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The Classical Quarterly 70.2 577–591 © The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Classical Association.
doi:10.1017/S0009838820000907

WHAT SOCRATES SAYS, AND DOES NOT SAY*

For several decades, scholars of Plato's dialogues have focussed their efforts on understanding Socrates' philosophy by unravelling the arguments used to establish it.[1] On this view, Socrates' philosophy is presented in his arguments, and, as Gregory Vlastos says, 'Almost everything Socrates says is wiry argument; that is the beauty of his talk for a philosopher.'[2] In this paper I raise questions about what can be learned about Socrates' philosophy through analysis of his arguments. One critic of what he views as traditional interpretations of Plato—'the sole frame of reference used by most interpreters of Plato from antiquity to the present'—describes this approach as follows:

(i) reading the dialogues to discover Platonic or Socratic doctrines, and
(ii) the logic of the arguments on which these doctrines are based.[3]

While I subscribe to the first point, I have questions about (ii), the ready contention that Plato's dogmas are based on the arguments through which they are defended in dialogues.

In this paper, I criticize central tenets of analytical interpretation of Plato, especially their focus on arguments. To some extent, this may now seem like old hat. In recent years, interpretation of Plato's dialogues has become a subject of intense controversy, as ranks of scholars have lined up to criticize 'dogmatic' interpretations of the dialogues.[4] I avoid these larger questions. I assume conventional positions on the central issue, that Plato uses the dialogues to communicate his doctrines, and puts them in the mouth of his central character, generally Socrates.[5] Although these points are hotly disputed, and there are problems with the evidence, the evidence in their favour is far

* Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a conference at Virginia Tech and at the University of Leeds. I am grateful to participants at both events for valuable comments and suggestions, especially to Jamie Dow and Carl Fox.

[1] For simplicity's sake, I assume that, in the cases that concern us, there is little distance between the views of Socrates and of Plato, and I discuss the two figures interchangeably.

[2] G. Vlastos, 'Introduction', in M. Ostwald (transl.), *Plato: Protagoras* (Indianapolis, 1956), vii–lviii, at xxxi.

[3] G. Press, 'Principles of dramatic and non-dogmatic Plato interpretation', in id. (ed.), *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations* (Lanham, MD, 1993), 107–28, at 125 ([i] and [ii] supplied).

[4] Such works include Press (n. 3); J. Angelo Corlett, *Interpreting Plato's Dialogues* (Las Vegas, NV, 2005); C. Griswold (ed.), *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* (State College, PA, 2001); and H.W. Ausland and E. Benitez (edd.), *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity* (Lanham, MD, 2000). An excellent non-sceptical analysis of the implications of the dialogue form is M. Frede, 'Plato's arguments and the dialogue form', in J. Klagge and N. Smith (edd.), *Methods of Interpreting Plato and his Dialogues* (*Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, *Supplementary Volume*) (Oxford, 1992), 201–19.

[5] For good defences of these claims, see R.B. Rutherford, *The Art of Plato: Ten Essays in Platonic Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 25–9; and N. Smith, 'Introduction', in id. (ed.), *Plato: Critical Assessments. Vol. I, General Issues of Interpretation* (London, 1998).

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stronger than for any alternative hypothesis. What sets my approach apart from other recent critics of the analytical approach is that my criticism is internal. I criticize analytical interpretations from their own standpoint. Because my approach to Plato is essentially theirs, it is much more difficult for them to respond.

Although I raise questions about interpretation through analysis of arguments, I do not of course dispute the importance of all arguments. Some used by Socrates are relatively straightforward and provide clear support for views he is depicted as holding. Examples include the protreptics in the *Euthydemus* and the *Lysis*, and the elaborate proof that wrongdoing is due to ignorance in the *Protagoras*.[6] These arguments provide important evidence about the Socratic paradoxes that 'virtue is knowledge' and 'no one does wrong willingly'.[7] But arguments used in elenctic refutations of Socrates' interlocutors are more troublesome. Because these arguments give rise to *aporia* rather than to firm conclusions, they frequently allow different interpretations, and it is difficult to know exactly what to make of them. Although a great deal can be learned from these arguments, it is not clear that they provide direct support for Socrates' views. Examples that fall in this category include arguments that address relationships between knowledge and different virtues in the *Laches* and the *Charmides*. My particular focus in this paper is arguments that are still more problematic. Some of these appear to contain obvious fallacies. Others appear to be inconsistent with claims made in the same or different dialogues.[8] Examples from the *Protagoras* and the *Crito* are discussed below. In many cases, I believe, there is significant space between Socrates' (and/or Plato's) doctrines and the arguments used to support them in different dialogues. In other words, in many cases, Socrates' arguments do not provide strong evidence of what he thought about the issues under discussion.[9] While he may hold the positions that the arguments support, the former are not held because of these arguments but because of other considerations that may not be directly reported in the dialogues.

In this paper, I defend two basic claims. First, I argue for a particular means of determining what Socrates *says* in particular dialogues, which requires careful attention to one particular aspect of their dramatic action. Employing this criterion—to which I refer as the 'dramatic criterion'—will allow us to rule out various interpretations as inconsistent with what Socrates actually says. Beyond the obvious point that ignoring dramatic aspects of dialogues can lead to misconstrual of Plato's intentions in writing them, I am interested in how this can lead to misinterpretation of the arguments themselves. That analytical techniques must be used properly with careful attention to the dramatic contexts in which arguments occur is an obvious point, and one that few scholars would dispute. I attempt to operationalize this precept by developing the dramatic criterion, which tells us what constitutes sufficient attention to the dramatic

[6] *Euthyd.* 278d–282d, 288d–292e; *Lysis* 207d–210e; *Prt.* 351b–360e.

