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## Setting Aside the Subject-Object Framework in Reading Plato

Die »wahre Welt«, wie immer auch man sie bisher concipirt hat,  
—sie war immer die scheinbare Welt noch einmal.\*  
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachlass*,  
November 1887–March 1888, 11 [50]

### ARISTOTELIAN ASSESSMENTS OF PLATO'S SOCRATES

A fundamental tension presents itself to us if we read carefully Aristotle's remarks on Socratic philosophy. This tension should indicate to us that the Socratic philosophical project is worlds away from the modern one with which we are familiar. Indeed, if we linger for a moment within this tension, Socrates must appear to us by Aristotle's lights as a quite perplexing figure.

Before beginning, it is important to note that, for Aristotle, who never experienced Socratic conversation firsthand, Plato's early dialogues seem to present a fair portrait of the historical Socrates.<sup>1</sup> At the very least, nothing Aristotle says concerning the historical Socrates is inconsistent with the character drawn by Plato in his early works. Thus, because Aristotle's image of the historical Socrates seems so thoroughly informed by the persona of Socrates in these works, his assessments of the former can be used in good conscience to illuminate our subject here, which is strictly speaking the latter.

The first of the two relevant remarks comes down to us only secondhand. It is found in Plutarch's responses to the Epicurean Colotes, specifically to

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\*The "true world," however one has conceived of it until now—it has always been the apparent world once again.

the latter's attacks on Socrates and various other philosophers for the purported impossibility of living according to their teachings. We read there,

Of the inscriptions at Delphi, "Know Thyself" seemed most divine, for it even provided Socrates with the source (ἀρχὴν) of his *aporia* and his searching (τῆς ἀπορίας καὶ ζητήσεως), as Aristotle states in his Platonic writings. (*Adv. Col.* 1118c)<sup>2</sup>

According to the young Aristotle, the simple Delphic imperative to know oneself is the ultimate impetus for the constant searching and questioning of Socrates, which is all that the early dialogues depict. And this imperative, therefore, is the ultimate origin of the *aporia* beyond which Socrates' philosophical activity in the early dialogues never reaches. Apparently, in Aristotle's judgment, that activity should be considered an attempt by Socrates, *originally and primarily*, to come to know himself and to aid his interlocutors in coming to know themselves.

Surely Plato scholars and casual readers of the early dialogues alike would endorse such a claim on some level. However, the possible significance of this description has been largely missed even in the massive wealth of secondary literature that addresses itself to the subject. Either interpreters rest content with understanding Socrates' activity as directed toward self-knowledge in some vague and commonsensical manner, or if they offer any explanation of this, they manipulate the concept 'self-knowledge' to the point of unrecognizability. As one commentator remarks,

Among the nominees we find, e.g., innately correct beliefs, a self-consistent set of beliefs, the so-called Socratic precepts, virtue itself, and even knowledge of knowledge. Yet with a few exceptions, one candidate is conspicuously absent from the ballots: self-knowledge in the context of the Socratic elenchus is rarely taken to be knowledge of the self.<sup>3</sup>

That is to say, scholars have been largely uninterested in pursuing the most direct path—whatever the "knowledge" aimed at or effected by Socratic conversation, it is in some sense *reflexive*, i.e., it is above all *of one's self*, one's own character, tendencies, or perhaps one's very own thoughts and beliefs, and their unclear or unremarked contents and implications.

Indeed, many interpreters have been able to ignore this implication partly insofar as they equate the Socratic goal of 'self-knowledge,' simply and

without remainder, with what is reported in the second of our Aristotelian assessments.<sup>4</sup> In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle summarizes the Socratic contribution to the search for wisdom as follows:

Socrates made his central occupation (πραγματομένου) the ethical virtues (τὰς ἠθικὰς ἀρετὰς) and first sought to define (ὀρίζεσθαι) these according to the whole (καθόλου). . . . It is well-spoken to say that he sought the ‘what it is’ (ἐζήτει τὸ τί ἐστίν). (*Met.* XIII.1078b17–23)<sup>5</sup>

It is the first part of this passage that has been glossed as addressing the issue of Socratic self-knowledge. Rather than seeking all-embracing explanations of natural phenomena, in the words of Cicero, Socrates “first called philosophy down from the sky, placed it in the cities and brought it into the homes, and compelled it to consider life and morals (*de vita et moribus*), and what is good and bad” (*Tusc.* 5.4.10). That is, he turned his philosophical attention *away from the natural world and toward human beings*. Broadly speaking, this has been taken as an adequate and perfectly manifest description of the Socratic aim of self-knowledge—we search for knowledge of ourselves with Socrates insofar as we seek definitions of the ethical universals that concern how we should live our lives.

