

In honour of David Sedley,
who asks good questions
and answers them

AUTHORITY AND THE DIALECTIC OF SOCRATES

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Socrates was the author of a hymn to Apollo and versifications of Aesopic fables. He was not the author of anything philosophical.¹ Socrates acknowledged the authority of gods, of Athenian law, and of his commanding officers.² He did not acknowledge any philosophical authority. Nor indeed did he claim any philosophical authority for himself. If Socrates belongs in a volume on Authors and Authorities, that is because, in line with the old slogan that ‘For any one pair of opposites, there is a single branch of knowledge,’ he can illuminate philosophical authorship and philosophical authority by being so distant from them both.

If I want you to accept something, but do not have the authority that entitles you to take my word for it, then I must show you the thing in such a way that you can see it for yourself. For instance, I might turn out my pockets to show you that they are empty. But not all showing is as straightforward as that. Showing you

¹ The evidence, such as it is, for Socrates’ own writings, such as they were, is gathered in West (1972) vol. 2, 118-19.

² Gods: e.g. Plato *Apology* 21b, *Phaedo* 60d-61a. Athenian law: e.g. Plato *Crito* 50a-54e, Xenophon *Memorabilia* 4.4.1-4. Commanding officers: Plato *Apology* 28e.

something philosophical is more like showing you something in mathematics: I have to do it by presenting you with argumentation and reasoning.

Reasoning sometimes comes as an uninterrupted monologue, and sometimes as a dialectical sequence of questions and answers. Of course, not all reasoning is equally happy in either format. Imagine an argument for solipsism which concludes with: 'So you agree then that nothing exists apart from me?' 'Indeed, I do agree; for you alone exist.' Or imagine an uninterrupted monologue which argues that the only arguments worth considering are dialectical. Sometimes Socrates' arguments verge on such incongruity; for example, in a speech addressed to Callicles at Plato *Gorgias* 486e-488a, he hymns dialectic monologically. More often, however, what Socrates argues does not by its content demand exposition in only one format. As Demetrius *On style* 296-7 points out:

In general, just as the same wax can be moulded into a dog by one person, into an ox by another, and into a horse by a third, so too the same material can be presented by one person in declarations and assertions ('People bequeath property to their children, but they do not bequeath with it the knowledge of handling their bequest'—this kind of expression is called Aristippean), while another will put forward the same material by way of insinuation, as often in Xenophon (such as 'For people should bequeath to their children, not only property, but also the knowledge of handling it'), while what is called the distinctively Socratic kind (of which Aeschines and Plato are thought to be the greatest aficionados) would transform the material we have described into questioning along some such lines as this: "My boy, how much property did your father bequeath you? Quite a lot, I presume, and not easily totted up." "Yes Socrates, a lot." "So did he also then leave you the knowledge of handling it?"

Since Socrates' reasoning could so often be presented in other modes, it is consequently all the more striking that, as Demetrius also points out, Socrates' favourite way of reasoning with people should be by getting them to answer his questions. But what is so good about question and answer?

In Plato *Protagoras* 334c-d, Socrates asks Protagoras to confine himself to brisk question and answer, on the grounds that Socrates' memory is too poor to cope with a long speech. But Socrates's poor memory, and his consequent inability to cope with a long speech, are manifest fictions. The last 52 Stephanus pages of the *Protagoras* are a single long speech by Socrates, as are the 20 pages of the *Lysis*, the 23 of the *Charmides*, and the 294 of the *Republic*. If you think that a long speech like this is a swizz, since it narrates a conversation consisting of shorter speeches, then recollect that Socrates often delivers long speeches that are not themselves narrated conversation: some examples are the Myth of Er in Plato *Republic* 614b-621d, the exposition of Simonides in Plato *Protagoras* 342a-347a, and the Palinode about love in Plato *Phaedrus* 243e-257b. In any case 'long speech' (μακρὸς λόγος) is just an idiomatic term for the sort of rambling speech thought characteristic of slaves (Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1091a8-9, Euripides *Iphigeneia in Aulis* 313): it expresses disdain for a kind of speech contrasted with brisk question and answer, but it does not really give the grounds of that disdain.