[7] For the Socratic paradoxes, see W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 6 vols. (Cambridge, 1962–81), 3.450–62; G. Santas, *Socrates: Philosophy in Plato's Early Dialogues* (London, 1979).

[8] A troublesome aspect of the argument in the *Protagoras* just noted is its dependence on Socrates' espousal of hedonism. On this, see D. Zeyl, 'Socrates and hedonism: *Protagoras*, 351b–358d', *Phronesis* 25 (1980), 250–69; T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford, 1995), 81–92; id., *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford, 1977), 110–14.

[9] The intentions and perceptions that are attributed to Socrates and his interlocutors throughout this paper are those imputed to them by the commentator, in accordance with reconstruction of their mental processes.

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nature of at least certain Platonic works and rules out interpretations of arguments that read too much into the text.

Second, I am interested in the relationship between Socrates' philosophical positions and certain arguments used to establish them. As just noted, in many cases, I believe the latter provide only limited evidence for the former. In other words, the particular way in which Socrates is depicted as developing certain arguments tells us relatively little about his views on the issues under discussion, and so the latter must be reconstructed through other means. To establish Socrates' views in these cases requires interpretation, including far-ranging interpretation that combines material in different dialogues, rather than careful attention to the steps of particular arguments, however 'wiry' they may be.

This paper is in four sections. The dramatic criterion is presented in Section I. In Section II, I discuss its applicability to different dialogues. In Section III, it is used to criticize interpretations of particular scholars, while some broader implications and questions of interpretation are discussed in the concluding section.

I

As noted above, scholars who hold 'dogmatic' views about Plato's Socrates view the dialogues in a particular way, as centring upon arguments. While these scholars analyse Socrates' arguments with great skill, they frequently pay little attention to aspects of the dialogues that are not arguments, and do not lend themselves to such analysis. Combing the dialogues for 'tight philosophical argument[s] in the modern manner'[10] can lead scholars to misconstrue the targets of their analysis.

I begin with an ontological point. Throughout their works, scholars frequently employ locutions such as 'a given Platonic dialogue says X', or 'Socrates says X in a given work', or such and such an argument is 'in a given work' or 'in some speech of Socrates'. The problem is that, frequently, the arguments that the scholars discuss are not easily found in the text. They are often elaborate philosophical constructions, which have been recognized by none of the dialogues' multitudinous previous readers. And so what interests me are different senses in which an argument can be said to be 'in' a Platonic text, or to be 'said' by one of the persons in the dialogue, generally Socrates, and which of these senses apply to the reconstructions of the analytical scholars.

In many cases, the problem is this. Plato presents a dramatic exchange between Socrates and some interlocutor. Socrates asks a number of questions to which the interlocutor assents, and Socrates states some conclusion. For the philosophically interested reader it is often difficult to determine exactly how Socrates has demonstrated his conclusion and so exactly why the interlocutor assents. In certain cases, the reader can isolate certain premises upon which Socrates' argument appears to turn, and so the argument appears to be

$$(1) \qquad A + A_1 > B.$$

In certain cases, the reconstructed argument will appear to be sound. But other cases are more troubling. Perhaps $A + A_1$ do not imply B, in which case the reader may attempt to

[10] The quoted words are from G. Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, 1973), 348, in reference to an argument that appears in the *Parmenides*; his procedures are similar in regard to arguments that appear in the early dialogues.

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uncover additional premises, perhaps tacit ones. Obviously, there are numerous possibilities here. Perhaps (2) $A + A_1$ and the tacit A_2 are sufficient to imply the conclusion, and A_2 appears to be a premise that could possibly be taken for granted by Socrates and his interlocutor. But in other cases it may be necessary to read in a number of tacit premises, some of which might seem less apparent to Socrates and the interlocutor.[11]

A central concern in this paper is certain scholars' tendency to read a great deal into troubling proofs in order to extract 'tight philosophical arguments' from them. Beyond a certain point, the introduction of tacit premises and distinctions violates Plato's intentions as author and the sense of his texts. Although it is of course not easy to identify this point, I believe that one particular limit can be suggested.

Although Plato's use of the dialogue form often complicates matters for scholars, this form has some offsetting advantages. The fact that Socrates' proofs are directed at other individuals who are intended to understand them provides some guidance in interpreting problematic passages. Stated roughly, because a given proof is meant to be understood by the individual to whom it is addressed, the interlocutor's understanding of an exchange enjoys a privileged status. On the most basic level, a proof should be construed in accordance with the interlocutor's understanding of it, and this construal should be regarded as what Socrates says. If we wish to identify what Socrates says with what Plato says, a given proof as understood by the interlocutor is what Plato says as well. An informal survey of the recent literature indicates that many (if not most) scholars interpret Plato's texts in accordance with this dramatic criterion, whether consciously or unconsciously. However, in certain kinds of contexts, problems arise. The criterion is ignored and improbable interpretations result. I will discuss such contexts and the interpretations of specific scholars below. But, first, something should be said in the criterion's defence.

The dramatic criterion follows from obvious facts about Plato's use of the dialogue form. Plato's Socrates is a character in dramatic compositions, and his actions must make dramatic sense. A proper construal of his proofs must rely heavily on his intentions in employing them. Almost without exception, Socrates' proofs are directed at other individuals, who are intended to understand them.[12] Moreover, because Socrates' proofs are presented in the form of questions, a given proof is not merely directed at some interlocutor, but the interlocutor's assent is necessary to convert Socrates' questions into propositions that can serve as premises in arguments.