However, the other defining feature of Socratic questioning mentioned here must be considered as well—Socrates asks the ‘What is “x”?’ question. Indeed, Richard Robinson in his seminal work on Plato’s early dialectic follows Aristotle here, identifying this as *the Socratic question*. Examples include ‘What is piety?’ in the *Euthyphro*, ‘What is temperance?’ in the *Charmides*, ‘What is courage?’ in the *Laches*, ‘What is friendship?’ in the *Lysis*, ‘What is fineness or beauty?’ in the *Hippias Major*, ‘What is virtue?’ in the *Meno*, and ‘What is justice?’ in the first book of the *Republic*, which may well be an independent aporetic dialogue predating the composition of the rest of the *Republic*.<sup>6</sup> Of course, Robinson rightly points out that Socrates’ questions in some dialogues also take the alternate form of ‘Is “x” “y”?’, as is the case in the *Crito*, *Ion*, *Lysis*, and *Protagoras*, for instance. At other times, the ‘What is “x”?’ form explicitly gives way to this one (*Chrm.* 165b–e, 169c–d, *Grg.* 466a–527e, *Men.* 86c–100b). Nonetheless, as Robinson also notes, Socrates explicitly and repeatedly *prioritizes* the question ‘What is “x”?’ over all other questions, especially those seeking any particular predication (*Hp. Ma.* 287b–e, *La.* 189e–190a, *Men.* 71, 86d–e, *R.* I.354c, and *Prt.* 360e). Thus, although it “owes its prominence in the earlier dialogues not to spatial

predominance but to the emphasis Socrates puts upon it,<sup>7</sup> ‘*What is “x”?*’ is nevertheless the central and characteristic form of Socratic inquiry, which is precisely what Aristotle highlights in the passage above as a Socratic contribution to the search for the *sophia* or ‘wisdom’ that is *protē philosophia* or ‘first philosophy.’

Any reading of the early dialogues certainly bears this out, for Socrates insistently and with a certain precision demands of his interlocutors that they give an account not just of human virtue (and the various virtues that we shall see as its context-specific appearances), but of ‘what human virtue *is*.’ What precisely does he have in mind here? To be sure, Socrates never in the early works thematizes Being itself. He does not, for instance, dig beneath the (as yet undifferentiated) special sciences to ask the Aristotelian metaphysical question concerning “being *qua* being (τὸ ὄν ἢ ὄν)” (*Met.* 1003a21). Neither does he chase after the sufficient reason for the existence of contingent beings as such, asking with Leibniz why there are beings at all, and not rather nothing. And, although he sometimes uses terms that are familiar from Plato’s middle dialogues in order to refer to the object of his inquiry, such as *ousia*, *eidos*, *idea*, and *paradeigma*, his object here seems not yet the more fully articulated Platonic Idea of the middle period, as that is usually understood.<sup>8</sup> Thus, we must surely proceed with caution and not simply read back into the early works any or all of the characteristics traditionally associated with the Ideas, as immaterial, intelligible, changeless, eternal, self-same, perfect, paradigmatic, essential causes that are in some way *separated* from the material, sensible, changing, temporal, self-othering, imperfect appearances thereof, which populate the world of our everyday experience. At the very least, we can say that, when Socrates directs his interlocutors’ gaze toward his target, ‘what virtue *is*,’ and away from how virtue initially and immediately appears to them, he does distinguish the being of virtue and gives some indication of how he understands it.<sup>9</sup>

We might say provisionally that the Socratic question ‘What is virtue?’ seems to gesture toward what belongs in some sense to all virtuous individuals, is the cause in some sense of their being virtuous, and is that according to which these individuals are called or recognized as ‘virtuous.’<sup>10</sup> It is unnecessary for us to determine at this point whether Socrates takes the subject matter of his questioning to be separated from and transcendent with respect to material, sensible, particular virtuous things, or whether he takes it to be immanent to them. Rather, we need only say that, given his insistent posing of and emphasis on this question, a *prima facie* central aim of Socratic philosophizing, whether we see this as successful or unsuccessful in

Plato's portraits, seems to be bringing the participants in the discussion into a proper and truthful relation to what we can refer to as 'what virtue *is*' or the being of human virtue.

With this, however, a distinct tension presents itself between the two Aristotelian assessments cited earlier. According to the first, Socrates' discussions aim at some kind of *reflexive knowledge of oneself*, while according to the second, they seek *knowledge of the being of human virtue*.<sup>11</sup> In order to bring the unarticulated but no less pervasive modern bias to light, this tension could be put in the following terms. The Socratic project as described in the first assessment seems directed toward and confined within the horizon of the inquiring subject him- or herself,<sup>12</sup> while in the second, it is directed toward 'what *is*,' or toward what exists as objectively real over against the subject. This would then map onto the Socratic paradox discussed earlier in the introduction. The negative or destructive moment would be in effect a kind of self-knowledge, the subject's recognition that his or her opinions are groundless and disconnected from the objective reality of human virtue, while the positive moment, the sought-after salvific knowledge, would be a certain grasp of this reality.

Given any such bias, the question must arise, at what precisely is the inquiring Socratic gaze directed? In Socratic conversation, does one come to a knowledge of *oneself* or a knowledge of 'what *is*,' as something *other than oneself*? What is especially illuminating here is the fact that the Socratic project seems to us to suffer because of this tension, and yet both Plato and Aristotle are (troublingly) untroubled by it.

The tension made manifest through our consideration of these Aristotelian remarks, when rendered in subject-object terms, should make us suspicious of any interpretation that explicitly or implicitly imposes these categories and consequently settles on two mutually exclusive Socratic projects—a skeptical project whereby the subject would come to know only itself and its own oblivious ignorance or an epistemologically positive project whereby the subject would ultimately establish a secure connection to the objective reality of virtue. In contrast, we might ask how *both* the Aristotelian assessments might be true and essential, even if each in a radically modified sense, and this is precisely what the following chapters attempt to show. The Socratic elenchus does indeed accomplish a radical form of self-knowledge, but this is nothing other than a proper and truthful relation to the being of virtue.