We get closer to Socrates' grounds for preferring question and answer, when we reflect that a long speech is rhetoric, apt for bamboozling a mass audience, while an exchange of shorter speeches by contrast allows for pedantic focus on detail after detail. This contrast is explicit at the start of Melian Dialogue (Thucydides 5.84-85), which I quote in the translation of Thomas Hobbes:

These ambassadors the Melians refused to bring before the multitude; but commanded them to deliver their message before the magistrates and the few; and they accordingly said as followeth: Athenians. 'Since we may not speak to the multitude, for fear lest when they hear our persuasive and unanswerable arguments all at once in a continued oration, they should chance to be seduced (for we know that this is the scope of your bringing us to audience before the few), make surer yet that point, you that sit here: answer you also to every particular, not in a set speech, but presently interrupting us, whensoever anything shall be said by us which shall seem unto you to be otherwise. And first answer us whether you like this motion or not?'

Here the Athenians take it to be a sign of the strength of their argument that it does not need continuous exposition before a mass audience to make it seem plausible. Plato's *Hippias* (*Hippias Minor* 369b-c) draws the same contrast between rhetoric and dialectic, only to suggest that it is a weakness of Socrates' argument that it could not win a vote when presented as a single long speech:

You, Socrates, are always weaving arguments like this: you pull out the most tricky bit of an argument, and keep hold of it, fixing on it detail by detail, and you don't engage with the general theme of the argument. For here is a case in point: I will, if you like, demonstrate to you by powerful argument, based on a lot of evidence, that Homer made Achilles better than Odysseus, and no liar, and made Odysseus deceitful and full of lies and worse than Achilles; and you, if you like, take your turn and contend with my argument by setting forth your own argument that Odysseus was better. Then these people here will know more fully which of us speaks better.

Yet even though Socrates does prefer dialectic to rhetoric, he does not uniformly disdain all rhetoric.³ He has different attitudes to each of the three kinds into which rhetoric has been divided since Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1358a36-b29 drew his distinctions between epideictic, dicanic and sumbouleutic.

The speaker of a sumbouleutic speech attempts to persuade an assembly of the wisdom of some proposal for future action. The speaker of a dicanic speech attempts to persuade a jury of the justice of his case, and the injustice of his opponent's. Not so the speaker of an epideictic speech, or display orator. 'Some [speeches] should be persuasive, others apt for display' (Demosthenes 61.2). 'Someone who is not just giving a display, but actually means to achieve something, must search out those arguments that will persuade this pair of cities' (Isocrates 4.17). The speaker of an epideictic speech does not attempt to persuade us of anything, except perhaps of his own virtuosity as a speaker. When he praises

³ Much of what follows was sparked by Jamie Dow's 'Socrates' challenge: why dialogue is better than speechmaking', his contribution to the Keeling Colloquium 2013 in University College, London.

Athens in a funerary oration, like those in Thucydides 2.35-46, Demosthenes 60, and Lysias 2, the Athenian audience are already convinced anyway that theirs is a very splendid city. When, like Gorgias (B 11), he argues that Helen of Troy was an innocent victim of force majeure, the audience will be delighted at the audacity with which he defends the indefensible, but this will no more shift their beliefs about Helen than our beliefs about rabbits and hats are shifted by a conjuror. Or again, an epideictic orator might successfully praise pots and pebbles (Alexander *On starting points for rhetoric* 3.11-12), even though the audience remain as indifferent as ever on the entire issue of pots and pebbles.