Throughout the dialogues Socrates goes to great lengths to facilitate the interlocutor's grasp of his proofs. According to Xenophon, it is for this reason that he employs a methodical, step-by-step approach and insists on securing the interlocutor's assent to each step before moving on to the next (*Mem*. 4.6.15). For similar reasons, Socrates insists that the interlocutor answer honestly, according to what he actually thinks. In the *Gorgias*, in the most elaborate discussion of his method presented in the dialogues, Socrates describes the importance of his relationship to the interlocutor. When he is engaged in discussion, he cares about the opinions of the interlocutor alone; the opinions of everyone outside the discussion are of no immediate concern. Socrates

[11] G. Klosko, 'Criteria of fallacy and sophistry for use in the analysis of Platonic dialogues', *CQ* 33 (1983), 363–74.

[12] On the ad hominem character of the *elenchos*, see especially R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1953), 15–17; M. Stokes, *Plato's Socratic Conversations: Drama and Dialectic in Three Dialogues* (Baltimore, 1986).

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feels that, if he is unable to attain the interlocutor's assent, he has accomplished nothing (*Grg.* 472b–c, 474a–b). Accordingly, when some point is not clear to the interlocutor, Socrates will labour to make himself understood and will refuse to continue until the interlocutor is able to grasp it. Because each step in the proof must receive the interlocutor's sincere assent, Socrates declares that not he but the interlocutor is the author of the resulting logos.[13]

Thus Socrates' method of discussion rests upon the existence of a shared understanding between himself and the interlocutor, which it is a central purpose of the discussion to advance. It follows that a necessary condition for a correct interpretation of a given proof is that it must be consistent with this shared understanding. Because a Socratic proof is directed at the interlocutor and is intended to be understood by him, the interlocutor's understanding of the proof may be referred to as its 'dramatic meaning'.

The dramatic meaning of a given proof affords a valuable touchstone for identifying Socrates' arguments. This is clear in simple cases. For instance, there can be little doubt that the arguments Socrates directs at Cephalus' definition of justice (*Resp.* 331c–d) or at Laches' initial definition of courage as standing in line to battle the enemy (*Lach.* 190e) are intended to affect the interlocutors in certain ways and are carefully crafted towards these ends. Indeed, in the *Laches*, Nicias says that Socrates' target in a discussion is not the interlocutor's views but the interlocutor himself, whose way of life is put to the test (187e–188a). In these simple cases there can be little doubt that what Cephalus or Laches takes Socrates to be saying is what he 'says' in the most obvious sense, and that these arguments support the conclusions Socrates is depicted as establishing.

But in other cases it is more difficult to determine what Socrates 'says'. Cases that are especially likely to be misinterpreted involve what may appear to be unusual philosophical behaviour by Socrates, especially when a commentator is interested in dispelling the appearance of inconsistency between some belief he holds about the nature of Socrates' philosophical endeavour and the apparent nature of a given proof. Some of these problems have been noted above. For example, in certain cases the arguments that Socrates appears to use turn on obvious sophisms. Commentators, especially those who believe that Socrates would not use arguments that he knows to be fallacious,[14] will take considerable liberties with various proofs, often uncovering complex webs of tacit premises and distinctions that are able to yield valid arguments. In other cases, doctrines that Socrates appears to espouse in one context appear to conflict sharply with what he says elsewhere. An example is the apparent contradiction between the views concerning political obligation expressed in the *Apology* and in the *Crito*. Because they believe that Socrates would not contradict himself, scholars have reinterpreted various passages, again, introducing numerous tacit premises and distinctions into the texts. Similarly, because commentators find the view of political obligation presented in the *Crito* 'offensively authoritarian'[15]—and so unworthy of Socrates—they are tempted to reinterpret the text in order to avoid this appearance. In cases such as these, a gap may emerge between the arguments that the commentator identifies and those that the interlocutor appears to view Socrates as expressing. In problematic cases, it is often difficult to identify both the precise nature of Socrates'

[13] *Grg.* 472b–c, 482b–c, 516d; *Alc.* 1 (which I assume is genuine) 118b; see 112c–113a, 116d.

[14] E.g. G. Vlastos, 'Unity of the virtues', in id., *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, 1973), 221–65, at 223 n. 5; C.C.W. Taylor (ed.), *Plato: Protagoras*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 1991), 158; M.A. Stewart, 'Plato's sophistry', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 51 (1977), 21–44, at 21.

[15] R. Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton, 1987), 5.

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arguments and precise reasons for the interlocutor's assent. It is striking that in many sophisticated reconstructions of Socrates' arguments reasons for the interlocutor's assent drop from consideration.