It is generally agreed that this 'proper and truthful relation' for Socrates would be a 'knowledge,' an *epistēmē* or a *technē*, of virtue,<sup>13</sup> the necessary and

perhaps sufficient condition of which would be the ability to give Socrates the propositional definition he clearly demands in his characteristic philosophical activity and then to defend that definition from elenctic refutation. I argue later that this is not the case. Rather, Socrates' elenchus, focused as it is on the being of virtue, has the following two aims, one more immediate and the other more remote.<sup>14</sup> First, he sets out directly to interrogate his interlocutors' opinions about virtue, exposing their self-contradictions and their false presumption of just such an *epistēmē* or *technē*-like grasp of virtue thereby. Second, Socrates intends with his refutations alone to bring about a non-epistemic, but nonetheless true and properly human way of relating to 'what virtue *is*' as it is.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, although Socrates demands of his interlocutors a definition of virtue, I resist saying that Socrates' philosophical activity has as its own *aim* something like 'moral knowledge.'

Indeed, the properly wise and true relation established by the elenchus will prove to be the condition of *aporia* itself, with which (in one fashion or another) all of the early dialogues end. This proves to be a quite radical suggestion, to be sure, but we must not presume that in the abundant secondary literature on Plato this suggestion has already been taken up, analyzed, and rejected in favor of more orthodox interpretive approaches. Rather, as we shall see, a nearly universal ontological presupposition has made it impossible even to consider the peculiar truth and wisdom of Socratic *aporia*.

#### CONSTRUCTION OR DESTRUCTION IN THE EARLY DIALOGUES

The scholarly debate concerning the philosophical project of Plato's early Socrates has been ordered for the most part along a spectrum between two poles, the 'constructivist' and the 'non-constructivist' interpretations of the elenchus.<sup>16</sup> Despite its ostensibly negative results, the constructivist sees the elenchus as *indirectly* producing and justifying some kind of understanding, usually true belief or non-expert knowledge, with regard to virtue. That is, these interpreters, like the later Vlastos, argue that the elenchus establishes the truth, or at least the great likelihood, of the beliefs opposed to those found problematic and explicitly refuted in elenctic discussion. Some claim that an individual elenctic discussion can accomplish this,<sup>17</sup> while others claim this only occurs through many repetitions of the elenchus.<sup>18</sup> Against both of these, non-constructivists see the elenchus as capable only of revealing an interlocutor's ignorance of virtue, as evident in their failure to produce an unassailable propositional definition.<sup>19</sup>

There are, however, very good reasons to hesitate before either of these interpretive options. First, Socrates' many and emphatic admissions of ignorance about virtue throughout the dialogues would seem to speak directly against the constructivist's thesis.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, he often says not only that he lacks perfect wisdom or certain knowledge, but specifically that he does not know the answers to the very questions he is asking. Consider how Socrates clarifies his philosophical project to Critias after the latter presses him to endorse or reject his attempted definition of the virtue in question, *sōphrosunē* or 'sound-mindedness, temperance.' Asking for time to consider how best to address himself to Critias's proposal, Socrates responds,

But Critias, you are speaking to me as though I were claiming to know the things about which I am asking (εἰδέναι περὶ ὧν ἐρωτῶ) and as though I could agree with you if I wished. But this is not the case. Instead, I investigate with you what is put forth as an answer always on account of my own not knowing (διὰ τὸ μὴ αὐτὸς εἰδέναι). (*Chrm.* 165b–c)

And a bit later on, when Critias becomes defensive and accuses Socrates of seeking not truth, but mere victory in the argument, Socrates protests,

Oh come Critias, even if I refute you utterly (μάλιστα σὲ ἐλέγχω), how can you believe that the reason I do so is anything other than that very same reason for which I investigate what I myself say—fearing that I might escape my own notice, thinking that I know something although not knowing it (φοβούμενος μὴ ποτε λάθω οἰόμενος μὲν τι εἰδέναι, εἰδὼς δὲ μὴ). (*Chrm.* 166c–d)

The first passage resonates perfectly with Aristotle's general assessment—"Socrates questioned but did not answer, for he did not assert that he knew (ὠμολόγει γὰρ οὐκ εἰδέναι)" (*SE* 183b6–8). Socrates refuses to either endorse or reject Critias's suggestion *not* for pedagogical or dialectical reasons, but because he lacks the knowledge necessary to do so. Furthermore, Socrates emphasizes at the end of the first passage and clarifies in the second that his entire philosophical activity, his searching and questioning of opinions, arises only *dia* or 'through, on account of' his own acknowledged non-knowing. His philosophizing then serves not to relieve him of this condition, but to maintain him in (even while it introduces others to) a particular kind of self-knowledge—it does not allow him to *lanthanein* or 'escape his own notice' as being non-knowing with respect to virtue.

Taking Socrates (and Aristotle) at his word here is clearly difficult for the constructivist. According to this, his lifelong investigation of virtue has not produced what he would be willing to call 'knowledge' and thus it follows that the elenchus itself does not arrive at a true knowledge of human virtue, neither with every elenchus nor even through many repetitions.

