

SOCRATIC MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

THOMAS C. BRICKHOUSE

Lynchburg College

and

NICHOLAS D. SMITH

Lewis and Clark College



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

| | |
|--|---------|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | page vi |
| Introduction | i |
| 1 Apology of Socratic studies | 11 |
| 2 Motivational intellectualism | 43 |
| 3 The “prudential paradox” | 63 |
| 4 Wrongdoing and damage to the soul | 89 |
| 5 Educating the appetites and passions | 132 |
| 6 Virtue intellectualism | 153 |
| 7 Socrates and his ancient intellectual heirs: Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics | 193 |
| <i>Appendix: is Plato’s Gorgias consistent with the other early or Socratic dialogues?</i> | 248 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 259 |
| <i>Index of passages</i> | 268 |
| <i>General index</i> | 272 |

Introduction

SOCRATIC INTELLECTUALISM

The term “Socratic intellectualism” has come commonly to be used to describe either of two somewhat related features of Socratic philosophy, which may be called “virtue intellectualism” and “motivational intellectualism.” Socrates is generally, though perhaps not universally, regarded as a *virtue intellectualist* because he believed that all virtue is in some sense constituted by a certain kind of knowledge. In this respect, Socrates differs from Plato and Aristotle, who recognized aspects to virtue that were non-cognitive, such as having one’s appetites or passions in the proper order. Socrates is generally, though, again, perhaps not universally, regarded as a *motivational intellectualist* because he believed that all human actions are in some way directly or immediately the result of what those acting *think* is best for them. Socrates’ moral psychology is “intellectualist” because he is committed to the view that every ethical¹ failure involves some *cognitive* failure, for each ethical failure is the direct product of some false belief about what is good for the agent of the failure.

¹ Many ethical theorists these days find it useful to distinguish “moral” from “ethical” concerns, and the argument has been made (e.g. in Anscombe [1958] and, more recently, in Williams [1985]) that the ancients actually did not even have a concept of morality. Whether or not this is true, nothing we say in this book commits us to imputing any *moral* point of view to Socrates. Our focus, then, will be entirely on Socratic *ethical* thought and the psychology of agency (“moral psychology”) associated with that ethical thought.

In most of this book we use “Socratic intellectualism” to refer to motivational intellectualism. Although we take up virtue intellectualism in the penultimate chapter, our primary goal is to articulate and defend a more or less new conception of Socratic motivational intellectualism. We can only say that it is “more or less new” because we are not the first to present an alternative to what had been the received view. Credit for that must go to Daniel Devereux, who first explored it in a magnificent paper published in 1995. It is fair to say that from the time we first read Devereux’s paper we have spent most of our common research on Socrates seeking to refine and develop the view Devereux presented. This is not to say, however, that the view we defend in this book is exactly the same as what Devereux first proposed. In recent years, however, and after considerable debate between ourselves, our view is now, we think, importantly different from Devereux’s. We shall underscore these differences as our discussion unfolds. Nonetheless, the impact of his 1995 paper on us could hardly be exaggerated.

Since Devereux’s 1995 paper first forced us to re-evaluate our thinking about Socratic moral psychology, we have published a number of papers on various aspects of this topic. As we noted, however, our thinking about Socratic intellectualism, especially our thinking about how Socrates conceives of the differences between desires, has changed markedly as we have continued to think about it, and so it would be a mistake to think that one understands the argument of this book merely through familiarity with what we have said previously about this topic. In some cases, the revisions of our earlier work are not only numerous, they also involve significant modifications to the positions we advanced. Moreover, our attempt here is to offer more complete arguments than we have previously. Finally, by putting them together as we have, we hope to show how a coherent, single account emerges that

better explains what Socrates says about motivation than do rival accounts. Specifically, the following works appear in more or less revised form as sections of this book:

- “Apology of Socratic studies,” *Polis* 20, 2003: 112–31, is revised in Sections 1.1 through 1.5.
- Selections from “The myth of the afterlife in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” which appeared in M. Erler and Luc Brisson, eds. *Gorgias-Menon: Selected Papers from the Seventh Symposium Platonicum* (International Plato Studies 25), Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2007: 128–37, are revised in Section 4.2.3 and the Appendix.
- “Moral psychology in Plato’s *Apology*,” forthcoming in *Reason and Analysis in Ancient Greek Philosophy: Essays in Honor of David Keyt*, eds. G. Anagnostopoulos and F. Miller, Jr., supplementary volume of *Philosophical Inquiry*, is revised in [Section 2.2](#).
- Selections from “Is the prudential paradox in the *Meno*?” *Philosophical Inquiry* 30, 2008 (festschrift for Gerasimos X. Santas, ed. G. Anagnostopoulos): 1–10 and “The Socratic paradoxes” (in *The Blackwell Companion to Plato*, ed. H. Benson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006: 263–77) are pieced together in revised form in [Section 3.2](#).
- Selections from “Socrates on akrasia, knowledge, and the power of appearance,” which appeared in C. Bobonich and P. Destrée, eds. *Akrasia in Greek Philosophy: From Socrates to Plotinus*. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill (*Philosophia Antiqua* series, vol. 106) 2007: 1–17, are revised in Sections 3.3–3.4.
- “Socrates on how wrongdoing damages the soul,” *Journal of Ethics* 11, 2007: 337–56 is revised in [Section 4.1](#).
- Selections from “The problem of punishment in Socratic philosophy,” in M. McPherran, ed. *Wisdom, Ignorance, and Virtue: New*

Essays in Socratic Studies, Academic Printing and Publishing, special issue of *Apeiron* 30, 1997: 95–107 and “Incurable souls in Socratic philosophy,” *Ancient Philosophy* 22, 2002: 1–16 are pieced together in revised form in Sections 4.2.1–4.2.2 and 4.2.4–4.2.7.

- “Socrates on educating the appetites and passions,” *International Journal of the Humanities* 2.3, 2006: 1999–2008 is revised in Chapter 5.
- “Socrates and the unity of the virtues,” *Journal of Ethics* 1, 1997: 311–23 is revised in Section 6.2.
- “Making things good and making good things in Socratic philosophy,” in T. M. Robinson and L. Brisson, eds. *Plato: Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides, Proceedings of the V Symposium Platonicum Selected Papers* (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2000), pp. 76–87 is revised in Section 6.3.
- “Socratic and Platonic Moral Psychology,” forthcoming in J. Hardy and G. Rudebusch, eds. *Grundlagen der Antiken Ethik [Foundations of Ancient Ethics]*, Vandenhoeck is revised in Section 7.1.

TEXTS, TRANSLITERATION, AND TRANSLATIONS

Citations of Platonic texts throughout the book are to the *Oxford Classical Texts*, and are given in standard Stephanus page, section, and line number of the Greek text. We have elected to use transliteration throughout, as our discussion of the Greek is almost always limited to one or two words at a time. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are our own. Those of passages from the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito* are taken directly from the translations we provided in Brickhouse and Smith (2002).

A SHORT HISTORY OF THIS PROJECT

We have been writing about Socratic philosophy together since the late 1970s. Consequently, one might well wonder how we could have convinced ourselves that we really had anything new to say about the subject. Frankly, thanks to Devereux's path-breaking 1995 paper, we came to the conclusion that our previous work had uncritically endorsed a mistaken picture of Socratic moral psychology. We call this picture "the standard intellectualist conception" of Socratic moral psychology because, as far as we can tell, some version of this conception was held by every scholar working on Socrates until Devereux published his paper in 1995.² So, in a certain sense, what we are doing in this book is the result of a critical engagement with what has seemed to us to be (at least one of) the inadequacies of our earlier work.