The value of the dramatic criterion is apparent in difficult cases. I believe that the interlocutor's understanding should function as an outer boundary for non-problematic interpretations of a given passage. Other things equal, the commentator should be free to reconstruct the argument in a given proof as long as her reconstruction accords with the proof's dramatic meaning. But she must justify reconstructions that appear to go beyond the dramatic meaning. In most cases, it seems, commentators proceed in an acceptable manner, again, consciously or unconsciously, bearing in mind the understanding of the interlocutor. This does not prevent them from discussing aspects of Socrates' proofs that the interlocutor could not possibly be viewed as understanding. For instance, in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates presents a celebrated refutation of Euthyphro's definition of piety as 'what all the gods love' (9e). In two excellent studies, commentators take the dramatic meaning of the proof as starting points for their investigations and do not suggest that the considerations they discuss are what Socrates 'says'—although they believe that there is more to Socrates' position than what he says or than what Euthyphro can grasp.[16] Because these scholars—and others like them—concentrate on the philosophical implications of what Socrates says, their attention is focussed on what we may call the 'deeper meaning' of various passages. But when commentators advance theses about Socrates' behaviour, for example that he does not contradict himself or employ sophistical arguments, they are committed to discussing what he actually says. If the dramatic criterion is brought to bear, it becomes clear that a commentator who analyses some proof in a way that departs significantly from the interlocutor's understanding is placed in a difficult position. She must explain why Socrates employs arguments that his interlocutor could not possibly understand.

Appealing to the interlocutor's understanding of proofs raises various problems. For instance, why should it be easier to reconstruct the understanding of some interlocutor than the logic of a given argument? Arguments lend themselves to more precise analysis than the cognitive capacities of literary characters, some of whom are only sketched by Plato and about whom we have no independent information. But this objection can be dealt with. The dramatic criterion is intended to serve as an outer boundary. Its primary function is not to identify what Socrates' arguments are but what they are not. Recent commentators construe certain proofs as so complex that Socrates' interlocutors could not possibly comprehend them. Thus, even if it is not possible to ascertain exactly how the interlocutor does understand some exchange, in certain cases we can be confident that he does not understand it along particular philosophically involved lines.

An additional objection is that the dramatic criterion is too restrictive. It could be argued that there is far more to Plato's dialogues than what a given—often a limited—interlocutor is able to grasp.[17] With this objection I have no quarrel. As

[16] R. Sharvy, '*Euthyphro* 9d–11b: analysis and definition in Plato and others', *Nous* 6 (1972), 119–37; S.M. Cohen, 'Socrates on the definition of piety: *Euthyphro* 10A–11B', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 9 (1971), 1–13 = repr. in G. Vlastos (ed.), *The Philosophy of Socrates* (Garden City, NY, 1971), 158–76.

[17] Cf. Taylor's response to Stokes, who views the content of the Socratic dialogues, including the *Protagoras*, as entirely or almost entirely ad hominem. Taylor argues that this is not the *whole* point of the dialogues. The *Protagoras* also presents Socrates' teaching (Taylor [n. 14], xiv–xv). I agree with this claim, although I differ from Taylor in making less direct connection between Socrates' teaching and the specific steps in the flawed arguments he uses in this work.

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noted above, the criterion does not preclude analysis of the deeper meaning of Socrates' arguments. I return to this subject in the concluding section.

II

A brief look at various dialogues indicates the applicability of the dramatic criterion. It is obvious that Plato chooses his interlocutors carefully. What interests me is how interlocutors with different cognitive capacities are used in different works. When Plato's concerns are deeply philosophical, he utilizes interlocutors with philosophical aptitude, in sharp contrast to the limited figures with whom Socrates frequently converses in the early dialogues. On the whole, in the middle and late works, as Plato's dramatic concerns diminish and the dialogues approach philosophical treatises, the interlocutors are informed and agreeable. One exception is the truculent Philebus in the *Philebus*, but his place is taken by the compliant Protarchus. In general, the interlocutors play less important roles in these works. The *Laws*—or at least substantial parts of it—show signs of having been written originally in the form of a treatise and then later, and perfunctorily, transformed into a dialogue. Plato may not have lived to complete the process, as, for example, Books 5 and 6 are almost uninterrupted discourse by the Athenian. In Books 2–10 of the *Republic,* Glaucon and Adeimantus are so compliant that Cornford edited their replies out of much of his edition of the work.[18] In the *Parmenides*, Parmenides wishes to have the youngest of those present answer his questions, because he will cause the fewest problems: 'He would be the least likely to be over-curious and most likely to say what he thinks; and moreover his replies would give me a chance to rest' (137b; Cornford transl.).

The interlocutors' philosophical significance diminishes with their dramatic significance. In various early dialogues, the interlocutor's limited understanding is used to guide the discussion. When the interlocutor is unable to understand a given question, Socrates is forced to explain some matter in detail. Thus, because Euthyphro is unable to understand the relationship between the gods' love and being holy (*Euthphr*. 10a), Socrates launches into a detailed discussion of something along the lines of the distinction between essential and accidental properties (10a–c), a distinction which, as Burnet notes, can be detected for the first time in Attic prose in the *Euthyphro*.[19] Euthyphro's inability to follow Socrates elsewhere provides the excuse for detailed discussion of the relationship between reverence and fear, and so essential points about the nature of convertible propositions (12a–c). Along similar lines, Meno's confusion between the definition of a term and its instances affords the opportunity for detailed discussion of the nature of definition (*Meno* 72a–76d). In these works and in others one could name, Socrates must patiently educate his limited interlocutors, thereby making these dialogues admirable introductions to basic philosophical points.

Plato handles things quite differently in his more abstract philosophical compositions. When he wishes to present detailed discussion of philosophical questions, he provides sophisticated interlocutors who are able to ask them. While Socrates generally initiates the discussion in the early works, in later works the *elenchos* gives

[18] F.M. Cornford (ed. and transl.), *The Republic of Plato* (Oxford, 1941), vii–viii; cf. *Tht*. 143b–c.
[19] J. Burnet (ed.), *Plato's* Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, *and* Crito (Oxford, 1924), on *Euthphr*. 11a7; see the articles cited in n. 16 above.