When your speech will not persuade, and is not even intended to persuade, then you need not fear that it will persuade people of anything wrong. Even the austere and scrupulously honest can therefore indulge in epideictic oratory. Hence, for instance, the speech at Plato *Protagoras* 342a-343c, in which Socrates praises the intellectual attainments of the Spartans. In Plato *Symposium* 198d-e, Socrates proposes a standard for proper praise that his speech about the Spartans does not meet:

In my simplicity, I supposed that one should in every case tell the truth about the subject of the encomium, and, with this as basis, we should select from the truths about it those that are the most beautiful, and present them in the most becoming manner. And I was priding myself on how well I would speak, given my knowledge of the truth about praising a thing. But this turns out, apparently, not to be what it is to praise a thing well. On the contrary, to praise a thing well means offering it the biggest and most beautiful compliments, true or untrue; and if false, never mind.

But not even this more stringent standard prevents Socrates giving, in praise of Love, a speech that is, by the most conventional standard, a marvellous piece of epideictic.

Socrates is much more reluctant to give dicanic and sumbouleutic speeches, speeches of kinds that are meant to persuade. He gives dicanic speeches only at his own trial (Plato *Apology* 17d); and he never gives sumbouleutic speeches at all (Plato

Apology 31c). In a conversation with Gorgias (Plato *Gorgias* 454e-455a) he gives some rationale for his reluctance:

SOC: So shall we posit two kinds of persuasion, one that gives belief without knowledge, and another that gives knowledge?

GORG: Certainly.

SOC: So which of these is produced by rhetorical persuasion in lawcourts and other mass gatherings about matters of justice and injustice? The one which gives belief without knowledge, or the one which gives knowledge?

GORG: Obviously, Socrates, the one which gives belief.

SOC: Rhetoric, it therefore seems, produces persuasion that gives belief, rather than instruction, about what is or isn't just.

GORG: Yes.

SOC: So the rhetorician has no capacity to instruct lawcourts and other mass gatherings about justice and injustice; his capacity is only to persuade. For one could hardly instruct so big a mass gathering on such large matters in a little time.

GORG: Certainly not.

It is no accident that an orator in democratic Athens cannot hope to instruct a jury, but at best to persuade it without imparting knowledge. The jury was to be representative of the entire citizen body; there was no appeal from it to any higher authority, and it was addressed as 'O men of Athens', the term also used to address the entire Assembly. The entire citizen body of Athens was thought to amount to 'more than thirty thousand' (Plato *Symposium* 175e, Aristophanes *Ecclesiazousai* 1132). Quite how big a sample it takes to be representative of such a body depends of course on how closely we want the sample to match the body as a whole, and on how confident we want to be of that match. For example, statisticians often want to be at least 95% confident that the sample diverges from the population as a whole by less than 5%. If that is what we want—and for decisions with grave consequences we may well want more—then, as a matter of mathematical fact, our juries will have to contain at least 379 jurors. In Athens, they standardly contained at least 500; and for particularly important cases they might contain a multiple of 500. These large juries had to decide many cases (e.g. Aristophanes *Clouds* 206-08, *Peace* 503-05 and

Wasps passim); and this too can hardly be avoided in a city with a large population of equals, subject to the rule of law, and not divided into the retinues of a handful of competing magnates. Many cases, each of which must be tried by a large jury, means that, if the citizens are to have enough time for other activities, there must be severe limitations on the time that a trial can take. And it is this fact—one might call it the transcendental deduction of the water clock—which ensures that dicanic oratory cannot reasonably hope to achieve the good kind of persuasion, the kind that imparts knowledge.

