¹ This gesture is often seen as an example of Socrates' commitment to legality and justice, but, from what has been argued here, it would seem that Socrates' unwillingness to inflict death (regardless of the reason) was also at stake, since a collective trial would have meant certain death for all ten of the defendants.

(iii) Socrates' famous act of resistance during the tyranny of the Thirty Tyrants, when he refused to bring Leon of Salamis to be executed on trumped up charges, is perhaps the greatest example of both a refusal to inflict and flee from death. Rather than arrest Leon at the behest of the oligarchic tyrants, Socrates went home at risk to his own life.⁸²

(iv) Socrates' resistance to the Thirty also included his disobedience of the order that he desist from philosophizing. Critias, the fanatical leader of the Thirty who as a youth had been a member of Socrates' circle, gave the order, but Socrates continued to philosophize even though he risked his life.⁸³

(v) Finally, Socrates' equanimity and good-humour at his own trial offer the clearest example of his bravery in the face of death. Whether we accept every aspect of Plato's portrayal of the cheerful mockery Socrates employed at his trial — with Socrates going so far as to propose for his penalty that he be fed at public expense at city hall (*prytaneion*)⁸⁴ — it is hard to accuse

⁷⁸ Plato, *Laches*, 181b; *Symposium*, 221a–e.

⁷⁹ Xenophon, *Apology*, 18.

⁸⁰ Plato, *Apology*, 32b–c.

⁸¹ Xenophon, *Hellenica*, I, 7; *Memorabilia*, I, i. 18; IV, iii. 2–3.

⁸² Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV, iii. 3; Plato, *Apology*, 32c–d.

⁸³ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I, ii. 31–8; IV, iii. 3; Plato, *Apology*, 30b–c.

⁸⁴ Plato, *Apology*, 36d7.

Xenophon of hyperbole when he claims: 'It must be acknowledged that there is, in fact, no record of death more nobly borne.'⁸⁵

And, so, a final sense in which we can speak of the positive character of Socrates' profession of ignorance — its capacity to be something more than the mere absence or negation of knowledge — is the sense in which it is productive of virtuous action. There is a long tradition which denies this possibility, however. As has been said, Aristotle's main critique of Socrates is that he is not even interested in action: that he would rather know the nature of goodness than how to be good. Within the Platonic dialogues, both Callicles and Hippias similarly accuse Socrates of profound indifference to human affairs and find his philosophic search for unknown knowledge a pathetic substitute for a life of action within the law courts and assembly.⁸⁶ In modern times, Hegel and then Kierkegaard appeal to the 'infinite absolute negativity' of the Socratic enterprise and Nietzsche finds in Socrates the pivot-point in Western history, the point at which the long descent toward nihilism unceremoniously begins. But as we have just seen, a knowledge of ignorance encouraged Socrates to withstand despotism, defend his city bravely from attack, uphold norms of legality in times of upheaval, and meet his own end with cheerfulness and aplomb. Socrates' very failure to attain moral *episteme* dictated a moral *ethos*.

Conclusion

Clearly, the paradox of Socrates' claim to be knowledgeable about ignorance is a complex phenomenon that can be approached and analyzed from numerous perspectives. My own contribution to this question has been guided by a concern to think through some of the epistemological, psychological, and ethical consequences of Socrates' self-understanding as someone who does not possess knowledge of a universal standard by which human conduct might be rightfully judged. And my most basic conclusion has been that Socrates' profession of ignorance is more than the absence or negation of knowledge, but additionally a positive and constitutive endeavour. The reality of universal morality, the passions of wonder and *eros*, and the twin prohibitions on inflicting and fleeing from death are called forth by an awareness that one does not have knowledge of the highest things.

The significance of such a conclusion would be that it indicates an inter-penetration between morality and wonder. This inter-penetration can be seen from two perspectives. On the one hand, morality is an object of wonder. The prospect of an as-yet unknown knowledge of the highest things is a source of awe which distracts Socrates from the everyday concerns of domestic and political life. Although it is true that Socrates relies on the prospect of such a standard to deflate the epistemological pretensions of the sophists, it

⁸⁵ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV, vii. 2.

⁸⁶ *Gorgias*, 482c–485d, *Hippias Major*, 304a-c.

would be an oversight of the awe-inspiring aspect of universal morality to reduce it, as some commentators have done, to a device of disenchantment. Socratic ignorance does have this deflationary function, but it also contains elements that are enchanting, creative, and unverifiable. This double potential of Socratic ignorance — its capacity to be an engine of both disenchantment and enchantment — is identical to the double potential inherent in the very idea of an objective moral standard by which all human activity and customs might be held accountable. Such a standard deflates confidence in the hitherto unreflective norms of propriety and collective action, yet, in its very effort to rise above the contingency of tradition and culture, itself depends on a non-reflective moment of faith, unverifiable intuition, or divine inspiration — a moment in which it is decided, without sufficient evidence, that a universal standard of morality, whatever its features, *exists* and may possibly be brought to bear upon humankind. This metaphysical remainder, which is inherent in the practice of moral philosophy, is covered over by philosophies that purport to offer final solutions regarding duties and obligations. With Socrates, the profession of ignorance about moral obligation reminds us, *by its very positivity*, of the mystical residue that, although part of moral philosophy, remains impervious to even the brightest, most rationalized moral light.

On the other hand, not only is morality an object of wonder, but wonder is moralized by Socrates' profession of ignorance. In maintaining a thick sense of wonder vis-à-vis the universal moral standard, Socrates carves out for himself a set of ethical commitments that distinguishes him both from the *hubris* of the sophists (those who think they already know the nature of the highest things) and apathy and indifference of the masses (those without any concept of the highest things). Awestruck at the prospect of a universal morality, Socrates avoids both the dogmatism of thinking he knows the nature of such a morality and the scepticism of despairing that such a morality does not in fact exist. Existing between these two poles (dogmatic *hubris* and sceptical indifference), Socratic wonder results not only in the duty to philosophize (to discover the as-yet unknown knowledge of the highest things), but in additional ethical commitments. First among these is the duty of tolerance: i.e., the refusal to persecute others on charges that presuppose a knowledge of the highest things, as in indictments for impiety. Moreover, I have tried to argue that when extended to the meaning of death, Socratic wonder results in the twin injunctions against fleeing from death and imposing death upon others. When taken together this collection of duties borne from wonder — philosophy, tolerance, the refusal to kill, and courage in the face of death — not only encompass the very commitments which have earned Socrates ethical praise over the millennia, but they point to the possibility of grounding liberal values not in reason, but in ignorance and the wonder engendered from knowing such an ignorance.

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