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way to sustained investigations, frequently motivated by the interlocutors. Simmias and Cebes advance the discussion of the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* with their repeated questions. Glaucon and Adeimantus, of course, do the same in the *Republic*. Even the limited Meno is able to raise the crucial question that calls forth Socrates' first sustained account of knowledge as recollection (80d). Outside of the *Meno*, detailed discussions of metaphysical and epistemological matters are directed at interlocutors with some acuity. Theaetetus is presented as exceptionally gifted in philosophical pursuits, and therefore able to serve in the difficult discussion about to commence (*Tht.* 143e–144b). He is also the interlocutor in the *Sophist.* A young Socrates, of course, is the interlocutor in the first part of the *Parmenides*. It is interesting that Plato avoids giving a general account of the theory of Forms in any single work by presenting interlocutors in both the *Republic* (476a, 505a, 507a–b) and the *Phaedo* (100b) who are already familiar with it. Socrates is therefore able to discuss portions of the theory in detail, without being sidetracked by preliminaries.

When the interlocutor is less philosophical, Plato's handling of even philosophical topics is quite different. The *Euthyphro* presents intimations of the theory of Forms, or perhaps an earlier version of the theory.[20] But because Euthyphro is neither philosophically astute nor familiar with the theory, it is not explored in detail. The aspects of the theory discussed in the *Euthyphro* shed light on the Forms' role in answering questions of definition, and obviously indicate that Plato had already worked up some version of the theory by the time he wrote the work. But the arguments in the *Euthyphro* do no more than touch upon the theory. Along similar lines, passages in the *Lysis* and the *Euthydemus* that can be taken as pointing to the Form of the Good are directed at interlocutors who are without knowledge of the Forms. Because these intimations remain undeveloped (*Lysis* 219c–d; *Euthyd.* 291b–292e), Plato's theory of the Good is only alluded to in these works.

Similar points could be made about other interlocutors, in regard to both what they are able to grasp and what they are not.

III

Interpretations of various scholars frequently violate the dramatic criterion. As noted in Section I above, commentators are especially likely to depart from the dramatic meaning of an exchange in defending a particular view of the nature of Socrates' or Plato's philosophical practice, although one encounters other kinds of cases as well. In order to illustrate the criterion's implications, I will discuss (A) Vlastos's analysis of Socrates' doctrine of the unity of the virtues in the *Protagoras* and, more briefly, (B) Richard Kraut's analysis of Socrates' arguments on behalf of the Laws of Athens in the *Crito*.

(A) The unity of the virtues in the Protagoras

A particularly egregious example of the misinterpretation that concerns us is found in Vlastos's much-discussed account of the unity of the virtues in the *Protagoras*.

[20] *Euthphr*. 6d–e; see R.E. Allen, *Plato's 'Euthyphro' and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (London, 1970).

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While Vlastos's procedure is clearly indefensible on many grounds, I will discuss it as a perhaps-unmatched example of the usefulness of my proposed criterion. In the discussion that concerns us, Vlastos contests widespread opinions that a series of Socrates' arguments do not make good philosophical sense and turn on sophistry.[21] He attempts to reinterpret various confusing and/or confused statements of the unity of the virtues in the work in order to make them consistent with his preferred interpretation, which he calls the 'Biconditionality Thesis' (= BT):

> If a man has one virtue, then he will necessarily have them all. (UVP, 232; *Prt*. 329e)

BT has the great advantage of presenting a commonsensical (if controversial) moral position that is also consistent with other Socratic doctrines (UVP, 233–4). Vlastos distinguishes two other statements of the unity of the virtues, which he calls the 'Similarity Thesis' (with which we need not be concerned) and the 'Unity Thesis' (= UT):

> The names for all of the virtues (Wisdom, Temperance, Courage, Justice, and Piety) are names for one thing. (UVP, 224–6; see especially *Prt*. 349b).

Vlastos objects to UT because he believes it implies that the names of the virtues are synonymous, a consequence that is 'nothing short of preposterous' (UVP, 227). Accordingly, he attempts to reinterpret UT by using 'the unproblematic thesis', BT, to show that, with its guidance, 'a wholly acceptable sense' can be derived from UT (UVP, 234). I will concentrate on one portion of Vlastos's lengthy (UVP is 44 pages), intricate analysis. Put roughly and simply, the main difference between BT and UT is that the former is concerned with individuals who possess the virtues, while the latter deals with the essences and/or names of the virtues themselves. In attempting to resolve UT into BT, Vlastos is especially interested in reinterpreting Socrates' proof at *Prt.* 330b–332a, which seems clearly to refer to virtue-essences. The proof is intended to show that Justice is holy and Holiness is just. The statements in the proof that most concern Vlastos are in the form 'A is B'. 'A' is a stand-in for a substantive noun (Wisdom, Holiness, etc.) and 'B' for a cognate adjective (wise, holy, etc.). Vlastos believes that his reinterpretation can succeed 'provided that the surface-grammar' of 'A is B' is disregarded 'and B is understood to apply not to the abstract entity named by "A" but to each of its instances …' (UVP, 235; his italics; see also UVP, 253).

Socrates begins the proof by asking Protagoras a series of questions. In somewhat simplified form, these are as follows:

(a) Is Justice something or not a thing at all (ἡ δικαιοσύνη πρᾶγμά τί ἐστιν ἢ οὐδὲν πρᾶγμα; 330c1)? Protagoras agrees that Justice is a 'thing'.
(b) Is Justice just or unjust (δίκαιόν ἐστιν ἢ ἄδικον; 330c2–5)?