Here then is a reason for Socrates to shun dicanic oratory so far as lies in his power. And that will mean never bringing prosecutions against others. But it was not in his power to guarantee that others would never bring prosecutions against him. And, as a citizen law-abiding to the point of pedantry, he would have felt obliged, when prosecuted, to attend court and offer a defence. So Socrates eventually had to produce dicanic oratory. But while Socratic principles allowed his epideictic to meet the common standards for good epideictic, they required of him an unusual form of dicanic. He was reluctant to aim at the persuasion that results in mere belief without knowledge, even when the mere belief in which it results is a true belief. For there are things that speakers do in law courts that impart no knowledge but that might get people to form beliefs. In Plato's *Apology* Socrates mentions two, and declares that the court cannot expect either from him: stylish speech (17b-c), and a parade of sorrowing dependents (34c). If I am defending myself against criminal charges, then stylish speech or weeping children are simply not evidence that I am innocent—except of course in the unlikely circumstance that the crime with which I am charged is that of never speaking stylishly, or having uniformly dry-eyed children. So there is no need of such things. In fact, there is every need not to have such things: for a juror who sees my children weep, and on that basis concludes that I am innocent of corrupting the young men, has had his judgement corrupted. A good juror must instead 'focus simply and solely on the one question: is what I am saying just or not? For that is the virtue of a judge, as it is the virtue of a speaker to tell the truth' (18a). So whereas Socrates' epideictic oratory might look pretty much like other people's epideictic oratory, his dicanic oratory is going to look much more austere.

What about sumbouleutic oratory? Well, we can dream, as Socrates does in Plato *Gorgias* 504c-e, of an austere oratory that addresses the Assembly, making them just and sensible. But we can do no more than dream. Austere oratory before the Assembly is no more likely to be effective than austere oratory before a jury. And even if an orator deploys all manner of embellishments he is as liable to antagonise the Assembly as to mollify it. According to Ronald A. Knox's study of 41 of those who were most active in Athenian politics, 'only 19, less than half, avoid some kind of political catastrophe at the hands of (or, in the case of voluntary exile, because of fear of) their fellow citizens.'⁴ Now these 41 were all more eager to please the demos than Socrates would have been. If those eager to please had a greater than even chance of coming to a sticky end, how much more likely is it that Socrates would have done so too? Socrates is not exaggerating when he says in Plato *Apology* 31d: 'if I had tried to take part in politics, I would have been killed long ago.' So a Socrates will avoid sumbouleutic oratory as far as possible. And that means completely. For while he might be prosecuted and so have to speak in a court, there is no way that he can be forced to speak in the Assembly.

Socrates therefore does not uniformly disdain all rhetoric. And even if he did, that would not explain his preference for question-and-answer dialectic. For question-and-answer dialectic is not the only alternative to addressing a large audience continuously for a time limited by the waterclock. Another alternative would be addressing a small audience continuously for an unlimited time. We might call this Mr Gladstone's alternative, in memory of Queen Victoria's complaint that even in a private audience 'Mr Gladstone addresses me as if I were a public meeting.' We still need to explain why Socrates does not take Mr Gladstone's alternative. Why insist on question-and-answer? And if question-and-answer is the best way to expound thoughts, why must the person who gives the answers be different from

⁴ Knox (1985) 143. Knox's figures exclude both assassinations by oligarchs, like those mentioned in Thucydides 8.65.2, and executions by the demos of more obscure politicians, like the six generals mentioned in Xenophon *History of Greece* 1.7.34 and the nine treasury officials mentioned in Antiphon 5.69.

the person who asks the questions? As Callicles asks Socrates in Plato *Gorgias* 505d: 'Couldn't you go through the argument yourself, whether asserting it all by yourself or giving answers to yourself?' Why is that when, at Plato *Gorgias* 506c-507c, Socrates presents his argument by putting questions to himself, and answering them himself, he would much rather have Callicles do the answering? Or, to put the same question another way round, what do Callicles and others hope to avoid by not answering? Note how Callicles remains silent while in Plato *Gorgias* 515c Socrates says to him:

By this stage, haven't we often agreed that this is how a statesman must act? Have we agreed it, or haven't we? Answer. 'We have agreed.' I will answer on your behalf.