Against this, however, the constructivist sometimes responds that such passages indicate only two distinct levels or modes of 'knowledge.' Socrates distinguishes between real wisdom, which no one he has ever met possesses, and a lesser, weaker, or more limited understanding of virtue and its related notions, which he does claim to possess and that his elenctic philosophizing produces. However, Plato repeatedly *emphasizes* Socrates' self-conscious non-knowing of human virtue as his most salient and apparently praiseworthy characteristic, rather than his possession of some strong or weak knowledge, and the universally aporetic results of the early dialogues serve only to amplify this emphasis for us as we attempt to determine the ultimate aim of Socratic philosophical discussion.<sup>21</sup> What seems to make Socrates who he is, an exemplary human being for Plato, is not what he knows, but what he knows he does not know.

Moreover, if Plato's Socrates were to "know" some set of "generally applicable moral truths,"<sup>22</sup> and thus to possess that very knowledge he pretends to seek along with his interlocutors, whatever his reasons for refusing to share this knowledge, be they pedagogical or substantive, we can at the very least say that the epistemic grasp he enjoys would be the ultimate goal of Socratic philosophy and its ultimate good. The elenctic and aporetic discussion we see repeated in the early dialogues again and again, and which is indeed all that Plato ever presents us with, would then be *a merely propaedeutic step* on the way toward the possession of this resultant understanding and its capacity to direct our actions correctly. And yet, Socrates contradicts this in perhaps the most oft-cited passage in all the early dialogues. In the *Apology*, after his conviction and in a situation where the motivations traditionally cited for his irony would presumably not be in effect, we find him claiming that

The greatest good for a human being (μέγιστον ἀγαθὸν ὃν ἀνθρώπῳ) happens to be giving accounts of virtue (περὶ ἀρετῆς τοὺς λόγους ποιεῖσθαι) every day, along with the other things about which you hear me discussing and examining myself and others (διαλογομένον καὶ ἑμαυτὸν καὶ ἄλλους ἐξετάζοντος) for the life without examination is not worth living for a human being. (*Ap.* 38a)



As an obviously climactic moment of the *Apology*, this must be read as a considered, careful, and precise statement of Plato's Socrates' philosophical mission. Given this, we note that Socrates does not say that knowledge or wisdom of any kind concerning virtue is the greatest good for a human being. Rather, this status is reserved for precisely that *daily, repeated, always frustrated, and thus endless discussion of virtue* that we find portrayed throughout Plato's early works. As Francisco Gonzalez comments on this passage, "It is easy not to hear what is extraordinary in this assertion: Socrates is claiming, not that elenctic examination in search of virtue *promises* to produce a great good for us, but rather that *it is itself our greatest good.*"<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it would seem that the constant, elenctic, *aporia*-producing and sustaining questioning of Socratic philosophizing, and thus even a certain self-conscious way of *not possessing knowledge or wisdom of 'what virtue is,'* is what is supremely good for human beings. This passage seems to bring about a "collapse of the distinctions between knowledge and product, pursuit and possession,"<sup>24</sup> such that any interpretation that finds the great benefit of the elenchus in some knowledge or wisdom *beyond* that activity must be rejected in favor of an interpretation that finds this benefit *within the elenchus itself.* Thus, it speaks directly against the possibility of any human being ultimately *possessing* some real extra-elenctic product, some knowledge or wisdom about the issues addressed by Socratic questioning. Moreover, the passage would certainly contradict the assertion of a secret, never revealed, ironically dissimulated Socratic *possession* of knowledge or wisdom. The constructivist's interpretation seems at the very least dubious for these reasons.

And this very same statement from the *Apology* generates a fundamental objection to the non-constructivist's position as well. Socratic philosophy is presented by these interpreters as purely destructive, as merely exposing the ignorance of common opinion about virtue, but providing no alternative to common opinion. This skeptical vacuum would produce a bit of discomfort surely, but it would seem to leave the interlocutors free to slip inevitably back into their initial, unreflective views on virtue in living out their lives and making ethical decisions. If Socratic philosophy achieves no alternative (much less *true*) relation to 'what virtue is' and only exposes the oblivious ignorance of everyday opinion, how can Socrates claim that his mode of philosophizing is nothing short of "the greatest good for human beings"? What, then, would be so supremely beneficial about this purely destructive Socratic elenchus? The non-constructivist seems to have no satisfying response to this question.

In the following chapters, we will concern ourselves with the Socratic elenchus and the relation between its destructive project and truth. For now, we can simply acknowledge that it has proven extremely difficult for the scholars in this debate to cope with what is essentially a refinement of the aforementioned “paradox of Socrates.” That is, they have been unable to reconcile the elenchus’s explicit and consistent failure with the great benefit that these failed discussions are proclaimed to have for human beings.<sup>25</sup>

Although this interpretive dilemma has been widely acknowledged, the most direct way of resolving it has simply been put out of play due to a certain presupposition about the implicit ontology of the early dialogues. That is, scholars have been unable even to entertain the possibility that the aporia, which Socrates’ elenctic being-focused questioning obviously maintains and with which it always ends, is itself understood to be not just the properly human condition, but an epistemologically legitimate and even true relation to ‘what virtue is.’ If this were somehow the case, we could understand quite unproblematically Socrates’ claim that his utterly destructive elenchus itself accomplishes the greatest good for human beings, for it would accomplish what is for him and his interlocutors indisputably necessary for any human being to live well—a true and proper relation to ‘what virtue is’ as it is. Despite its elegance, this solution has not presented itself for consideration in orthodox interpretations of the early dialogues due to the unquestioned presupposition that for Socrates the mode of being of ‘what virtue is’ must be objective reality and that the relation to virtue he would seek must be therefore some kind of objective knowledge. If this presupposition is set aside, however, I believe the truth and supreme benefit of Socrates’ elenctic and aporetic mode of discussion can become intelligible, making sense of what we initially suffer as ‘the Socratic paradox.’