Forced to choose between these alternatives, Protagoras agrees that:

(c) Justice is just (330c5–d1).

Socrates uses a similar series of questions to secure Protagoras' agreement that:

[21] 'There would be no need of resorting to [an interpretation that turns on Socrates' use of sophistry] if we could understand the Socratic formulae in a way which purges them of their offensive features.' (Vlastos [n. 10], 221–69, at 223; see also 233). This article is cited hereafter as UVP.

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(d) Holiness is also a thing (πρᾶγμα) (330d2–5),
(e) Holiness is holy (330d5–e2),

and, more grudgingly, the conclusion:

(f) Justice is holy and Holiness is just (331a6–c4).

Vlastos believes that reinterpretation of the 'A is B' sentences is justified, because to describe abstract entities with moral predicates (for example 'Justice is just') is 'sheer nonsense' (UVP, 252). But it is apparent that there are problems with his reading of the proof. When a commentator asks us to disregard the 'surface grammar' of a passage, not to take it at 'face value' (UVP, 252), we should be on guard. It is not surprising that Vlastos's reinterpretation has been criticized. In the words of Taylor, his view 'requires the reader to read an enormous amount into the text without any guidance'.[22] Even if it is possible to construe (a)–(f) as concerned with individuals rather than with abstract entities, to quote Taylor once again, Vlastos nowhere explains how the reader might be expected to understand the statements in the proper sense 'in advance of the pains-taking step-by-step explanation which he himself gives'.[23]

However, Vlastos has a response to the charge of arbitrary interpretation. A certain amount of reinterpretation is necessary to make good philosophical sense of what Socrates says. The alternative is a confused moral view, which Socrates appears to uphold with blatant sophistry. Thus Vlastos's procedure could be defended as in keeping with a common sense approach to troublesome passages. Such a procedure is recommended by I.M. Crombie:

> […] we shall naturally try, whenever we find a passage the reasoning of which is apparently sophistical, to find an interpretation of it which renders it valid, or at least to reconstruct the valid train of thought the presence of which in Plato's mind allowed the fallacy to pass undetected.[24]

Accordingly, a supporter of Vlastos has a ready response to the charge of reading into the text. Because of the extreme liberties Vlastos takes, it is unlikely that this response would satisfy many of his critics. But a Vlastos supporter can justify some reconstruction. The question is how much.

To this question, the dramatic criterion affords a response. If we look at Socrates' argument from the point of view of Protagoras, we can see that Vlastos's interpretation cannot be correct. Even if the reader of the *Protagoras* could be expected to have the tremendous insight required to piece together the arguments that Vlastos has in mind, Vlastos has not explained why Protagoras should disregard the surface grammar of Socrates' questions and view them as about instances rather than about abstract entities. The competitive nature of the discussion between Socrates and Protagoras makes their philosophical motives difficult to fathom. But even if we set this aside, it seems clear that Protagoras would take the abstract nouns in (a)–(f) as applying to substances (of some sort).[25] Because he could not be expected to grasp the troubling implications of

[22] Taylor (n. 14), 119
[23] Taylor (n. 14), 119. Perhaps gesturing in the direction of this paper, J. Ferejohn criticizes Vlastos for 'not taking seriously what [Socrates] says' in the *Protagoras* ('The unity of virtue and the objects of Socratic inquiry', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 20 [1982], 1–21, at 4–7).
[24] I.M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, 2 vols. (London, 1962–3), 1.26; see also 1.23–4. T. Irwin presents a similar statement of principle in the Preface to his edition of the *Gorgias* (Oxford, 1979).
[25] Guthrie (n. 7), 4.225, 4.223.

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UT, he would have no reason to seek out a reading of Socrates' proof in which it was not about abstract entities. Because the mistakes involved in attaching moral predicates to abstract entities are more obvious, Protagoras could perhaps be thought to be aware of them. However, compelling evidence that he understands the proof as about entities rather than about the people who instantiate them is found in (a) and (d), in which justice and holiness are agreed to be things. There is no satisfactory explanation for these characterizations in Vlastos's article.

Vlastos's reading of the proof is improbable, because it does not make dramatic sense. Vlastos writes that 'as a work of dramatic art the *Protagoras* is flawless' (UVP, 230 n. 22). In order to salvage his reading of the proof he must explain why Socrates would present arguments that Protagoras could not possibly understand.[26]

B. Obligation in the Crito

In the *Crito* Socrates, of course, confronts his execution. If he believes that an innocent man must submit to unjust punishment, then the view of political obligation he expresses in the work must be quite authoritarian. Traditionally, most scholars have held that Socrates' proofs in the *Crito*—put into the mouth of the Laws of Athens—leave the citizen little room not to obey the law, even unjust laws. Scholars also believe that Socrates' proofs are deeply flawed and conflict with other Socratic doctrines, especially that one must never do what is unjust, and with what Socrates says in the *Apology* about refusing to obey a court order to give up philosophy, should such an order be forthcoming (*Ap*. 29b–e).

In *Socrates and the State*, Kraut attempts to show that Socrates' views in the *Crito* are both more liberal and more sophisticated philosophically than the traditional interpretation allows. In addition, Kraut believes that the Laws present a fully worked political theory—'the theory a city ought to propound to its citizens and not merely … a theory Socrates proposes to Crito'.[27] It bears mention that Kraut's book was widely acclaimed.[28] I think it can be seen that, in spite of the book's strong points, Kraut disregards the dramatic meaning of the Laws's speech and so his reconstructed arguments are not 'in' the *Crito*.[29] Because there is also strong textual evidence against Kraut's view, it can be shown to be incorrect on independent grounds. My feeling is that a major reason why Kraut misinterprets the Laws's proofs is because he disregards their dramatic meaning.