Not only was our acceptance of the standard view uncritical prior to reading Devereux, it was also well behind the times, for Terry Penner had already begun publishing what has now become an extraordinary series of papers in which the clearest and most compelling version of the standard conception of Socratic moral psychology is articulated. One element of Penner's recent work underscored the inadequacies of our own earlier presentation of the same view: Penner (in this case working with Christopher Rowe [Penner and Rowe 1994]) argues against the version of the standard view defended by Gerasimos X. Santas (1979: 185–9), whose

² In earlier publications, we called the view we criticize in this book "the traditional view," but one of the many authors who has argued for that view has objected to this description (see Rowe 2007: 21 n. 9), though without explanation for why he finds it objectionable. By calling the view we criticize in this book "traditional," we meant only to indicate that it was the view that has been widely shared by scholars for decades now. Perhaps "standard view" will seem less objectionable – in any case, we only mean to indicate the extent to which this view has been accepted and promoted by scholars generally.

influence on us was very great. According to Santas, Socrates believes that everyone always desires what they think is good. Penner, by contrast, insists that it is not what is *thought* to be good that Socrates regards as the target of all desire, but rather what is *actually* good. In Chapter 2, we review the two ways of thinking about good as the object of desire and explain why we have been won over by Penner's formulation. What we defend here, however, is importantly different from Penner's position because we now reject a point that is at the heart of the standard conception of Socratic intellectualism.

Even as we completed our 1994 book, a few topics continued to puzzle us because they did not seem to square with the picture of Socratic philosophy we had developed over the years. One was particularly troubling: we found several passages in the early dialogues in which Socrates seemed to recognize at least some value in certain sorts of punishments that seemed to us to be poorly suited to changing beliefs in any direct way, as the standard view seemed to require. Not long after we began to take this problem more seriously, and attempted to formulate an explanation of how Socrates could accept a role for such punishments in his ethical philosophy, Devereux's paper appeared in print, and the view it presented and the texts it offered in support of that view were illuminating to us, to say the least. Suddenly, it seemed to us that the problem of punishment could have a clear and plausible solution. As we developed that solution in our first paper on this topic, we realized that the new picture Devereux had offered of Socratic moral psychology also allowed us to reveal and resolve several other inadequacies in the standard picture of Socratic moral psychology: we believed that we could now provide more adequate explanations of Socrates' recognition of what Penner has called "diachronic belief-akrasia," and of Socrates' claim that wrongdoing damages the soul, and of his claim that there could be ruined or incurable souls (even in the

afterlife), and of certain things he said about education (especially early education).

In our 1994 book, we argued against a view defended by several scholars that, in the discussion with Callicles, Plato puts a new and very different moral psychology into the mouth of Socrates without in any obvious way marking that new view off from the moral psychology that had been at work in his earlier discussions with Gorgias and Polus. The awkwardness of the view we criticized, from the point of view of the composition of the dialogue, had always troubled us and although we were not actually yet ready, as it turns out, to rebut all of the arguments that could be made in its favor, we never accepted it. Also troubling to us was the consequence of that view regarding whether the *Gorgias* was really appropriate for the study of Socrates, the research project to which we have been dedicated for so long. If Plato really were suddenly putting a new and decidedly different moral psychology into the mouth of Socrates in the final section of the *Gorgias*, then whatever else Socrates said in that section of the dialogue was now tainted as evidence for the philosophy of Socrates. It seemed to us that doubts about validity of one section of the dialogue would potentially cast doubt on other sections as well. In our own research, however, the *Gorgias* (especially the section including Callicles) was so rich in content that much of the philosophy we found in the other early dialogues would be more difficult to understand well without the insights we could gain from comparing what we found in these other dialogues to the lively discussions of the *Gorgias*. Needless to say, we were troubled by the threat of losing what seemed a rich resource for the philosophy of Socrates.

The threat became even more acute with the publication of Mark McPherran's important (1996) book on Socratic religion. Although not primarily concerned with Socratic moral psychology, McPherran

argued that the view of the afterlife presented in the last section of the *Gorgias* was distinctly un-Socratic. Because there was at least a trace of the same view expressed in the speech of the personified Laws in the *Crito*, McPherran's argument led him also to express doubts about whether the speech of the Laws should be understood to express Socrates' own opinions. Subsequent books on the *Apology* and *Crito* have hardened these doubts into doctrine. More recent books, by Roslyn Weiss (1998) and James Colaiaco (2001), flatly deny that Socrates accepted what he presents as the words of the Laws of Athens, and this denial leads to what we believe is an implausible interpretation of the rest of the dialogue and, most importantly, of Socrates' conception of the citizen's duty to obey civil law. These new trends in interpretation threatened to fragment what we had all along supposed was the basic unity of view within the dialogues appropriate to the research project of understanding the philosophy of Socrates.

Although we have rejected this understanding of the *Crito* elsewhere,³ we provide a direct reply to McPherran's specific challenge in the appendix to this book. We note also that at least one of the two authors of this book has decided that the *Gorgias* does, in the end, provide one indication of being transitional. That evidence is to be found in its critique of poetry, though happily on grounds other than the picture of moral psychology given in that dialogue.⁴ Even so, we both continue to think that the moral psychology in the *Gorgias* (and also in the *Meno*, which is also usually treated as transitional) is entirely consistent with what may be found in any of the so-called "early" or "Socratic" dialogues of Plato, and we hope the analyses and the many citations we make to other "early" or "Socratic" dialogues that we offer throughout the book make the case for this consistency compellingly. Indeed, we find (and cite)

³ For which, see Brickhouse and Smith (forthcoming) and Brickhouse and Smith (2006).

⁴ For this argument, see N. D. Smith (2006–2007).

sufficient evidence in dialogues other than the *Gorgias* and *Meno* to make the case we seek to make in this book.

Apart from these specific issues, in recent years there has been a dramatic rise in expressions of skepticism about the general approach to reading Plato's dialogues that we have shared with others in the study of Socrates. In 1996, Charles Kahn published a new form of the old "unitarian" approach to Plato's dialogues. According to Kahn, all of the so-called "Socratic dialogues" represent only Plato's thinking and should not in any way be taken as evidence for the thought of Socrates as a thinker independent of, and prior to, Plato. Moreover, Kahn held that all of the views expressed in the "Socratic dialogues" are not only consistent with the doctrines Plato develops in the great, so-called "middle period" dialogues; the questions explored in the "Socratic dialogues" intentionally point the reader to those "middle period" doctrines as the answers to those questions. At the same time, others were attacking other assumptions vital to Socratic studies, such as hypotheses about dating or grouping the dialogues, hypotheses about the appropriateness of interpreting material in one dialogue in the light of some passages in another dialogue, and so on.⁵ As the magisterial but controversial work of Gregory Vlastos, which in many circles simply defined the study of Socrates, came under increasing criticism, some scholars concluded not just that Vlastos had failed adequately to answer the many questions his work addressed, but that the very questions he sought to answer were themselves senseless, because they were based upon the indefensible presumption that a "philosophy of Socrates" could be found in certain Platonic dialogues. As more and more influential scholars began to express similar views, we were forced to re-evaluate our own opposing position. As we looked carefully at

⁵ For several discussions indicating such controversies, see Annas and Rowe (2002).

the grounds for all the new skepticism about Socratic studies, however, we found the arguments of the skeptics ultimately unpersuasive. As a result of this study, then, we find ourselves again engaged in the research program of trying to understand and explain the philosophy of Socrates. We offer our defense for this reading of certain of the Platonic dialogues against some of its most recent critics in Chapter 1 of this book. This, then, is the brief history of what led us to write yet another book about Socrates.

Apology of Socratic studies

I.1 INTERPRETING SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY

1.1.1 A defense of our strategy

I don't know what effect my accusers have had on you, Athenians, but they were speaking so persuasively that I myself almost forgot who I am. And yet they said virtually nothing that's true. (Plato, *Apology* 17a1–4)

At the 2001 Sixth Annual Arizona Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy, in a prefatory remark before commencing with the reading of his paper, Charles Kahn announced that he thinks that scholars everywhere should simply give up talking about “the philosophy of Socrates.” These are the accusations as we understand them: “Socratic studies invents a bogus philosopher by the name of Socrates and it does so by means that are completely at odds with proper historical or hermeneutical technique. In doing so, Socratic studies corrupts the minds of students and scholars.” On the basis of such accusations, Kahn and other critics of Socratic studies would condemn to death the research program to which many scholars, including us, have devoted their work for many years.

In this book we propose to offer a new interpretation of a central aspect of the philosophy of Socrates. This project, plainly, presumes that there is something to which “the philosophy of Socrates” refers. If recent critics are correct, however, our project is groundless and

ill-conceived from the start; there is no “Socratic philosophy,” no “Socratic moral psychology,” no “Socratic motivational intellectualism” to interpret, either in novel or standard ways. Because there have been so many recent criticisms of the research program within which our present project belongs, therefore, it behooves us to confront these criticisms squarely before we undertake to explore specific questions of moral psychology.