#### FROM EXCESSIVE BEING TO OBJECTIVE REALITY AND BACK

We must note at the outset that this long-standing and all-determining presupposition of Socrates’ objective ontology remains almost entirely unstated. Such silence, however, does not testify against the claim that such a presupposition exists. It indicates, rather, that the position is so deeply ingrained in the dominant, which is to say analytic or Anglo-American, interpretative approaches that it seems not to require thematization, much less justification.<sup>26</sup> This makes it quite difficult to confront directly as a bias. The presupposition tends to surface, however, with the vocabulary employed in the following

contexts: 1) In discussing the anti-relativism of Plato's Socrates; 2) in distinguishing Socrates' search for definitions from twentieth-century nominalism; and 3) in excavating an implicit and ordinary or everyday attitude about reality in Plato's thought. Let us examine each of these in turn.

#### ARTICULATING PLATO'S ANTI-RELATIVISM

We begin with an early work of twentieth-century English scholarship, one that set many of the terms of later discussion even in being vigorously opposed by most later interpreters. In his 1903 *Unity of Plato's Thought*, Paul Shorey puts forward a non-developmental account of Plato's works. In so doing, he argues that the being-focused Socratic search for definition in the early dialogues already indicates "the definite and positive assertion that the substantive essences, or rather the objective correlates, of general notions constitute the ultimate ontological units of reality to which psychological and logical analysis refer us as the only escape from a Heraclitean or Protagorean philosophy of pure relativity."<sup>27</sup> Shorey here exhibits quite clearly a fundamental tendency of twentieth-century Plato scholarship. He emphasizes that Socrates' philosophizing is already directed at the being of virtue, just as I have previously. However, in order then to oppose this position to sophistic relativism, Shorey makes the unwarranted presupposition that Being here must amount to *objective reality*, and consequently that the true, certain, and philosophically required mode of grasping or, better, relating properly to this reality is *objective knowledge*.

Later, and in the same vein, J. L. Ackrill states directly that, for Socrates, "if questions such as 'what is justice?' . . . can be answered . . . justice is a real, objective characteristic."<sup>28</sup> T. H. Irwin writes that, in the early works, "Socrates commits himself to the existence of real kinds and genuine objective similarities that justify our classifying things as we do."<sup>29</sup> And from Terry Penner we hear that "Socrates urges against relativism the objectivity of the *sciences*, and suggests that the knowledge that is virtue is just one more objective science."<sup>30</sup> It is of no consequence to the present argument whether the interpreters in question find the separate, immaterial, intelligible Ideas of Plato's middle period already at work in the early dialogues (as Shorey certainly does), or whether they insist that, although there are Ideas at stake in the early dialogues, these are immanent to particular material things, or whether they reject there any technical role whatsoever for *eidōs* and *idea*. What I wish to indicate is simply that, because of his overt anti-relativism,

it is concluded that Socrates' 'What is virtue?' question asks after something that has the status of objective reality, be it material or immaterial. David Roochnik offers a perfect summary of this position in his primer to ancient philosophy, writing, "Unlike Protagoras or Gorgias, for whom there was no Truth about questions of justice or goodness, Plato argued time and again that objective knowledge, and not merely opinion, was both possible as well as necessary in living the good life."<sup>31</sup>

#### DISTINGUISHING SOCRATES' SEARCH FOR DEFINITIONS FROM TWENTIETH-CENTURY NOMINALISM

The very same vocabulary arises in attempts to stave off a prevalent tendency among contemporary interpreters. That is, because Socrates exhibits a consistent and consuming interest in the definition of ethical terms, his philosophical project is easily, but mistakenly, viewed as commensurate with the "nominalism" of twentieth-century philosophers who practice linguistic or conceptual analysis. In the wake of positivism's violently anti-metaphysical project, these analytic thinkers emphatically and proudly turned their backs on 'Being' as an illusory place-holder responsible for nothing but a myriad of pseudo-problems in the history of philosophical inquiry. They asked *instead* after what we mean by or how we use given universal terms.<sup>32</sup> Many readers of Plato have, as a result, felt compelled to observe that Socrates' search for definitions is something altogether different from this post-positivist movement. In the trajectory traced by the following passages, however, there is an important slippage from the language of 'realism' to the language of 'objective reality' in attempts to combat this perceived interpretive temptation.