Note again how Protagoras moves from saying yes, to nodding, to just about nodding, to complete lack of response, during the concluding exchange from Plato *Protagoras* 360c-d:

'But manliness,' I [Socrates] said, 'is opposite to cowardice.'

He [Protagoras] said it was.

'And wisdom about what is and isn't scary is opposite to ignorance about these things?'

At this point too, he still nodded his assent.

'And ignorance about these things is cowardice?'

At this point, he just about managed to nod his assent.

'So wisdom about what is and isn't scary is manliness, being opposite to ignorance about these things?'

At this point, he refused to nod his assent any longer; he just kept silent.

And I said 'What's up, Protagoras? You are not saying yes in answer to my questions, and not saying no either?'

'Finish it off yourself,' said he.

Note finally how at Plato *Gorgias* 506c Callicles tells Socrates:

Do the talking yourself, there's a good chap, and finish things off.

Why should it so matter to Socrates and his interlocutors which of them, Socrates or interlocutor, answers his questions?

In the first place, when people explicitly state things for themselves, that can turn our—and their—beliefs or suspicions into certain knowledge. There is a neat example in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Beatrice and Benedick have met only to exchange insults. But Benedick is starting to suspect that he loves Beatrice, and, because of what his friends say, to suspect that Beatrice loves him. And her position is of course a mirror of his: Beatrice is starting to suspect that she loves Benedick, and, because of what her friends say, to suspect that Benedick loves her. Then they tell one another that they love one another. Before, they just suspected; now, they know. Likewise, when in Plato *Gorgias* 453b–c Socrates interrogates Gorgias:

As for what this rhetorical persuasion is that you're talking of, and what the subjects are on which it is persuasion, I have no clear knowledge, as you should be well aware, though I do have my suspicions about what you're talking of, and its subjects. All the same, I will nevertheless ask you what you say this persuasion is that depends on rhetoric, and what you say its subjects are. Now, given that I have my own suspicions, what will be the point of my asking you, rather than speaking myself? It won't be for your sake, but for the sake of the argument, for it to progress in such a way as to make it as plain as possible to us what it is an argument about.

Here it is evident that nothing other than Gorgias' own answer to this question will do.

In the second place, even when both parties already know a fact, an explicit declaration can turn their separate knowledge into what is called common knowledge⁵ of that fact. To see this, let's change the example. Suppose I have treated you badly; you know it; and I know it. So what then is the point in my saying to you 'I have treated you badly,' when I am only saying something that we both already know? Well, we now not only each know it; we both know that we both know it; and we both know that we both know that we both know it; and so on, ad infinitum. Once something is in this way common knowledge between two people, instead of simply being known separately by each of the two, all sorts of new things can happen. For example, you know that my flies are undone; I know that my flies

⁵ There is a classic definition of common knowledge in Lewis (1969) 56.

are undone; and, to begin with, we each pretend not to have noticed. I might even realise that you have noticed, but pretend not to have realised this; and you might notice my realisation, and connive at my pretence. But when you tell me that my flies are undone, I decide there is no point in trying to act natural any more, and instead do them up. In short, when something is known by each of several people, but is not common knowledge between them, it is possible to keep up appearances, as in the tea-parties given by the less than opulent gentlefolk in Chapter 1 of *Cranford* (Gaskell (1853)):

Everyone...talked on about household forms and ceremonies as if we all believed that our hostess had a regular servants' hall, second table, with housekeeper and steward, instead of the one little charity-school maiden, whose short ruddy arms could never have been strong enough to carry the tray upstairs, if she had not been assisted in private by her mistress, who now sat in state, pretending not to know what cakes were sent up, though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes.

When one is not merely the audience of a argument presented monologically, but an interlocutor giving explicit assent to the steps of an argument presented dialectically, then it is common knowledge between all parties to the argument what they all agree on. Thus Xenophon *Symposium* 4.56:

'Let us start by agreeing on what it is that a pimp does. And whatever questions I ask, don't you lot hesitate to answer. The idea is that we will know what we are jointly agreed on. Do you accept that?' he [Socrates] said.

