

**The Priority of Definition**  
**Continuum Companion to Socrates**  
**Edd. Bussanich and Smith**

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**Introduction**

One thing we seem to know about Socrates<sup>1</sup> is that he was preoccupied with questions of the form ‘What is F-ness?’.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle famously tells us that

Socrates busied himself concerning the ethical virtues and was the first to seek to define them universally ... He was reasonable in seeking the what it is; for he sought to syllogize, and the what it is is the starting point of syllogisms... For Socrates may be fairly attributed two things, epagogic arguments and defining the universal ... [*Metaphysics* 1078b17-29: Ross trans.]<sup>3</sup>

According to Xenophon

[Socrates’] own conversation was ever of human things. The problems he discussed were, What is godly, what is ungodly; what is beautiful, what is ugly; what is just, what is unjust; what is prudence, what is madness; what is courage, what is cowardice; what is a state, what is a statesman; what is government, and what is a governor;--these and others like them, of which the knowledge made a ‘gentleman,’ in his estimation, while ignorance should involve the reproach of ‘slavishness.’ [*Memorabilia* I i 16; Marchant trans.]

And of course, the Socratic dialogues<sup>4</sup> of Plato abound in such questions. Socrates and his interlocutor(s) focus on the question ‘What is piety (or holiness)?’ in the *Euthyphro*, ‘What is temperance (or moderation) in the *Charmides*, ‘What is courage (or bravery)?’ in the *Laches*, ‘What is fineness (or beauty)?’ in the *Hippias Major*, ‘What is a friend?’ in the *Lysis*,<sup>5</sup> ‘What is justice?’ in *Republic* I, ‘What is a sophist?’ in part of the *Protagoras*, ‘What is rhetoric?’ in part of the *Gorgias*, and ‘What is virtue?’ in the first third of the *Meno*.

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<sup>1</sup>My concern in this essay will be primarily with the character Socrates in Plato’s so-called Socratic dialogues. I begin with Aristotle and Xenophon, however, to indicate the likelihood that the feature of Socratic dialogues (and indeed of the Platonic dialogues a whole) concerned with ‘What is F-ness?’ questions may have been feature of the historical Socrates’ philosophical perspective. By the ‘Socratic dialogues’ I mean (in alphabetical order) *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic* I. As we will see below, the scholarly debate concerning Socrates’ preoccupation with the ‘What is F-ness?’ involves among other things which of these dialogues should be included on this list. I begin, however, by being inclusive. Those who are less inclusive will be discussed below.

<sup>2</sup>My reasons for using the inelegant ‘F-ness’ can be found at (Benson 1990a:125 n 2).

<sup>3</sup>See also *Metaphysics* 987b1-4.

<sup>4</sup>See n. 1 above.

<sup>5</sup>See (Sedley 1989) for a different understanding of the *Lysis*.

Given this preoccupation one is immediately led to wonder what Socrates would count as adequate answers to such questions. An immediate response is that Socrates is searching for definitions. Indeed, this preoccupation is often characterized as a search for definitions, following Aristotle. But appealing to definitions here is problematic for at least two reasons. First, pointing out that in asking these sorts of questions Socrates is looking for definitions of the relevant F-nesses (piety, courage, temperance, etc.) only pushes the question back. One wants to know what features are required for definitions of the relevant F-nesses.<sup>6</sup> Second, talk of definitions is potentially misleading since it is likely to carry with it anachronistic connotations concerning the nature of definition. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Plato never uses Aristotle's favored term for definition (ὀρισμός), and rarely (at least in the Socratic dialogues) uses Aristotle's other technical terms (ὅρος and ὀρίζεiv) in the sense of definition.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Socrates's concern to raise questions of the form 'What is F-ness?' is clear whether or not providing an answer to such questions amounts to providing a definition.

I propose to leave the question concerning what amounts to adequate answers to Socrates' 'What is F-ness?' questions to one side, to the extent that I can.<sup>8</sup> Instead I will focus on another related question concerning Socrates' preoccupation with "What is F-ness?" questions - what motivates this preoccupation? What, that is, is so valuable about the answers to these questions that Socrates is so devoted to asking them? I suspect that a number of considerations motivate his preoccupation, but a fairly traditional answer (and one with which I am in general agreement) is that Socrates takes such answers to have a special epistemic status.<sup>9</sup> Knowledge of these answers is in some way epistemically prior to other sorts of knowledge, and given Socrates'

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<sup>6</sup>It is at this point that the debate concerning whether Socrates is pursuing nominal or real definitions arises; see, for example, Locke, *Essay*, III 3.13-17, (Vlastos 1965, 156 n 26), (Penner 1992:141-144), (Fine 1992:202), (Irwin 1995:25-26), (Fine 2004, 54 n 36 & 62 n 58), and (Forster 2006b:25-33).