In his chapter on Socratic definition, Richard Robinson writes,

Socrates is also assuming some sort of realism as opposed to nominalism. . . . He is assuming that this form or essence or one in the many is not a word in the mouth, nor a concept in the head, but something existing in the particular Xes independently of man.<sup>33</sup>

Note that Robinson leaves somewhat indeterminate here the status of whatever it is that Socrates searches for in his quest for a definition of 'what virtue is.' He insists only that Socrates' question aims at something ontologically independent of language or thought. Arguing from "the explanations which Socrates gives of his question,"<sup>34</sup> Robinson states a bit further on that they

indicate “some sort of realist assumption about the ontological status of this ‘essence’”<sup>35</sup> as the aim of the Socratic ‘What is “x”?’ question. I wish only to note here that, for Robinson, Socratic realism amounts to a target not located ontologically within human language usage or thought. It must be *beyond* these, in some way, and *independent* of them.

R. E. Allen, in his excellent interpretation of the *Euthyphro*, makes a similar observation. He writes,

The dialectical procedure of the *Euthyphro* cannot be represented as an attempt to discover what the word ‘holy’ means, coupled with a further attempt to find out whether it applies to anything. For . . . existential import is taken for granted, not demonstrated, in the early dialogues: Socrates and Euthyphro assume there are holy things, and ask what their nature is; and this assumption of existence is made in every early dialogue in which that ‘What is it?’ question is initially answered by appeal to examples—which is to say in every dialogue in which it is asked.<sup>36</sup>

Allen too wants to distinguish his Socrates from a twentieth-century philosopher of language, and he does so by pointing out the brazen “assumption of existence” made in his conversations. The “existential import” of the term *hōsion* or ‘holy’ is taken for granted by Socrates, in that it is understood to refer manifestly to something in the world, beyond or in excess of the contents of human language or thought.

*As far as they go*, the claims of Robinson and Allen in these passages are indisputably correct. As they make clear, there can be no doubt that Socrates is some kind of realist and no kind of nominalist, in that he presumes to be asking after ‘what virtue *is*’ rather than merely what the term means or what we conceive it to be, and he certainly does not reduce the former to the latter. However, a significant transformation occurs if this claim, namely, that ‘what virtue *is*’ for Socrates *is something more than* or *exceeds* the contents of human thought and language, slips into the claim that it must therefore be an *objective* reality to which *objective* knowledge would be the proper and truthful relation.

A. E. Taylor provides a particularly illuminating example of this very slippage in his discussion of the *Meno*. In the passage in question, Socrates is insisting on searching with Meno for ‘what virtue *is*,’ a notion filled out in the discussion as the one *eidos* that all virtuous things must share (*Men.* 72c). As Taylor writes, for Socrates this entails that

[T]here is no third alternative between realism and nominalism. A universal, unambiguously employed, signifies something or it does not. If it signifies anything, that something is not an arbitrary fiction of the mind; if it signifies nothing, there is the end of all science. Science stands or falls with "objective" reference.<sup>37</sup>

According to Taylor, like Penner, Socrates' search for a proper relation to the being of virtue must be a search for something like a "science" of the objective referent of the term 'virtue.' For the only alternative to this that he can imagine would be simple "nominalism," according to which the term would be understood as referring only to other words or mental contents. These would amount to arbitrary "fiction[s] of the mind" for Taylor's Socrates, precisely because any connection to a world outside the subject would be left unsecured. Thus, because Plato's Socrates seeks knowledge of 'what virtue is' as something *beyond* or *exceeding* human thought or language, it is presumed by Taylor (representatively) that Socrates must operate with an objective ontology and that he must be searching for scientific or objective knowledge as the proper way of relating to or grasping this object.

#### EXCAVATING THE EVERYDAY UNDERSTANDING OF BEING IN PLATO

To conclude this brief and pointed survey, let us turn to a passage once again from Vlastos. He is here introducing a distinction between having an ontology, or an implicit, all-governing understanding of Being, and being an ontologist, or one who is reflective about one's ontological principles and can articulate them more or less systematically. Vlastos is arguing here that Socrates can have the former without being the latter. In so doing, however, Vlastos also makes admirably clear the manner in which the presupposition of, in particular, an objective ontology is *read back into* the early dialogues:

Can one have an ontology without being an ontologist? Why not? The belief in the existence of a physical world independent of our own mind, stocked with material objects retaining substantial identity and qualitative continuity over long or short stretches of time, is a solid piece of ontology, as entrenched in the mind of the average Athenian then as in that of the average New Yorker now.<sup>38</sup>

Now, I agree with Vlastos that there is an ontological framework implicit in the everyday attitude and I would say that Plato's Socrates might adhere in

his investigations to some guiding notion of what it means 'to be' without thematizing Being as such. However, I would call into question the assumption that what we find at work in the early Plato's Socratic discussions is the very same *objective* ontology that is so familiar to us.<sup>39</sup> I would even say that Vlastos is likely right in claiming that, for the everyday attitude of the fourth-century Greek, 'what *is*' might well have been understood as in some sense *exceeding* one's most immediate opinions or perceptions and as not in any way constituted by these. And in any case, this is surely true for Plato's Socrates, as his obvious and consistent anti-Protagoreanism or anti-relativism indicates.<sup>40</sup> However, as represented by the passages assembled here from a few seminal interpreters of Plato, the unsupported interpretive bias of the dominant approaches to the early dialogues becomes evident when what we might call this acknowledged *excessiveness of 'what is'* is identified without comment, much less justification, with the claim that 'what is' is *objectively real*.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF PRESUPPOSING AN UNDERSTANDING OF BEING AS OBJECTIVE