1.1.2 A defense, not an apology

“*Apologia*” in Greek – the word in the title of Plato’s and others’ accounts of the trial of Socrates usually translated into English as “Apology” – really meant “defense” and not “apology” in our sense. We propose in this first chapter not to apologize for our views and approaches, but rather to defend Socratic studies against several recent criticisms that have been made of it, including some by Kahn himself. In particular, we shall defend the widespread practice within Socratic studies of focusing predominantly on the Socrates – and the philosophy portrayed as belonging to the character by that name – in a certain group of Plato’s dialogues.¹

Those engaged in the field plainly do not agree on all of the issues surrounding the status of the Socrates of Plato’s “Socratic dialogues” in general or on each specific detail. Such differences may be very important ones with respect to the degree to which the familiar criticisms actually apply to scholars working in this field. Accordingly,

¹ In fact, we have become persuaded in recent years – mostly by the excellent work of such scholars as Louis-André Dorion and Donald R. Morrison – that Socratic studies can be considerably enriched by careful study of the works of Xenophon, as well. Indeed, in the particular area on which we focus in this book, moral psychology, recent work by Dorion (2007) makes a good case for attributing a similar view to the Xenophontic Socrates as we attribute herein to the Platonic Socrates. This book, however, is limited to articulating the views of moral psychology given to Socrates in Plato’s early or “Socratic” dialogues.

we begin, first, by specifying what we regard as the two main principles shared by Socratic scholars and that constitute the foundations of Socratic studies. We go on to note the kinds of disagreements that are accepted among those who engage in this research program. Then, in the sections immediately following the first one, we consider a few of the recently influential objections to these principles, and explain why we think these objections do not undermine the principles, properly understood. Our conclusion will be that none of the reasons we have considered count against the principles and, thus, against Socratic studies as a research program. We will then close with a brief discussion about Socratic studies as a research program, explaining why we think it merits this characterization, and what follows from regarding it as such. We concede in advance that nothing we say warrants conclusions about the value of alternative approaches. We claim only to achieve the negative conclusion that the criticisms of the foundational principles of Socratic scholarship fail to supply adequate reasons for abandoning our own interpretive approach.

1.2 THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF SOCRATIC STUDIES

1.2.1 *The identity principle*

The first of the two principles we propose to defend against criticisms in this chapter is what we will call the Identity Principle:

The Identity Principle: Socrates is the same character, with essentially the same philosophical views, in each of a certain group of dialogues by Plato. (This character cannot be assumed to be identical to the character by that name in works by other ancient sources, or in any dialogues by Plato other than those in this certain group.)²

² We provide and discuss the relevant list of these dialogues in more detail when we discuss what we call the “Relevant Dialogues Assumption,” below. We are indebted to Antonio

Critics often argue as though all scholars who accept the Identity Principle accept one very extreme version of it, one that might be called the Journalistic Historical Identity Thesis. By this, we mean the thesis that, in the relevant group of dialogues, in every detail of word, deed, and description, Plato has attempted to present a precisely accurate portrait of the historical Socrates. In fact, as far as we know, no one has ever claimed that Plato is giving a perfectly accurate portrait of Socrates, so any argument aimed at invalidating the principle(s) behind this practice is an argument against no one.

Another, plainly weaker, version of the Identity Principle is what might be called the General Historical Identity Thesis. According to this thesis, the ways in which Socrates is depicted – even if not absolutely accurate in every detail – nonetheless form a generally reliable picture of who the historical Socrates was, how he spoke and argued, and what his philosophy was. This thesis, which even by its most enthusiastic supporters³ is never held as a matter of historical demonstration (whatever that might be!), functions for many Socratic scholars as an interpretive hypothesis, whose plausibility is defended on various grounds, but whose truth is never claimed (to

Chu for calling our attention to the fact that we must add the words in the parentheses to complete the principle.

³ Perhaps the most famous and influential of these was Gregory Vlastos (1991). A cautious defense of what we are calling the General Historical Identity Thesis is given in Taylor (2002); a more forceful endorsement of this position is given in the same volume by Penner (2002). Central to Penner's defense of this position, however, is the view of Socratic motivational intellectualism that we reject in this book. Our own position has been taken as committed to the General Historical Identity Thesis but, in fact, the most we have ever claimed about the historical reliability of any of Plato's depictions of Socrates was what we had to say about the single dialogue, the *Apology*, in our 1989 book on that dialogue: "though we cannot assume accuracy on any given point, we believe that the burden of proof must be borne by those who deny it, and not by those of us who are inclined to grant it" (Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 10). We have never taken any stand regarding the historical reliability of any of Plato's other dialogues, and explicitly refused to take any such stand in Brickhouse and Smith (1994: viii–ix).

our knowledge, at least) as simply established or proven by any of the arguments given in its favor.

We will have more to say about the epistemological or evidential value of such hypotheses in [Section 1.5](#). Let us now simply notice that this view is completely invulnerable to refutation on the ground that there are historical anachronisms within the relevant dialogues, since it does not claim that all of the details of the Platonic characterizations are historically accurate. Nor does this thesis deny that Plato might have invented meetings with certain interlocutors, or even whole conversations with interlocutors the historical Socrates may not have ever met. A conclusive refutation of the General Historical Identity Thesis would have to consist in some reason that was sufficient for concluding that Plato's depiction of Socrates would be recognized as wholly, or at least mostly, false and unreliable by others who knew the historical Socrates. Plainly, however, such a conclusive refutation of this thesis would require precisely what most critics claim we *cannot* have: an accurate knowledge of the historical Socrates, or at least a source whose testimony about him was demonstrably reliable.

We can think of several reasons why one might be agnostic about the General Historical Identity Thesis. Indeed, we believe some sort of agnosticism is all that even the most powerful arguments against it have ever managed to support. But, for reasons we will explain in our replies to the criticisms of this thesis, we do not find anything here that warrants putting an end to Socratic studies.

Although it seems plain that the General Historical Identity Thesis is what grounded the research program of Socratic studies in its earliest stages, we believe that the majority of Socratic scholars working within this program now obviously recognize the program itself as sufficiently robust as not to feel the need to make any decision at all about this thesis, preferring instead only

to affirm a version of the Identity Principle that is actually far weaker than the General Historical Identity Thesis. One can maintain the validity of the research program and accept only what we will call the Philosophical Identity Thesis, which claims only that “the philosophy of Socrates” or “Socratic philosophy” is identical to the philosophy given to Socrates in the relevant group of Platonic dialogues. Indeed, we believe most of those now working within the research program that is “Socratic studies” adhere only to this weaker principle. The Philosophical Identity Thesis makes no commitments of any kind about the historical accuracy of the Platonic portrait of Socrates or Socratic philosophy. This thesis, instead, simply insists that there is a philosophy worth trying to interpret and study contained and expressed by Socrates in the relevant Platonic dialogues and that is distinguishable from the philosophy we find in other Platonic dialogues not included in the “Socratic” group.

Those who accept the Philosophical Identity Thesis may actually find questions of historical accuracy irresolvable. Few we know would ever put it quite so starkly as this. Most of us would at least be interested in knowing whether, to what degree, and on what issues Plato is historically reliable in his portrait of Socrates in any of his dialogues. Even the clearest and most undeniable proof (as if such a thing were possible!) of Plato’s historical *inaccuracy*, however, would have little effect on most Socratic scholarship. Perhaps notes would be added to scholarly works, acknowledging the historical non-identity of Plato’s Socrates with the historical Socrates. But then the rest of the book or article would proceed almost exactly as it would have without such proof, since the historical identity and characteristics of the flesh-and-blood Socrates never really made any difference to the enterprise in which such books and articles were intended to play a part. After all, the goal is only to explicate

the philosophical contents of the relevant dialogues of Plato.⁴ Plainly, any criticisms aimed at undermining or invalidating Plato's authority as a historical source on Socrates are entirely irrelevant to the scholarly practices founded upon the Philosophical Identity Thesis.