'Absolutely,' said they; and once they had said 'Absolutely,' they all kept saying this in unison thereafter.

And once it is common knowledge that we have agreed on something, I can hardly avoid agreeing—and indeed giving my explicit assent—when you put to me some evident consequence of what we have agreed on. If I refuse to assent, I simply look sulky or stupid.

This makes dialectical argument peculiarly coercive. It can leave us, as

Callicles says in Plato *Gorgias* 482e ‘trussed up and gagged’. Xenophon *Memorabilia* 4.6.15 puts essentially the same point in a a more long-winded way:

Whenever he went through something in an argument himself, he would proceed by steps that had the most assent, deeming this to be what makes an argument secure. And that is why, of all those known to me, he got much the most assent from those listening. He said that Homer accorded Odysseus the honour of being ‘a secure speaker’ [*Odyssey* 8.171] because he was good at taking arguments through steps with which people agreed.

Here ‘by steps that had the most assent’ translates διὰ τῶν μάλιστα ὁμολογουμένων. Gregory Vlastos translated this phrase originally as ‘from the most generally accepted opinions’ and later as ‘from the most strongly held opinions’. Both earlier and later, he took this phrase to comment on the premisses from which Socrates reasoned, and took the entire passage to mean that the premisses and conclusions of Socrates’ arguments were particularly uncontroversial.⁶ As Vlastos himself acknowledged, this interpretation makes Xenophon look silly: for how could Xenophon have thought that Socrates’ conclusions were uncontroversial, or that reasoning from uncontroversial premisses cannot lead to controversial conclusions? We can be kinder to Xenophon if we interpret him as talking instead of how, at each step of the argument, Socrates compels the interlocutor to signal his assent.

There is one way to answer Socrates’ questions without getting trussed and gagged. It is to answer the questions, while making it clear that one does not mean one’s answers seriously, that one gives them only to please—or to humour—the questioner. Callicles often does this in Plato’s *Gorgias*:

CAL: For quite some time now, Socrates, I have been signalling agreement as I listen to you. I am conscious that, if anyone ever grants you anything, even in play, you delight in seizing on it, as if you were a youngster. (499b)

...

CAL: Let’s grant you that, so that you can finish the argument. (510a)

⁶ Vlastos (1983), reprinted in Fine (1999) 36-63 (which translates ‘most generally accepted’ on p. 49), and much revised as Chapter 1 of Vlastos (1994) (which translates ‘most strongly held’ on p. 14).

...

SOC: Are we to lay it down that this is so?

CAL: Indeed we are, if that is what you find more pleasant. (514a)

...

SOC: Do you think this, or don't you?

CAL: Indeed I do—that's to gratify you. (516b)

It is in the same spirit that Thrasymachus says this to Socrates in Plato *Republic* 350e:

So either you let me have my say; or, if you want to ask questions, ask away—and I will say 'Right ho!' and nod and shake my head, as one does to old biddies when they are telling their tales.

The idea is to spoil Socrates' victory by making it look easy.

There is a comparison and a contrast to be drawn with an incident in Chapter 33 of *Catch 22* (Heller (1961)), when some Americans try to force an Italian to say uncle, that is, to acknowledge that they have her beat:

'Say uncle,' they said to her.

'Uncle,' she said.

'No, no. Say uncle.'

'Uncle,' she said.

'She still doesn't understand.'

'You still don't understand, do you? We can't really make you say uncle unless you don't want to say uncle. Don't you see? Don't say uncle when I tell you to say uncle. Okay? Say uncle.'

'Uncle,' she said.

'No, don't say uncle. Say uncle.'

She didn't say uncle.

'That's good!'

'That's very good.'

'It's a start. Now say uncle.'

'Uncle,' she said.

'It's no good.'