Having merely indicated the pervasiveness of this vocabulary of objectivity, we have yet to make clear precisely what it entails, i.e., what its logical consequences are. Let us begin by saying quite trivially that, for one who holds an objective ontology, 'what is' has the way of being of an object. Our first inclination here might be to understand an 'object' as a material thing, but that would be an unwarranted restriction of the meaning, as the 'objective idealism' sometimes associated with the middle Platonic works indicates. What is essential to being an object seems to be, in the language of the passages already cited, 1) "retaining substantial identity and qualitative continuity over long or short stretches of time," but also, 2) being "independent of our own mind," or "not an arbitrary fiction of the mind," or existing "independently of man." One cannot speak of something as an object in the ordinary sense, as what exists in the mode seemingly indicated by the common vocabulary of 'objective reality,' unless the thing in question has some persisting presence as what it is and is located in the world outside of and not constituted by the subject who thinks or perceives it. If either of these things is not in place, we are speaking no longer of something with objective reality.<sup>41</sup> This is precisely what most interpreters presume to identify as the aim of Socratic being-focused questioning, whether they state their interpretive bias explicitly or not.

There are two fundamental consequences that follow from this presupposition. First, a concomitant notion of truth will be organized according

to what is now, in some sense, a subject-object relation. In order to arrive at truth, one will likely be understood as having to produce a proposition, 'S is p,' that accurately represents or corresponds to the present object and its properties or circumstance, in our case the being of virtue. Of course, for Socrates, this would also be an essential, propositional definition, but that is unimportant in this context. Given objective reality as the aim of Socratic inquiry, the truth he explicitly claims always to aim at will have to be a proposition that represents the independently present object. Second, the status of the initial appearances of the object, i.e., the first, unreflective, pre-philosophical opinions Socrates' interlocutors have about virtue, will also be affected by the introduction of a modern subject-object relation. That is, the 'independence' of the object from our initial human reception of it will almost certainly be taken to entail *a separation of being from appearing*.

In one recent, far-reaching study of philosophy in the modern period, the author describes precisely what is entailed by the Cartesian and then quintessentially modern commitment to a reality that is objective. He writes,

Everything you think or say stands to be assessed in terms of what is *not* you. The measure of thought is *reality*, and reality is neither created by thought nor controlled by it. Reality is *objective*: its being is distinct from its seeming: what it is does not depend on what we *think* it to be. Our thought is aimed at reality, and when it hits the target, then and only then can we speak of truth.<sup>42</sup>

Now, a portion of this description of the epistemological project of modern philosophy might be applied legitimately to the early Plato's Socrates. To be sure, he wishes to measure what his interlocutors think or say about virtue against 'what virtue *is*.' And for him, whatever its status, this is not constituted by individual or communal beliefs about it. That is, whatever the being of virtue is, it is more than and not 'created by' human thought about it. Without a doubt.

However, the next step in this description, which is of course perfectly accurate with regard to philosophical thought in the modern period, simply does not apply to Socrates' understanding of 'what virtue is.' We read here that, with regard to the objectively real, "its being is distinct from its seeming." That is, objective reality *per se* may or may not be accurately revealed in its initial mode of appearing to us in the everyday, pre-philosophical attitude. It is precisely this *separation* of being from seeming or appearing that necessitated what Descartes calls a "general overthrow of opinions (*generalis*



. . . *opinionum eversioni*)”<sup>43</sup> in order to clear away these dubiously ungrounded mental contents and then identify a firm and immovable point, a self-evident, undeniable truth (or truths), from which all knowledge might be rigorously deduced after the model of geometry, thereby warranting the name *scientia*.<sup>44</sup> With Descartes one sees that the separation of being and seeming quite simply entails that all pre-reflective opinions or initial appearances be suspected of being radically deceptive. Thought must confront the terrifying prospect that all unexamined opinions may be, not just cloudy or partial appearances of ‘what is,’ but utterly disconnected phantasms, merely subjective illusions communicating nothing about reality. In the traditional approaches to Plato’s early works, this separation of being from seeming is, in addition to the demand for propositional truth, carried along with the vocabulary of ‘objectivity’ and improperly imposed upon the Socratic philosophical project.

The imposition of this particular aspect of the modern conception of objective reality is sometimes quite apparent. For instance, it is right on the surface of Benjamin Jowett’s oft-cited remark that Plato is subject to certain insoluble logical problems in the later dialogues because he “separates the phenomenal from the real.”<sup>45</sup> It is also present in some commentators’ accounts of the status of *doxa* or ‘opinion, belief’ for Socrates. We find it for instance in Taylor’s book on the historical Socrates, where he again opposes the misplaced nominalism he sees in the tendency to speak of the objects of Socratic inquiry as “‘universals,’ ‘concepts,’ or ‘class-notions.’”<sup>46</sup> He writes,

If we would avoid all such misunderstanding, it is best to say simply that the Form is that—whatever it may be—which we mean to denote whenever we use a significant ‘common name,’ as the subject of a strictly and absolutely true proposition, the object about which such a proposition makes a true assertion. . . . The soul, as we saw, has one single fundamental activity, that of *knowing* realities as they really are. . . . Where the mind is not face to face with a Form, we have only *opinion* or *belief*, a *belief* which may, of course, in many cases be quite sufficient for the needs of everyday life, but we have not *knowledge*; the element of ‘*necessary* connection’ is missing.<sup>47</sup>