We should recognize, of course, that this version of the Identity Principle gives us no reason for using the name "Socrates" to refer to whose philosophy is under discussion other than the use of that name in Plato and the conventions of the research program itself – conventions that derive from the research program's traditional inclusion of (and historical roots in) scholarship that accepts the stronger General Historical Identity Thesis. But Plato's use of the name and the conventions of a research program may well be sufficiently good reasons for continuing the practice of calling this philosophy "Socratic," especially since that practice has now taken root within the larger research program we call the history of philosophy. Until and unless some anti-historicist provides a compelling reason to *stop* calling this philosophy "Socratic," which merely skeptical arguments about the view of the historical Socrates could never accomplish, the identification of this philosophy as "Socratic" will continue, if only for the lack of any plainly more adequate way to identify it. As we shall argue in [Section 1.5](#), the very robustness

⁴ To give just three examples from recent books in the field: we get this from Hugh Benson: "Whose epistemological views, then, am I examining? The short answer to this question is that I will be attempting to uncover the epistemological views of the Socratic character in Plato's early dialogues. No part of my subsequent argument depends on assuming that these views represent the views of either the historical Socrates or the author of the dialogues himself" (2000: 7); George Rudebusch says, "this book's concern is the philosophical ideas in these dialogues, rather than the historical issues of to whom to attribute the ideas or at which developmental stage Plato wrote which dialogue" (1999: 129 n. 1); Roslyn Weiss simply proclaims, "The Socrates referred to is the Socrates of Plato's dialogues. The relationship between this Socrates and the historical Socrates is not a concern of this book" (1998: 3 n. 1).

of a research program confers some evidentiary value upon its principles and practices.

1.2.2 *The relevant dialogues assumption*

The second principle we wish to defend in this chapter is what we will call the Relevant Dialogues Assumption.

The Relevant Dialogues Assumption: The group of Plato's dialogues relevant to questions about Socrates (or the philosophy of Socrates) is the group generally identified as the "early dialogues" or as the "Socratic dialogues."

Dialogues that are frequently included in the list of the group relevant to the study of Socrates and the philosophy of Socrates are, in alphabetical order: *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic I*.

Some Socratic scholars generally also freely cite the *First Alcibiades*, or the *Theages*,⁵ or the *Meno*,⁶ or the *Menexenus*. For various reasons, others may steadfastly refuse to include one or another of these dialogues. Still others may exclude some of the dialogues we included on the first list.⁷ There is certainly no unanimity among Socratic scholars as to exactly which dialogues should be included on the list, although there is widespread agreement about the majority of works that belong on the list.⁸ In any event, precise agreements on this issue are not required within Socratic studies. All that

⁵ Mark McPherran, for example, often cites these two dialogues in his work.

⁶ Most scholars writing on what is called the "unity of the virtues," or on "Socrates' denial of akrasia," or on "Socratic moral psychology," cite this dialogue, as we will in later chapters of this book.

⁷ Vlastos expresses the view, for example, that the *Euthydemus* and *Lysis* are transitional dialogues, which attribute to Socrates' actions, views, or approaches that Vlastos thinks should be identified as Platonic rather than Socratic (1991: 46–7).

⁸ See Nails (1993: 273–92; 1995: 58–61).

is required is general agreement about a fairly large sub-set of the ones listed above.

1.3 CRITICISMS OF THE IDENTITY THESIS

1.3.1 *First criticism of the General Historical Identity Thesis: contra chronology*

Several arguments have recently been made against the ways in which the relevant dialogues have been selected. Most of the criticisms have disputed sorting Plato's dialogues chronologically. Two strategies for sorting the dialogues chronologically have enjoyed wide acceptance: stylometry and content analysis. Socratic scholars have typically proclaimed both methods to yield very similar results, and – because the two methodologies are (or are at least claimed to be) independent of one another – the perceived similarities of their results have been counted as mutually supporting. For the sake of brevity, however, we wish to focus on content analysis and propose to show why this method provides ample support (independent of stylometry) for identifying a group of dialogues of the sort required by the two foundational principles of Socratic studies.

Interestingly, even some of the most vehement critics of chronology end up employing content analyses in such a way as to identify a group of dialogues that would serve well both principles underlying the established practice of Socratic studies. In his introduction to the recent Hackett collection, *Plato: Complete Works*, John Cooper writes,

I urge readers not to undertake the study of Plato's works holding in mind the customary chronological groupings of "early," "middle," and "late" dialogues. It is safe to recognize only the group of six late dialogues. Even for these, it is better to relegate thoughts about chronology to the secondary

position they deserve and to focus on the literary and philosophical content of the works, taken on their own and in relation to the others. (Cooper 1997: xiv)

Since Cooper plainly says that *only* the “six late dialogues” can safely be recognized as a chronological group, one might suppose that Cooper’s argument would have the effect of nullifying the second foundational principle of Socratic studies. Indeed, his associate editor, D. S. Hutchinson, seems to have understood Cooper this way: Hutchinson cites Cooper’s introduction without further argument or explanation for Hutchinson’s claims that Plato’s “early” or “Socratic” dialogues do not provide either “reliable reports of how Socrates philosophized” or any reason for thinking that “it was Plato’s intention in these dialogues to represent the philosophy of Socrates” (Hutchinson 1999: 603). But this is not at all what Cooper himself concludes, for on the very next page of his introduction we find him saying this:

One very large group of dialogues can usefully be identified here. These are what we may call the Socratic dialogues – provided that the term is understood to make no chronological claims, but rather simply to indicate certain broad thematic affinities. In these works, not only is Socrates the principal speaker, but also the topics and manner of the conversation conform to what we have reason to think, both from Plato’s own representations in the *Apology* and from other contemporary literary evidence, principally that of the writer Xenophon, was characteristic of the historical Socrates’ own philosophical conversations. (*ibid.*: xv)

After providing a list of these dialogues (which includes all of those given in our own list, above, plus several of the spuria and dubia), Cooper draws his conclusion:

[I]n these dialogues Plato intends not to depart, as he does elsewhere, from Socratic methods of reasoning or from the topics to which Socrates devoted his attention, and no doubt he carries over into these portraits much

of the substance of Socrates' own philosophizing, as Plato understood it. (*ibid.*: xvi)

Despite his dismissive attitude towards chronology, then, Cooper ends up endorsing a view that looks very much like the General Historical Identity Thesis, for Cooper thinks that the “Socrates” of the relevant dialogues is based on the actual Athenian philosopher who was executed by the city in 399 BCE, and not just the weaker claim that this is the Socrates worth studying philosophically. If Cooper's position is consistent – and we think it is – then it follows that one can jettison the entire apparatus and the methodologies of chronological ordering and nonetheless advocate some version of both the first and the second foundational principles of Socratic studies.

Debra Nails, another distinguished critic of chronology, reaches a very similar conclusion. Having argued that the entire project of chronological groupings of dialogues is indefensible, Nails proposes another approach, which distinguishes two very general groupings of Plato's works. In one we find Socrates arguing in the agora and in the other the style is more suited to Plato's Academy. But the dialogues Nails puts into the “agora” group match up quite nicely with the ones Socratic scholars have all along put into the “Socratic” group.⁹

It should be noted that even Kahn, who also rejects virtually any attempt to order the dialogues chronologically beyond the last six mentioned by Cooper in the passage cited above,¹⁰ is fully committed to dividing the corpus into three groups, just as those engaged in Socratic studies do. Indeed, Kahn thinks that it is appropriate to

⁹ See Nails (1995: 203), and compare her groupings with the ones given above.

¹⁰ The exceptions are the *Apology* and *Crito*, which Kahn thinks “are Socratic in an historical sense,” and the *Ion* and the *Hippias Major*. These four, Kahn holds, were the first works written after the death of Socrates (1996: 52–3). Another exception is the chronological

subdivide the first group. The result is that, with the exception of one sub-grouping consisting of three dialogues,¹¹ Kahn's first group is virtually identical to the list most often used as the basis of the Socratic studies program. Of course, Kahn and the participants in Socratic studies see the same list as reflecting very different philosophical projects. Kahn takes these dialogues to be suitable philosophical introductions to the metaphysical and epistemological doctrines explored and defended in the *Republic*. Participants in the Socratic studies program see these dialogues as containing a number of salient doctrines that are different from and, in several instances, incompatible with those developed in the *Republic*. What is important for our purposes, however, is that Kahn is in substantial agreement with Socratic scholars that the dialogues that form the basis of Socratic studies are best understood as forming a single grouping. Like Cooper and Nails, whose lists also differ slightly from those we find employed by most who are engaged in Socratic studies, Kahn's project shows that content analysis – even if it has been extolled as an instrument of chronology – requires no commitment to chronology in order to sustain the field of Socratic studies.