I will focus on Kraut's analysis of the proof that begins at 51c. The Laws argue, anticipating later theories of the social contract, that Socrates has performed various acts that constitute an agreement to do what the laws command. According to the traditional view, the agreement

a. is made at *dokimasia*. At the age of seventeen a youth follows a certain procedure in order to be enrolled as a citizen by his deme. This process is referred to as *dokimasia* (see SS, 154).

[26] Vlastos appeals to Protagoras' understanding of various points in the discussion at UVP, 224, 242 n. 57, 244 n. 68.

[27] Kraut (n. 15), 40 (cited hereafter as SS).

[28] E.g. T. Irwin, 'Socratic inquiry and politics', *Ethics* 96 (1986), 400–15; G. Vlastos in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 August 1984, 931–2; Rutherford (n. 5), xxx.

[29] Cf. Kraut's remarks in SS, 110; he should be criticized for overlooking questions concerning an interpretation's degree of fidelity to an author's intentions.

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b. can be abrogated by leaving the country. The Laws repeatedly say that Socrates was not forced to stay in Athens. He was free to leave at any time. In addition, he was not tricked into this agreement; he was not compelled to make it; and he had adequate time to make it (52e).
c. obligates the citizen to obey all the laws of the state, as long as he resides in it —unless he can convince the Laws that some law is wrong (51e). (Reasons of space preclude detailed discussion of this 'persuade or obey' stipulation.)[30]

Two of Kraut's main claims that contravene traditional interpretations are as follows:

(A) *dokimasia* alone is not enough to make the agreement; the agreement also requires that the subject be satisfied with the laws of the state over a lengthy but indeterminate period of time.

(B) residence in the state is not the only sign of satisfaction. Various indications of satisfaction bear on whether an agreement between an individual and the state has been made.

Kraut defends these points with close readings of the text, by calling attention to details that the traditional view does not adequately explain. For the purposes of the discussion here, I will not examine Kraut's arguments in detail, but I will merely point out passages where he clearly violates the dramatic criterion. For instance, there is direct textual evidence in opposition to Kraut's points. As he notes, at 52d6–7 (and at 50c4–6) Socrates and Crito say that an agreement has been made (SS, 170 n. 9). This poses a problem for (B). The Laws say that Socrates 'had seventy years in which [he] could have gone away, if we did not please [him] and if [he] thought the agreements were unfair' (εἰ μὴ ἠρέσκομεν ἡμεῖς μηδὲ δίκαιαι ἐφαίνοντό σοι αἱ ὁμολογίαι εἶναι) (52e3–5). The Laws do not say 'Socrates had seventy years to terminate the process of making an agreement by expressing dissatisfaction'. Compare the language of Kraut: 'The only way [the adult citizen] can, with a single act, prevent his agreement from being completed is to take up residence in a different city' (SS, 185; see also 177). But according to 52e3–5, the agreements have not only been completed but also were completed long ago. The sentence indicates that they were completed 70 years ago—although this is an exaggeration. The Laws's position appears to be that it is normal for someone born an Athenian to become a citizen, and so the agreement dates from birth. Thus the textual evidence tells against Kraut's (A) as well as his (B).

A severe problem for Kraut's interpretation is that Crito is of limited philosophical sophistication.[31] He cannot possibly be expected to furnish for himself the intricate network of tacit assumptions and distinctions that Kraut's interpretation requires. Because Crito would accept the Laws's proofs at something close to face value, much of Kraut's interpretation can be dismissed out of hand. For instance, once Kraut raises the relevance of satisfaction to one's agreement to obey the law, numerous questions arise as to how satisfaction is expressed. For instance, it is necessary to

[30] See Kraut, SS, ch. 3; however, even if we grant much of Kraut's reading, his conclusions are overly strong. He says the Laws 'welcome dissent' (166); their position 'invites dissent' (181). I see no textual warrant for such claims.

[31] Cf. G. Young, 'Socrates and obedience', *Phronesis* 19 (1974), 1–29. Young's position is close to mine, in holding that Socrates' proofs must be assessed according to their intended effects upon Crito, although I believe that many of his specific interpretations are improbable.

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introduce a distinction between feelings of satisfaction and actions that express satisfaction. Kraut is not bothered by the fact that such a distinction is not found in the text: 'Can the Laws have been too stupid to realize this?' (SS, 172). Kraut's view requires that we 'deepen our understanding of the variety of ways in which people can make agreements' (SS, 172). He focusses upon a kind of agreement that is expressed by non-verbal signs of satisfaction. The Laws do not require a list of such signs, and so they need not raise questions about what these signs are and at what point they constitute an agreement. To ask for such an abstract criterion would be unreasonable: 'no one can delimit the class of words that signal assent, and similarly the Laws need no definitive list of actions that will count as signs of agreement' (SS, 174).