Evident here is the assumption of precisely that disconnect between being and seeming identified earlier, as well as the effect it has on the way the interpreter understands both the Socratic search for knowledge and the Socratic critique of everyday *doxa*. Taylor presumes that arriving at knowledge

entails securing a “necessary connection” between oneself and ‘what virtue is,’ while *doxa* clearly suffers from a lack of precisely this connection. Thus, for Socrates’ interlocutors, who complacently rely on the mere *doxa* of human virtue, “moral life is at the mercy of sentimental half-thinking,”<sup>48</sup> and thus in danger of a complete disconnect from ‘what virtue truly is.’ Absolutely crucial is this: the desire for a “necessary connection” to objective reality, the epistemological dream proper to modern post-Cartesian philosophy, is here being imposed upon the Socratic project.

And with this we arrive at the purpose of this admittedly strategic review of scholarship. Having traced these two consequences, we are now able to see precisely how the presupposition of an objective ontology in the early dialogues is responsible for the incapacity in the dominant interpretative approaches even to entertain the most elegant resolution of the Socratic paradox. It becomes impossible for these interpreters to take Socrates at his word and see his ostensibly destructive, elenctic discussion of virtue as itself accomplishing the greatest good for human beings, so long as they see Socrates as confronted with the being of virtue understood as an objective reality.

That is, under the influence of this ontological bias, any such supreme benefit within the destructive elenchus itself is ruled out by the fact that, as Paul Woodruff summarizes, the elenchus “presupposed nothing but the beliefs of Socrates’ victims, and . . . it ended nowhere but in the victim’s feeling that he did not know.”<sup>49</sup> We must try to hear the force of this “nothing but” and “nowhere but.” With the assumption of an objective ontology, Socratic elenctic questioning must be seen as beginning with nothing but unsubstantiated and radically suspect beliefs and as therefore arriving nowhere but the victim’s internal subjective space, revealed in the harsh light of pure self-conscious ignorance. There can be no truth and, thus, no supreme benefit in the *aporia* of the Socratic elenchus itself, for its negative result entails that Socrates and his interlocutors remain trapped on the subjective side of a subject-object gap, dealing only with opinions and succeeding only in marking the absence of that necessary connection to the objective reality of ‘what virtue *is*.’

Richard Robinson makes the following highly illuminating remark regarding a certain tension between how Plato’s Socrates seems to understand what occurs in the dialogues and how we tend to read them. He writes,

Plato’s dialectic is often of such a nature that to our minds it ought to be separated from philosophy. To us he often seems to be discussing neither physical nor metaphysical reality, but only the human

logical apparatus of conceptions and terms. But still, in a manner very strange and unnatural to us, he regards himself as talking not logic but ontology.<sup>50</sup>

Although he is ultimately unable to extricate himself from the anachronism outlined previously, Robinson does register the strong resistance in Plato's early works to just this presupposition of objective ontology. He notes, at those moments where Plato's dialogues seem *to us* to be concerned merely with concepts and meanings, with thought and its elements, *for Plato* the topic of conversation seems to be 'what *is*.' The radical gap between appearing and being, between the subjective and the objective, seems "in a manner very strange and unnatural to us" not to exist for Plato.

I suggest that, having confronted this tension and this resistance, we simply refuse to impose the presupposition of objective ontology in approaching Plato's works. Nothing more. I do not presume to have *proven* it false or groundless, a mere imposition of modern ontology on ancient thought. I certainly do not claim to have overturned the results of the brilliant and highly esteemed scholars I have cited here, from whose work I myself have benefited immensely. I hope only to have exposed a general, implicit, indeed utterly undiscussed, interpretive bias in a range of orthodox and seminal approaches to the dialogues and to have indicated how this bias is responsible for the impossibility of exploring a very straightforward, even if for us ultimately quite challengingly strange, approach to the central paradox of the Socratic philosophical project. Let us, simply, put aside this particular presupposition and set about reading the dialogues.

If we do so, I believe we will find evidence there of a radically different ontology at work in Socrates' being-focused elenctic questioning. That is, the being of virtue, understood as otherwise than objective (indeed, as neither objective nor subjective), will prove to be in a properly human way 'grasped,' or much better, related to *truly*, precisely in the condition of *aporia* with which all these early discussions of human virtue end and in the painful *meletē* or 'concern' for that Socrates explicitly aims to provoke. This will no doubt seem bizarre, and we might well ask what kind of radical alternative ontology could account for this. Perhaps, for Socrates, the aim of philosophizing is not a proper relation to *objective reality* at all, but to what we might call *phenomenal being*, where the 'being of virtue' would be understood as that which has always already appeared to us and established a connection to us in our immediate or unreflective experience of our world. It is what already concerns us, calling forth our striving and our thinking, even if

this concern needs amplification and our thinking needs refinement through the Socratic elenchus.<sup>51</sup> That is to say, perhaps Socrates seeks the being of virtue as nothing other than what has already presented itself to us, albeit in a self-concealing manner, in what the Greeks would call *doxa*, the beginning point of all Socratic philosophical questioning.