1.3.2 *Second criticism of the General Historical Identity*

Thesis: anti-historicist criticisms

Another common criticism of Socratic scholarship insists that serious study of works by Plato's contemporaries, many of which are quite similar in style and subject,¹² disqualifies any claim Socratic

ordering of the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*. Kahn thinks the *Meno* must have been written before the *Phaedo* (1996: 47).

¹¹ These are the *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Cratylus* (Kahn 1996: 47).

¹² Kahn (1996: 1–35) surveys the various other ancient authors who wrote Socratic dialogues. The evidence from these other works is only fragmentary, but there is enough of

scholars have made for Plato's historical reliability in any dialogue or group of dialogues. We can see from the outset just how limited this criticism actually is, for it obviously leaves wholly intact the point of view held by those who remain agnostic about historical questions and endorse only the Philosophical Identity Thesis. But it is also worthwhile to give closer inspection to the typical forms the anti-historicist criticism takes in order to see how ineffective it is even against the historicism that is its proper target.

Perhaps there are stronger or more sophisticated versions of this criticism, but let us consider two statements of it that we find representative, one given in E. de Stryker and S. R. Slings' (1994) recent commentary on Plato's *Apology*, and one by Douglas Hutchinson (1999), in his antagonistic review of Mark L. McPherran's (1996) book on Socratic religion. De Stryker and Slings raise the question of whether or not we should regard Plato's *Apology* as historically accurate. Although they concede that there can be no definitive proof either way,¹³ they favor a negative answer, and offer this argument for their inclination: "The most conclusive proof that Plato, when writing his *Apology*, did not feel bound to stick as closely as possible to the main lines of what Socrates had actually said in court is, in my eyes, its exceptional literary quality" (de Stryker and Slings 1994: 6).

Insofar as the *Apology* has clearly identifiable literary features or shows the effects of considerable polishing, we may rightly suppose that it did not "stick *as closely as possible* to the main lines of what

it to conclude that there were many inconsistent portraits of Socrates provided. Individual works by Plato – particularly the *Apology* – have also been compared to various works by other authors who do not include Socrates as a speaking character.

¹³ De Stryker and Slings (1994: 7–8): "I would dare to assert that there is, on the one hand, no single sentence in the Platonic *Apology* that [the historical] Socrates could not have actually pronounced, and on the other, that the published work contains no passage so specifically un-Platonic that it cannot be Plato's work."

Socrates had actually said in court” (our emphasis). But why should the evidence of Plato’s literary artistry lead us to deny that the work captures both the tone and the substance of what Socrates actually said to the jury (which is all that the General Historical Identity Thesis requires)? Why should we not think that someone who witnessed the trial and later read the *Apology* might reasonably conclude, “Well, Plato’s literary embellishment is evident, but Plato’s version sets down quite well the very points Socrates actually made, however less elegantly.” We can think of no reason for holding that literary mastery and basic historical reliability are somehow incompatible. Why, indeed, could a writer as talented as Plato not write works as dramatically engaging and as artistically complex and intricate as his dialogues plainly are, while maintaining quite strict adherence to what he knew as the historical truth?¹⁴

Now, of course, the literary merits of Plato’s *Apology* may well count against the idea that Plato simply wrote down the actual speech Socrates gave word-for-word. It is unlikely that an extemporaneous speech, as Socrates claims his will be (17c2–3) would have such merits. But again, as we said earlier, we know of no one who accepts what we called the Journalistic Identity Thesis, but this is the only version of the identity thesis that could reasonably be affected by the criticism under consideration. There seems to be no reason for thinking that Plato’s own additions of literary structure

¹⁴ In making this criticism, scholarly history is repeating itself. Here is what Paul Friedländer had to say about Olaf Gigon’s expression of the same sort of anti-historicism in 1947: “A basic mistake of Gigon’s remarkable book [...] is its contrast of the dialogues of the Socratics as ‘literary creation’ (*Dichtung*) with the so-called historical reports. In dealing with historic truth, however, Gigon’s frame of reference is the authenticity of the dossier or police report – in that case, what is left of Thucydides? – while his idea of literary creation appears to coincide with what we call ‘fiction.’” Friedländer goes on to fault Gigon for giving up on Socrates: “How can Gigon, though he knows that Socrates is an ‘elemental force,’ put aside ‘in determined resignation’ the inquiry in the historic existence of that ‘elemental force’ (14f.)?” (1958, vol. 1: 361–2).

and polish to Socrates' speech require any significant distortion of the views Socrates expresses in the *Apology*. And, even more obviously, the criticism applies not at all to the weaker Philosophical Identity Thesis.

Hutchinson's version of the anti-historicist criticism at least has the general form of an induction: "[T]o regard Plato's *Apology* as any kind of accurate report of what Socrates said is anachronistic and naïve, for it ignores the literary genre in which Plato's *epideixis* participated."¹⁵ Hutchinson's critique is based on an assumption that the *Apology* belongs to a genre of rhetorical display pieces.¹⁶ And not just this, but Hutchinson also assumes that the works within this genre were never intended as "any kind of accurate report," even in part. In light of this window on the world of ancient Greek literature, Hutchinson is confident that the genre in which Plato was participating ruled out more or less accurate accounts of the views of the historical Socrates. Given their importance to his understanding of Plato, it is only fair to ask for evidence to support these assumptions.

Of course, no one can claim to know that these guiding assumptions are true, and so Hutchinson's anti-historicist views must be appraised according to the same ancient evidence we use in appraising the historicist views. And what do we learn if we consider such evidence? What we find is that even the most dedicated anti-historicists are unable to show that Plato's works in general or the *Apology* in particular are conventional according to many of the

¹⁵ Hutchinson (1999: 603).

¹⁶ We find it interesting and telling that the several critics of the historicist view tend to put the *Apology* into different genres. For example, see the view developed in Hutchinson (1999) and contrast it with that of Kahn (1996: 88), who classifies it as a "quasi-historical document" within the genre of "the courtroom speech preserved for publication" and with that found in Morrison (2000: 235), who regards the *Apology* as belonging within the genre of parody (*ibid.*: 244). It seems that critics of Socratic studies are not themselves able to agree about which ancient genre we should assign Plato's Socratic dialogues to. Of course, we are inclined to count this as evidence against any claim that genre considerations require us to abandon the assumptions of Socratic studies.

tropes they regard as central to the relevant genre. Instead, they find many of the ordinary conventions missing altogether, and many others “transposed” (de Stryker and Slings 1994: 34).

Even if we did have compelling evidence for thinking that Plato intended to write within a certain genre, this is no reason to think that what he wrote is largely fictional, unless, of course, we knew that the rules of the genre *required* fiction. Although we can be sure that some *epideixeis* were fiction, for example, we know of no reason to think that historical inaccuracy was a *requirement* of the genre to which we should suppose Plato’s works belonged. There is simply nothing that we know about the relevant genre that precludes even a high degree of historical accuracy. Even where Plato’s writings seem to have similar characteristics to those by other authors, he may well have given his works such characteristics for reasons entirely his own.

In fact, the best evidence we have for thinking that Plato’s *Apology* belongs to any literary genre is the *Apology* of Xenophon. But Xenophon makes clear that he is trying to set the record straight (Xen. *Ap.* 1), which does imply that others’ accounts of Socrates’ trial are inaccurate. Xenophon’s criticisms of others’ inaccuracies would be a senseless complaint if such accounts were universally or even generally recognized as historically unreliable. Critics of Plato’s historicist interpreters claim to know Plato’s intentions – but they certainly cannot get these in any direct or obvious way from Plato’s own words in his dialogues. The best argument of such critics is comparable to evidence of guilt by association; because we know (somehow) that all *the other* members of a certain genre do not tell the truth, we can infer that Plato’s works do not tell the truth. But the conclusion is secured only by dubious literary analysis of Plato’s works and by poorly supported claims about what is and is not textual evidence of historical truth. It is no support,

moreover, for denying Plato's historical accuracy to note that other reports of Socrates (in any genre) tell conflicting stories about the man. The inference from "They can't all be true" to "They all can't be true," is, of course, a gross *non sequitur*.¹⁷ The problem is figuring out which, if any, have gotten it right, and on what details. For that, some judgment is required, and we may never be able to come to any conclusion on this issue with great confidence. What the historicists do is try to reconstruct a plausible case. And what the anti-historicists do is try to reconstruct a very different plausible case. The final decision as to which is the most plausible is left to those of us interested enough to judge the cases the two sides make.