<sup>7</sup>See (Dancy 2004:23-24) who points out that only one of the six occurrences of 'ὅρος' (*Republic* I 331d2-3), and only two of the 15 occurrences of 'ὀρίζεiv' (*Charmides* 173a9 and *Laches* 194c8) in the Socratic dialogues are best translated as 'definition'. In (Benson forthcoming) I mistakenly claimed that Socrates does sometimes use 'ὀρισμός' in the Socratic dialogues. To the best of my knowledge he does not.

<sup>8</sup>For important discussions see, for example, (Nehamas 1975), (Vlastos 1981), (Woodruff 1982:ch. 4), (Benson 1990a), (Wolfsdorf 2003), (Forster 2006b), (Charles 2006), and (Fine 2010).

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, (Ross 1951:16). See (Forster 2006b:35-39) for a different, but related, motivation.

commitment to knowledge, it is natural for and incumbent upon him to pursue what is epistemically prior. It is the task of this essay to examine more closely this alleged motivation for Socrates' preoccupation with 'What is F-ness?' questions.

I begin with a sketch of the nature of this alleged motivation. The motivation depends on Socrates' endorsement of an epistemic priority principle which I will call henceforth 'the priority of definition principle' (keeping in mind the flaws of using the word 'definition').<sup>10</sup> I will then run through the primary evidence for and against attributing such a principle to the Socrates of Plato's Socratic dialogues. We will see that the evidence appears to cut both ways. I then conclude the essay by rehearsing the various ways in which scholars have attempted to resolve this interpretive tension. In the end, I hope the reader will see that anything like a confident stance with respect to Socrates' endorsement of the priority of definition principle will depend on one's interpretation of many more features of Socratic philosophy than we can consider here.

### **The Principle**

Let us begin by stating the principle in its most general form.

(PD) If A fails to know what F-ness is, then A fails to know anything about F-ness.

So stated, the principle requires a variety of qualifications and comments.

First, I will simply stipulate that for Socrates to know what F-ness is is to know the answer to his 'What is F-ness?' question. Of course, what it is to know the answer to the 'What is F-ness?' question cannot be fixed in light of my earlier decision to leave unexplored the adequacy conditions of a successful answer to the 'What is F-ness?' question. But suffice it to say that to know the answer to a 'What is F-ness?' question is at least to be able to survive a Socratic examination or *elenchos*. Again, what precisely is required in order to survive a Socratic *elenchos* is a long and controversial story,<sup>11</sup> but suffice it to say that surviving a Socratic

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<sup>10</sup>The principle has gone by a number of names, perhaps most famously by 'the Socratic fallacy'. (Dancy 2004:35–64) calls it the Intellectualist Assumption, [AI]. (See (Nehamas 1987:275–277) who takes Socrates' alleged commitment to this principle as a component of the 'Socratic intellectualism'.) I prefer the priority of definitional knowledge, but I will not ride my hobby horse here.

<sup>11</sup>See chapter 3 above and, esp., (Vlastos 1983), (Kraut 1983), (Brickhouse and Smith 1984a), (Polansky 1985), (Benson 1987), (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:ch. 1), (Benson 1995), (Adams 1998), the essays in (Scott 2002), (Forster 2006a), (Young 2006), (White 2008), and (Benson forthcoming).

*elenchos* at least requires the ability to state an answer to the ‘What is F-ness?’ question that coheres with one’s other F-ness related<sup>12</sup> beliefs. Consequently, we need to distinguish the priority of definition principle from two related but distinct principles concerning the nature of knowledge of what F-ness is, viz. the verbalization requirement and the coherence requirement

[V] If A fails to be able to state an answer to the ‘What is F-ness?’ question, then A fails to know what F-ness is.<sup>13</sup>

[C] If A’s F-ness related beliefs fail to cohere, then A fails to know what F-ness is.