The Americans are not satisfied when the Italian promptly says uncle. So too

Socrates is not satisfied when Thrasymachus and Callicles promptly agree with him. That is the comparison. The contrast is that because the Italian has absolutely no concern for or even awareness of the kind of victory that the Americans seek, she effortlessly makes the Americans' victory worthless, whereas Thrasymachus and Callicles, in striving to engineer the effect that the Italian accomplished so effortlessly, betray their fear that they will otherwise suffer an overtly humiliating defeat. In consequence, when Socrates reduces people to saying 'I will answer this way, but only to humour you,' he has a victory of sorts. But his victory is not as comprehensive as it would be if the interlocutors engaged more seriously in the contest.

How then can Socrates get people, not merely to offer answers to his questions, but to offer them in a suitably serious spirit? Seriousness can have no simple warrant. If it did, Socrates could not so easily be suspected of teasing and dissimulation. But there are verbal devices that come as close as any verbal device can to ensuring seriousness, and Socrates makes ready use of such devices. Thus Socrates invokes the name of Zeus, God of Friendship, to ask Euthyphro and Callicles to be serious (Plato *Euthyphro* 6b, *Gorgias* 500b, 519e), just as he invokes the same name to assure Alcibiades of his own seriousness (Plato *Alcibiades* 109d), and just as Phaedrus invokes the same name to ask him to be serious (Plato *Phaedrus* 234e). Another such device is switching from first or second person pronouns to using someone's name and title in a third person statement, as if solemnly minuting a declaration of his. Thus there is this exchange between Socrates and Callicles in Plato *Gorgias* 495d-e:

SOC: Come now, let us make a mental note of this: Callicles, from the deme of Acharnae, said that pleasant and good are the same thing, and that knowledge and manliness are different both from one another and from the good.

CAL: But does Socrates from the deme of Alopeke agree or not agree with us on these points?

SOC: He does not agree. And I think that Callicles will not agree either, once he has a proper view of himself.

Socrates uses the same device in two remarks from Plato's *Alcibiades Major*, both

addressed to Alcibiades:

So it was stated that, on questions of justice and injustice. Alcibiades the Handsome, the son of Cleinias, has no knowledge, though he thinks he does, and is going to go to the Assembly to advise the Athenians about something about which he knows nothing? Wasn't that it? (113b)

Alcibiades the son of Cleinias has not had, so it seems, and does not have now, any lover apart from one alone, and that, one with whom he has to be content, Socrates the son of Sophroniscus and Phaenarete. (131e)

In Plato *Theaetetus* 160d-e, Socrates uses a modest form of this device to Theaetetus, whose proposal that knowledge is perception he enters into the record using only the name 'Theaetetus'. It is those more slippery than Theaetetus who need also demotics and patronymics to ensure their seriousness.

Suppose that by these or other means Socrates does extract serious answers, and that his interlocutor does get trussed and gagged, that is, does get rendered incapable of denying the point for which Socrates is arguing. This does not yet mean that Socrates has proved that point to the interlocutor. For assent can be extorted by dialectical argument, without persuasion of any kind, let alone the kind that imparts knowledge. In Plato *Republic* 487b-c, Adeimantus points this out, making a beautiful comparison between losing in dialectic and losing in a board game like chess or draughts:

Socrates, nobody could contradict you on these points. But the fact is that whenever people hear you say what you're saying now, it has the following effect on them: they suppose that because they have no experience of question and answer, they get led astray by the argument, a little bit astray at each question; and when the little bits are put together at the end of the argument, their error turns out massive, quite the opposite of what they said at first. Just as, at the end of a game, people who are skilled at *petteia* leave those who are unskilled blocked in and unable to move, so too, at the end of a discussion, people feel blocked in and unable to speak, because of this other, as it were, *petteia*, played not with counters but with words. This is because they think that the truth is, for all that they have been defeated, not any more as you say.