None of what we have said is intended to deny the application of genre studies to Plato's works. Perhaps, indeed, Plato did wholly intend to write his works within some particular genre; or perhaps he wrote different works intended to belong to different genres. Our point, rather, is that whatever value there might be in the application of genre studies to Plato should not be imagined or expected to have the result of anything close to a demonstration that Socratic studies as it has been practiced in the last decades should be abandoned as a research program.

¹⁷ This appears to be the inference we are invited, nonetheless, to make by Kahn: "Our comparative survey of the Socratic literature is thus designed to correct the misleading historical perspective that is built into Plato's work. But it can do more. At least one feature of the genre can be of decisive importance for an interpretation of Plato's thought. This is the imaginative and essentially fictional nature of Socratic literature" (1996: 2). The same strange inference may be found in Morrison, who says, "The surviving Socratic writings, both whole works and fragments, contain enough anachronisms and inconsistencies and other sorts of historical implausibilities that we can be confident the constraints of this genre were rather loose, and authors were entitled and expected to put a great deal into the mouth of their character 'Socrates' which the historical Socrates never said and never would have said" (2000: 235). Given his overall skepticism, we are left to wonder how Morrison thinks he can judge what Socrates "never would have said." The fallacy in these complaints, at any rate, is obvious: it plainly does not follow from the fact that different witnesses often tell conflicting stories to the police – as often happens – that *all eye-witnesses are liars*.

But we should recall here one item of evidence the anti-historicists must confront,¹⁸ and we find their confrontations with it awkward at best. Let us consider briefly the version of this confrontation we find in Charles Kahn's important recent book:

Plato's success as a dramatist is so great that he has often been mistaken for an historian. Hence the history of philosophy reports Socrates' thought on the strength of Plato's portrayal in the dialogues. And it is not only modern scholars who fall victim to this illusion. Like Guthrie or Vlastos, Aristotle himself finds the historical Socrates in the *Protagoras* and *Laches*; and the stoics do much the same.¹⁹

Kahn's explanation for Aristotle's error is that Aristotle "arrived on the scene too late; he was separated from Socrates by the dazzling screen of Plato's portrayal" (1996: 87). Kahn, then, is, in effect, claiming that he understands Plato's intentions better than Aristotle did! In the first place, Kahn's analysis ignores the fact that Aristotle would have been in an excellent position to question others who knew the historical Socrates and who knew how well Plato characterized the views of his great predecessor. That Aristotle would not have taken advantage of such opportunities is simply not plausible.²⁰ Of course, an alternative story can also be told, according to which Plato's version of Socrates was so massively successful that, even though subsequent authors knew that Plato's works were fictional, they were comfortable talking about the "Socrates" that appears in Plato's dialogues *as if* he was historically real. But the effect of this story, for which we have no evidence, is to affirm the main contention required by Socratic studies – the Philosophical Identity Thesis.

¹⁸ Though they do not always do so – we note there is no mention of Aristotle's testimony either in Prior (2001), or in the anti-historicist criticisms found in either Hutchinson (1999) or Morrison (2000).

¹⁹ Kahn (1996: 3).

²⁰ For similar criticisms of Kahn's dismissal of Aristotle as a source, see Brickhouse (1999) and Penner (2000, 2002).

Finally, it is worth considering how much the anti-historicists' standards of historical evidence would affect the entire field of ancient history, if applied more broadly than just to debates about the historicity of Plato's Socrates.²¹ Anti-historicist arguments generally follow the form:

- (1) The historicist reading of Plato is one way to understand what Plato is doing, but
- (2) there is some other way of understanding what Plato is doing that is also historically possible and would not support historical inferences from the same evidence, and
- (3) we cannot know which of the two ways (the historicist or the alternative given by the anti-historicist) is the truth of the matter, so
- (4) we should be agnostic about this evidence as regards its historical value.²²

As plausible as this argument may seem from some *a priori* epistemological point of view, its more general application would have the effect of bringing to an end virtually all historical inquiry about antiquity. In the words of one prominent critic of Socratic studies, we should remind ourselves “just how slim and fragmentary our evidence for classical antiquity often is, and how dramatically this affects the degree of confidence we are entitled to have in our conclusions” (Morrison 2000: 263). Fair enough. But if this sobering recognition warrants the kind of skepticism that Morrison and other critics have proposed that we apply to the question of the historical Socrates, then it must also warrant the same degree of skepticism

²¹ The point we make here was also expressed by several of the participants – most vividly by Jacques Bailly – at the Sixth Annual Arizona Conference in Ancient Philosophy in 2001.

²² A very forthright example of such an argument – and of its inherently speculative nature – is given in Morrison (2000: 252).

about nearly every other claim historians will ever make about *any* topic, event, or figure in ancient history. The claims of historicist Socratic scholars, we believe, need to satisfy no more stringent standards of evidence than do other historical claims, standards that must rely substantially on admittedly speculative judgments about what makes the best sense of “slim and fragmentary” evidence. Like ancient historians, historicist interpreters of Plato claim only that their account makes better sense of the available evidence than do alternatives. They see themselves as open to refutation as additional evidence becomes available or if a different, more compelling way of organizing the evidence is provided.

Given the testimony of Aristotle, and the anti-historicists’ inability to account for it in a credible way, therefore, and given a reasonable application of standards appropriate to the inherently speculative field of ancient history, we are inclined to think that the General Historical Identity Thesis remains a viable and attractive interpretive hypothesis, especially given its role in helping to create and sustain Socratic studies as a research program, about which we will have more to say in [Section 1.5](#). Having granted this, however, let us be clear about our project in this book: our discussion of Socratic moral psychology requires *only* what we have called the “Philosophical Identity Thesis,” and in the remainder of this book, it is only this thesis we should be taken as assuming.

1.4 CRITICISM OF THE RELEVANT DIALOGUES ASSUMPTION

1.4.1 Plato’s dialogues as hermeneutical monads

Even if successful, the two criticisms we have considered thus far would not seriously undermine Socratic studies. Notice that, even

if we accepted both the anti-chronologists' arguments and the anti-historicists' arguments, it would still be open to Socratic scholars to endorse the Philosophical Identity Principle, as we have now said we do in this book. But another recent criticism, from scholars eager to defend literary readings of Plato, would actually compel the abandonment of Socratic studies. According to this criticism, now particularly popular among some British scholars,²³ Plato's dialogues must be understood as crafted wholes, complete unto themselves, which do and say all that Plato wants without requiring their readers to do extensive reading or study of any of Plato's other works. To interpret these dialogues in such a way as to require their readers to bring to bear passages or arguments from other Platonic dialogues is, according to this view, to accuse Plato of being a "bad writer."²⁴ It is obvious how this view truly does oppose Socratic scholarship in a fundamental way, for all versions of the Identity Principle rest on the claim that the best interpretation of a collection of certain Platonic works is the hypothesis that aspects of the same philosophy are being expressed or developed in each member of the collection.

1.4.2 An implausible interpretive requirement

We find the interpretive requirement advocated by this criticism a very implausible one in general, but especially implausible when applied to the works of Plato.²⁵ It is simply absurd to think that one could be a complete expert on *Hamlet*, for example, but know

²³ Not all British scholars, we should note: C. C. W. Taylor has recently made it very clear that he does not find this approach at all plausible for reasons much like those we advance here. See Taylor (2000: 43–4; 2002: 83).

²⁴ An example of this sort of criticism, which applies the term "bad writer" as the consequence of using other dialogues to interpret something Plato has Socrates say in the *Apology*, may be found in Stokes (1992: 30–1). See also Tigerstedt (1977: 99).

²⁵ Kahn rejects this approach to Plato's dialogues, comparing it to reading "each dialogue as if it were a complete literary unit and a thought-world of its own, like the individual

nothing about any other Shakespearean tragedy, comedy, or sonnet. Even if we were to grant that Plato's works are fictions, we could compare his dialogues to Arthur Conan Doyle's works involving Sherlock Holmes.²⁶ One's understanding of Holmes in any one of Conan Doyle's mysteries is clearly enriched by one's understanding of the character of that same name in Conan Doyle's other mysteries. To insist without some additional and compelling reason that the view expressed by the Socrates of any particular dialogue must be understood entirely by consulting only other passages in the same dialogue is to risk seriously misunderstanding the complexity and subtlety of the view at issue, and of the "Socrates" we find exploring that view.