Other problems arise. What specific laws has one promised to obey through non-verbal signs of satisfaction? Must one obey laws with which one is dissatisfied? According to Kraut: '[T]he *Crito* would be an absurd document if it were to hold that sincerely expressed objections to a statute do not express dissatisfaction with it' (SS, 182); 'Obviously, if agreement is shown through natural expressions of satisfaction, then the Laws must concede that dissatisfaction can be manifested in the same way' (SS, 182). Additional instances could be presented, but the main point should be clear. It is not enough to ask what the Laws know or assume or could not be so stupid as not to believe. One must also ask what Crito can be taken to understand. Even if some of the assumptions that Kraut's view requires could be furnished by Crito, it is unlikely that Crito could construct the elaborate series of tacit inferences that Kraut has in mind without Socrates' help. At some point the contention that Socrates does not mention these distinctions and assumptions because he expects Crito to supply them and to weave them into an elaborate argumentative edifice becomes insupportable.

Crito is not afraid to tell Socrates when he cannot understand a certain question (50c). The speech of the Laws is for his benefit, and on three occasions (50c, 51c, 52d) Socrates interrupts it to make sure that Crito agrees with him. Having held numerous discussions with Socrates in the past (46c–d, 49a), Crito knows the conventions and purpose of Socratic dialectic, and would surely speak up if he could not understand additional points. By the end of the work, Crito has been convinced by Socrates' arguments (54d)—despite the flaws that they contain, which would be apparent to a more acute interlocutor. I do not wish to say that Socrates could not present a rigorous set of arguments for his view of political obligation. But Socrates does not do this in the *Crito*. In keeping with the discussion in Section III, I believe that a dialogue in which Socrates developed a 'theory' of political obligation would differ from the *Crito* in having a more sophisticated interlocutor, who would raise the complex problems that such a theory must address.

IV

The two instances we have examined should indicate problems in reconstructing arguments without reference to how they are intended to be understood by interlocutors. Considerations of space preclude examination of other objectionable reconstructions—or similar misinterpretations—of which there is no shortage in the literature.

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In regard to larger questions of Plato interpretation—especially of the earlier dialogues—the argument of this paper has clear implications, but these can be discussed only briefly. Full discussion would require an additional paper.

To begin with, nothing I have said is intended to question the evidentiary value of the clear statements of Socrates' positions or the careful arguments in which he supports them. The implications, rather, concern arguments of questionable validity, especially those that contain obvious fallacies or are problematic for other reasons. The two examples just discussed fall into these categories. As I said above, in interpreting such arguments, we should place less direct weight on their workings than many scholars allow. Many analytical scholars in particular believe that Socrates' philosophical positions are argued for directly in specific passages, and so a reconstruction of Socrates' views depends directly on analysis of arguments. These scholars treat each step in a given argument, whether statement or question, as an inherent part of the position Socrates holds.

Applying the dramatic criterion, I believe that, in many passages, the most important and interesting material from a philosophical perspective is not *in* the text. Exploring such issues requires wide-ranging survey of themes in different dialogues. But while the resultant material can be read into the text, there is a considerable gap between the important philosophical views Socrates is suggesting or alluding to and what he actually says. Consider an additional example, a portion of Socrates' refutation of Gorgias in the *Gorgias* (460b1–7).

(1) Whoever has learnt building is a builder.
(2) Whoever has learnt music is a musician.
(3) Whoever has learnt medicine is a medical man.

The principle is generalized:

(4) Whoever has learnt a particular subject has the quality conferred on him by his knowledge of that subject (460b4–5; transl. following Dodds).

From this principle the conclusion follows:

(5) Whoever has learnt justice is just.

When Gorgias accepts (5), the most likely reason for his assent is that he is taken in by a misleading induction, which Socrates uses to trick him. (5) is basic Socratic doctrine, but there is little reason to believe that Gorgias is aware of, let alone accepts, the complex web of doctrine concerning the relationship between virtue and knowledge on which Socrates' belief in (5) rests. While these doctrines can be read into the text in order to make it more interesting philosophically and to rescue Socrates from a possible charge of sophistry, because they fall beyond Gorgias' possible understanding of the argument, they are not in the text. To get at Socrates' view concerning these matters, we must move beyond the overt steps of this argument and look at overall themes in different dialogues.

Accordingly, in cases such as this, rather than careful reconstruction of the steps of problematic arguments, a preferable alternative relies upon a kind of coherence method. On this approach, the scholar should move readily, back and forth, between specific passages and the wider context of Plato's works. This approach begins by analysing troublesome passages in accordance with the understanding of the interlocutor. Because such analysis oftentimes leads to positions that are less than satisfactory either as explanations of Socrates' philosophy or in terms of philosophical plausibility, further

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interpretation is necessary.[32] But this depends on an accumulation of evidence. In many cases, what is more important than the particular logic of an argument are the overall themes it suggests and how they tie in with the larger context of Plato's thought. Thus, for example, in regard to the unity of the virtues, one would examine the overall evidence for Vlastos's BT as opposed to other interpretations.[33] The argument at *Prt.* 330c–331c provides some evidence for Vlastos's view. But this evidence is indirect. Rather than being deduced or proved in the argument, an interpretation of the unity of the virtues is indirectly suggested, and requires additional support.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that it is wrong to expect more precision in the treatment of a subject than the nature of the subject permits (*Eth. Nic.* 1094b23–5). This precept applies here. One should not expect a degree of precision from a questionable argument beyond what is consistent with Plato's dramatic intentions, and so, generally, with the understanding of Socrates' interlocutor.

University of Virginia GEORGE KLOSKO
gk@virginia.edu

[32] As Rutherford says (of arguments in the *Euthydemus*), 'Plato leaves some of the work for the reader to do' ([n. 5], 116).

[33] E.g. T. Penner, 'The unity of virtue', *Philosophical Review* 82 (1973), 35–68.

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