The beauty of this comparison is how it demonstrates that reluctance to believe in your heart what you have been forced to accept with your lips need not be a sign of perversity. For if you lack skill in the board game, then you might lose from a position from which you could have forced a win, had you but known how. And if you are wise enough to be aware of your lack of skill, then you will rightly allow that perhaps it, rather than any objective deficiency in the position you had to start with, explains your defeat.

However, even if the argument does not prove to the interlocutor its ostensible conclusion, it still proves something. For it proves that, whether or not the interlocutor is perverse in refusing to believe the ostensible conclusion, there is something wrong with the interlocutor somewhere. For if you are now right in refusing to believe what you are forced to say at the final stage of the argument, then you were wrong at earlier stages, either in the premisses you accepted, or in the inferences you made from them, or both. And this you can hardly deny, however complacently you may insist that you could easily have done better. For example, in Plato's *Hippias Major*, even Hippias has to acknowledge that he has been shown up, although he tries to minimise this by suggesting that he could easily do better if given a bit more time to think, unharrassed by Socrates' questions:

SOC: But, comrade, let's not give up just yet. For I still have some hope of making it clear just what the beautiful is.

HIP: Of course, Socrates; that's not hard to discover. For I know well that if I had a short while in private to look at it by myself, I could tell you it more exactly than exactness in its entirety. (295a)

...

SOC: As for me, I've no idea any longer where to turn; I'm at a dead end. But what about you? Can you say anything?

HIP: Not just at the moment; but, as I was saying just now, once I have had a look, I know I will discover it. (297d-e)

Hippias has his pride, and that stops him acknowledging quite how deep are the roots of his failure to understand the beautiful. But that he suffers from some such failure is guaranteed by the fact that he has been dialectically compelled to admit to some such failure. For if it is dialectical compulsion, and not merely, for example, a

wish to be agreeable, that leads to the admission, then he thinks, and does not merely say, that there is something wrong with his thoughts about the beautiful. And if he thinks that there is something wrong with them, then there is something wrong with them. The logic here is akin to the Epimenides: once a Cretan tells us that we cannot always believe everything that a Cretan tells us, then it is bound to be true that we cannot always believe everything that a Cretan tells us.

There are no doubt all sorts of other ways to demonstrate that Hippias has only a faulty understanding of the beautiful. When Socrates demonstrates it by dialectically compelling him to admit it, the demonstration has a special merit that not all others share. For the demonstration is a demonstration, not just to the wise, or to ideal pupils, but to Hippias himself. For Hippias himself now comes to know what he has been forced to admit. And only his own admission can give him this knowledge. The united assurances of others could not. In Plato *Gorgias* 474a, Socrates says to Polus:

Whatever I am saying, I know to produce one witness for it, the very person to whom I am saying it, and I ignore the masses; and I know to put the issue to a vote of one person, but with the masses I do not so much as exchange a word.

This is simple truth, when what Socrates is saying is that Hippias has not got things straight. Hippias' own authority is the only sufficient authority that he can have for such a thing.

There is a further merit to such a demonstration. It not only makes the fact that Hippias has not got things straight known to him. It makes that fact common knowledge to every participant in the conversation. They all know it, they all know that they all know it, they all know that they all know that they all know it, and so on indefinitely. Any pretence to the contrary is now no longer possible. This is why having your ignorance demonstrated in this way humiliates so painfully that it can be compared to snakebite, birthpangs and electric shock (Plato *Symposium* 218a, *Theaetetus* 151a, *Meno* 80a), so painfully that Callicles and Protagoras fall silent when such a humiliation looms up, so painfully that you might even be motivated to abandon complacent fantasies about how wise you already are, and set about

becoming wise for real. And all this, without anyone having to take Socrates' word for anything. We can revere him for his philosophical expertise in bringing about such demonstration. But if this is his sole philosophical expertise, we cannot revere him as a philosophical authority.

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