At any rate, the criticism that derives from this interpretive requirement understands Socratic scholarship as claiming that one could not possibly understand some one or more passages in the Platonic dialogues, or even an entire dialogue, correctly without consulting some other dialogue. But that is simply a misunderstanding of the Socratic scholar's use of evidence. Some passages of some Platonic dialogues strike us as puzzling or problematical in some way. We then look for passages in other Platonic dialogues of the appropriate group in order to help us understand. No one will find the interpretation we thereby generate acceptable, however, if it does not make enough sense of the original passage to allow that passage to fit plausibly and naturally within its own argumentative and dialogical context. In other words, the resultant interpretation

plays of Shakespeare or Molière" (1996: 37). We would argue that Shakespeare or Molière scholars generally do *not* treat each of these authors' works in complete isolation from all of the others. And even if some few authors invited such exceptional individuality of understanding for each of their works, we would regard this as by far the exceptional case. Most literary authors we know and admire write in ways that make each of their works better understood as we read and consider their other works.

²⁶ We are grateful to Antonio Chu for suggesting this parallel to us.

must qualify as one that readers can plausibly apply to the passage even if it were not supported by what Plato more clearly claims in some other work. From the fact that someone finds the initial passage puzzling and cannot immediately interpret it to his or her satisfaction, one cannot reasonably conclude Plato is confused or writing badly. Some puzzling passages may only show just how profoundly paradoxical some of Socrates' doctrines are. Or they may only show that the distance in time and context that we are coming from make it difficult or even impossible for us to understand what Plato's original intended audience would have understood clearly and easily.

In recent years, many scholars have engaged in a kind of procedural approach that might actually have its basis in the interpretive requirement we have been considering. A number of very fine books and journal articles have advanced our knowledge of Plato by focusing deeply on one work and seeking to interpret it with as little recourse or reference to any of Plato's other works as possible. Not only do we find nothing wrong with such efforts, we have often found a great deal *right* with them. After all, even if those engaged in what we are calling Socratic studies are right to think that a certain group of dialogues have deep philosophical commonalities and affinities, it remains true that the works within this group are *different works*, and also true that each one deserves individual attention and reflection. Some defend the practice of focusing on one work at a time on the ground that doing so is particularly well-suited for appreciating the unity of each work.²⁷ This seems exactly correct to us. Others have endorsed some version of this approach on the ground that the group of dialogues that form the basis of Socratic studies contain so many inconsistencies that they simply should

²⁷ See, for one excellent example of such an argument, Scott (2006: 3).

not be supposed to display any broad consistent philosophy.²⁸ This seems *incorrect* to us. Of course, it may also be true that there simply is no essentially consistent philosophy in the relevant dialogues, taken as a group. The proof required for this debate, in other words, is the overall adequacy of the interpretations of the relevant texts. As we have said, those of us who look for guidance in interpreting puzzling passages of one Platonic text by applying what we find in some other text will either end up providing an adequate interpretation of the puzzling text ... or not. If not, then our approach has failed us, and our interpretations should not be accepted. But to concede this point is to concede nothing to the interpretive *requirement* that we must take each dialogue as an interpretive unit entirely on its own.

1.4.3 *Socrates' calls for consistency*

No doubt one of the reasons that the Socrates of Plato's dialogues has become such a role model among philosophers is that he is portrayed as someone for whom consistency of thought, speech, and action was a highest priority. Throughout the dialogues Socratic scholarship has counted as relevant, we find Socrates chastising those who cannot or will not remain consistent, and sometimes contrasting their inconsistencies with his own strong interest in being

²⁸ See, for a particularly forceful expression of this sort of claim, Arieti (1998: 273). An influential early expression of this view may be found in Grote (1865: 246; see also 278). Very recently, David Wolfsdorf has expressed a version of this view, on the ground that he finds too many "intratextual and intertextual inconsistencies among Socrates' philosophical utterances" (2008: 20). This, of course, begs the question that Socratic scholars attempt to answer with interpretations that resolve apparent inconsistencies, and Wolfsdorf himself goes on to allow that "problems of inconsistency have to be treated on a case-by-case basis" (*ibid.*: 21). In this book (Chapter 6), we address at some length one of the putative inconsistencies Wolfsdorf actually cites (on the unity of the virtues in the *Protagoras* and their disunity in the *Euthyphro*; *ibid.*: 23), and attempt to show that there is actually no inconsistency in the positions Plato gives to Socrates.

consistent – whether by bragging about his actually managing to achieve this goal (e.g. at *Crito* 46b–e, 48b–49e; *Gorgias* 481c–482c, 508b–509b), or by bemoaning his ignorance when he finds himself unable to achieve it (e.g. at *Hippias Minor* 372d–e, 376c). To return to our point about Sherlock Holmes, what is significant, of course, is not only that Conan Doyle gives the same name to an ingenious detective in each mystery. After all, Plato gives the name “Socrates” to the principal speaker in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus* – dialogues that are not usually examined as part of Socratic studies. Rather, just as Holmes is recognizably the *same character* because of the consistency of how he is described and how he goes about his work, so we think the Socrates of the relevant dialogues is the same character because of the consistency of his views, and of his manner of going about his philosophical work.

Those who suppose that Plato the author need *not* be seen as trying to give Socrates a consistent set of views, all the while having his character by that name emphasize such consistency so relentlessly in his conversations, themselves convict Plato of being a bad writer: we always see Plato’s Socrates extolling consistency and insisting that others achieve it, but according to such critics Plato himself shows no particular concern for such things in his depictions of Socrates’ actions and speech. On their face, Plato’s dialogues seem to require their readers to seek consistency in their portrait of Socrates. As he converses with many others and in many different circumstances, is the way he speaks and represents himself consistent or not? If it is, then this very consistency is what Socratic scholarship has sought all along to reveal and to explicate. If not, then this would seem to count as a very serious complication, if not simply an embarrassment, to Plato’s project.²⁹

²⁹ It is precisely that there is such a “complication” between what the “early” or “Socratic” dialogues and the “middle” or “Platonic” ones that is confronted by Socratic scholars’ groupings of dialogues into those relevant to the study of Socrates, and those that are less

1.4.4 Dramatic relations between the dialogues

Finally, the fact is that Plato sometimes does make reference in his dialogues to other works he has written. These are clearest in dialogues outside the “Socratic” group, of course, but it is also the case that several of those within this group are given historical settings that put them into important historical relations with one another. The *Theaetetus* is set only moments before Socrates has to go off to hear the indictment against him at the king-archon’s office; the *Euthyphro* is set just outside the king-archon’s office, before Socrates’ trial; the *Apology* gives Socrates three speeches at that trial; the *Crito* provides a conversation Socrates has with an old friend during one of his last days in jail; and the *Phaedo* is set on Socrates’ last day, and closes with his drinking the hemlock and dying. Of course, what such chronological connections in their dramatic dates is supposed to show us is a matter of interpretation. But it seems plausible to suppose that such a grouping invites some comparison among the dialogues so connected. Even the earliest collections of Plato’s dialogues grouped and sorted them, and such groupings and sortings were taken to have some significance for their interpretation, even if this significance was not originally understood in developmentalist terms.³⁰ We do not know for whom Plato wrote the dialogues, or even if he wrote some for a number of significantly different audiences. But surely one audience for at least some of the dialogues was those gathered

so, or not at all. The argument for such differentiations by content analysis is that Plato maintains such consistency in a certain group of dialogues, and then abandons that consistency (presumably, in favor of consistency in another set of dialogues and doctrines) in a different group of dialogues. This “complication” is often explained developmentally, but it can obviously be explained in other ways, as we find in Cooper (1997: viii–xxx) and Nails (1993). But it is one thing to see the inconsistencies between the two groups as a problem to be explained away, and quite another to insist that Plato’s “literary” goals require that we should not recognize such inconsistencies as a problem at all.

³⁰ For discussion, see Cooper (1997: viii–xii).

in Plato's Academy. The idea that Plato's students and colleagues would read and understand his works entirely independent from one another and in no specific groupings or order is one that cannot be supported by anything else we know about the Academy or those who lived and worked there. Indeed, the best evidence of how those in Plato's Academy read the dialogues must surely be the evidence we get from Aristotle, whose stay at the school lasted nearly 20 years and whose interpretive practices, as we said in the last section, are quite the opposite of those called for by those modern critics who insist that the dialogues be treated as literary and doctrinal wholes.

For these reasons, we find the most dangerous of the criticisms we have considered also to be the least plausible and the least supported by the available evidence. It follows that, unless the critics of Socratic scholarship have better criticisms to make than the ones we have surveyed in this chapter, there is no reason for Socratic scholars to give any ground at all to such critics. Even if we do not and cannot know whether Socratic scholarship understands Socrates or Plato's dialogues rightly, we have certainly been provided with no plausible reasons in the criticisms we have addressed in this chapter for thinking that such scholarship is as naïve or as wrongheaded as its critics have claimed.

1.5 SOCRATIC STUDIES AS A RESEARCH PROGRAM

1.5.1 Criticizing a research program

We have been calling Socratic studies a "research program." In calling it this, we mean to include it within those intellectual enterprises that share certain foundational principles, and then attempt to generate an interesting or useful larger system of knowledge or information on the basis of these shared principles. So far in this

chapter, we have attempted to defend the foundational principles of Socratic studies against some of the criticisms that have recently been made against them. We wish to end our discussion, however, by shifting the focus from the foundational principles themselves to another very important aspect of any research program – the fruit it produces as a result of working from such foundational principles.

Insofar as the foundational principles of a research program are demonstrably flawed in some way, there is plainly a great risk that work within the program will end up falling short of the goal of forming “an interesting or useful larger system of knowledge or information,” as we put it, precisely because any information or system that derives from such flawed principles could end up being fatally infected with the flaws of the principles from which that work derives. We might think of the research programs of phrenology or astrology as examples of research programs simply doomed by such fatally flawed foundational principles. Our recognition of this possibility should make any researcher within a given research program attentive to serious criticisms of that program’s foundational principles.

But notice that this kind of transference of flaws is neither inevitable nor necessary in any directly logical way – one can, after all, derive true conclusions from false premises without violating the laws of logic. Research programs that go on for some time and are pursued by many researchers³¹ begin to generate certain results.

³¹ We do not doubt that there would be controversy among critics of Socratic studies and those engaged in such studies about just how long this research program has gone on, at this point. We expect that some critics would be inclined to characterize this research program as one that has enjoyed a very short life, though there can be little doubt that it has gone on now at least for several generations of scholars. (Some would deny even this. Consider, for example, the claim made by Robert B. Talisse [2002: 46]: “The notion of a *Socratic* philosophy, as distinct from what is commonly known as Platonism, has its origins in the work of Gregory Vlastos.”) Some in this research program would claim that

These results begin to have a certain evidentiary value of their own, as support for the value of the foundational principles *as* foundational principles – a weight, we claim, that puts a certain burden of proof on those who argue for ending the research practice supported by such principles.

*1.5.2 Has Socratic studies proven itself
as a research program?*

To be more specific about Socratic studies, what we are driving at in these general remarks is this: on the basis of the foundational principles we have defended in this chapter, a very substantial body of research has been produced.³² The value of these principles as interpretive hypotheses is not simply dependent upon their defenders' ability to explicate their plausibility as simple statements or propositions. We claim that these principles are given considerable justification by the body of scholarly work to which they have given rise embodied in interconnected interpretations of the relevant dialogues of Plato. They are justified precisely because that scholarly work meets the standards required of a successful research program: again, the standards met when an inquiry results in "an interesting or useful larger system of knowledge or information."

We have long conceded that we cannot be sure whether the philosophical views we expose and explicate really do belong to the

Socratic studies goes back all the way to antiquity, perhaps counting Aristotle's distinction between Socrates and Plato as the first contribution to that program. For the purposes of what we have to say about the fruits of research programs, we believe that there is enough such fruit to evaluate in the way we are calling for, even if we count the program itself as a recent one.

³² So substantial, indeed, as to short-circuit any thought here of providing a bibliography of the works we regard as within Socratic studies. A small indication of this, however, may be seen just in the scholarly works we cite and engage in this book, which is devoted to a single issue within Socratic studies.

historical Socrates,³³ which is the only concession the anti-historicists can claim their own arguments merit. But working from the foundational principles of Socratic studies, that is, working from the assumption that there is a coherent “Socratic philosophy” in Plato’s early or Socratic dialogues, we believe that our own books and articles, and those of others at work in this research program, with ever-increasing sophistication and refinement, support the vitality and viability of the foundational principles we and so many others have employed.

1.5.3 The inadequacies of criticisms of Socratic studies as a research program

Those who would call for the abandonment of these principles must do more than argue for skeptical scenarios intended to create doubts about the principles. Such a strategy may be adequate for suspension of belief about individual claims of fact or value, but the situation is considerably different where such claims are recognized as the foundational principles or hypotheses of a flourishing research program. Even if the skeptics can plausibly show that the claims made in these foundational principles do not pass the high evidentiary standards of critical inquiry all on their own, the principles enjoy further support from the research program they motivate. A case in point is the research program embodied in what is called the unitarian approach to the Platonic dialogues, which was particularly dominant in the first part of the twentieth century. It too had a foundational principle, namely, that Plato held the same rich philosophical views throughout his career as a philosophical writer. Although it continues to have contemporary advocates,³⁴ the unitarian approach

³³ Again, see Brickhouse and Smith (1994: viii–ix).

³⁴ Recent defenses include Annas (1999) and Kahn (1996).

gradually fell out of favor, though not because the foundational assumption of unitarianism itself came under attack. Rather, many scholars gradually became convinced that the project required too many “epicycles,” too many *ad hoc* explanations of passages. The developmentalist view that replaced it did so not because the foundational principles of developmentalism were put up against the foundational principle of unitarianism, and deemed to be more plausible, but rather because many scholars concluded that developmentalism and what we are calling Socratic studies makes better sense of the relevant information. For critics to provide adequate grounds for ending Socratic studies, accordingly, they must be prepared not just to cast doubt on its foundational principles. Either they must disprove such principles decisively, or explain why the research founded on such principles is so without value or promise of such as not to be worth pursuing or refining, or else they must provide a way of understanding Plato’s writings that makes better sense of them than Socratic studies does. There is no shortage of criticism in the world of scholarship, of course, but to our knowledge no criticism of Socratic studies has met or even approached meeting any of these criteria of success.

1.5.4 Socrates in the history of philosophy

The Athenians on that jury in 399 BCE condemned the philosopher, Socrates, to death. But he was already an old man and there was little chance that he would have lived for a great deal longer anyway. Athens’ tragic loss, as a result of those jurors’ judgment of Socrates, was thus tempered by its inevitability, which the jurors only hastened to some extent. As Plato has Socrates tell us in the *Apology*, however, to recognize this fact is not at all to diminish the culpability of the prosecutors for the role they played in obtaining this result,

or those jurors for making the judgment that they made (*Apology* 39b1–6). But research programs can span many generations, and the one we have defended in this chapter is already the product of inter-generational interest, and continues to be renewed in the term papers, masters' theses, and doctoral dissertations of students, and to mature in each new scholarly contribution to the field. So even if the Socrates of each such effort is not all the same in every student's or scholar's account and even if the philosopher who is exposed in such accounts is perhaps but a pale shadow of the intriguing Athenian philosopher whose charisma our studies barely reflect, the students' and scholars' Socrates will go on living and philosophizing as long as the research program in his name continues to bear fruit.

There is some reason to suppose that the jurors at the historical trial were already deeply prejudiced against Socrates, and so it may well have been that the burden of proof at the historical trial fell (however unfairly) on the defendant. For the reasons we have given in this chapter, however, we contend that the burden of proof in the case against Socratic studies lies with the prosecution. It is a burden, we claim, which the prosecutors have not borne nearly well enough to put an end to the research program they have attacked. Aristotle is said to have refused to allow the Athenians to "sin a second time against philosophy"; so should we refuse to allow contemporary scholars to complete the job of the ancient accusers and to "sin a second time" by removing what can appropriately be called "the philosophy of Socrates" from the history of thought.