When these two principles are conjoined to [PD], we get the result that being unable to coherently answer a ‘What is F-ness?’ question entails that one lacks any knowledge of F-ness. Such a result may or may not receive Socratic endorsement, but its Socratic endorsement is distinct from the Socratic endorsement of [PD]. It is [PD] that is the focus of this essay.

Second, as the preceding discussion indicates, [PD] is a principle regarding the priority of *knowledge*. [PD] requires definitional *knowledge* of F-ness (whatever that amounts to) for any other *knowledge* regarding F-ness. It should not be confused with the view that stating an answer to the ‘What is F-ness?’ question is prior to knowledge of anything else about F-ness; that is the conjunction of [PD] and [V]. Nor should it be confused with the view that knowledge of what F-ness is is prior to the ability to state or assert that something is F or that F-ness has some property or other. To arrive at that sort of view from [PD] requires commitment to something like the following assertability requirement:

[A] If A asserts something about F-ness, then A knows what A has asserted

Again such a principle may or may not receive Socratic endorsement, but whether it does is not the focus of this essay. Our focus is on [PD] - the claim that *knowledge* of what F-ness is is prior to any other *knowledge* regarding F-ness.

Third, [PD] is a conjunction of two principles which have often been discussed separately in the literature. The first maintains that knowledge of what F-ness is is prior to knowledge that

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<sup>12</sup>For the notion of F-ness related beliefs see my brief remarks concerning ‘appropriate related beliefs’ at (Benson 2000:161–162). For the notion of doxastic coherence as opposed to consistent beliefs see (Benson forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, (Irwin 1995:27) and (Dancy 2004:37–38) for this requirement.

anything is F. For example, one cannot know that Socrates is virtuous, if one fails to know what virtue is. The second maintains that knowledge of what F-ness is is prior to knowledge of any of the properties of F-ness. For example, one cannot know that virtue is beneficial, if one fails to know what virtue is. Put only a bit more formally, [PD] is the conjunction of

[P] If A fails to know what F-ness is, then A fails to know, for any x, that x is F, and

[D] If A fails to know what F-ness is, then A fails to know, for any G, that F-ness is G.

Finally, [PD] should not be confused with what might be called the sufficiency of definition principle. As the name implies, the sufficiency principle maintains that knowledge of what F-ness is sufficient for knowing anything about F-ness. For example, if one knows what virtue is, then one knows that Socrates is virtuous. Again, whether Socrates would endorse such a principle (or more plausible versions of it),<sup>14</sup> this principle is distinct from [PD]. [PD] maintains that knowledge of what F-ness is is necessary for any other knowledge involving F-ness, while the sufficiency principle maintains that such definitional knowledge is sufficient.

In conclusion, the priority of definition principle, [PD], is the conjunction of two principles [P] and [D], each asserting the *necessity of knowledge* of what F-ness is for *knowledge* of other things about F-ness. According to [P], knowledge of what F-ness is is necessary for knowledge of which things are F, and according to [D], knowledge of what F-ness is is necessary for knowledge of which properties F-ness has. It is important to note that [PD] on its own only asserts the necessity of knowledge of what F-ness is for *knowledge* of other things about F-ness. It is silent about whether such knowledge is necessary for belief, assertion, action, or anything else. It is also important to note that [PD] as here discussed is *fully general*. According to [PD], knowledge of what *any* F-ness is is necessary for *anyone* to know *anything else* about that F-ness. Certainly, if Socrates does endorse [PD] in the Socratic dialogues we can understand why he is so preoccupied with trying to acquire knowledge of the answers to his ‘What is F-ness?’ questions. The question, of course, is does he endorse such a principle.

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<sup>14</sup>See (Benson 2000:142–160) for a defense of a Socratic endorsement of a more plausible version of the sufficiency principle.

## Socrates' Endorsement of PD?

Given this sketch of the priority of definition principle, both what it is and what it is not, we need to examine the evidence concerning Socrates' endorsement of this principle. I will begin by looking at the evidence which appears to support Socrates' endorsement, first by looking at the evidence for [P] and then the evidence for [D]. Then, I will turn to the evidence which appears to argue against this endorsement.

**Evidence That Socrates Endorses [PD].** The strongest evidence for Socrates' endorsement of [P], the principle, that if one fails to know what F-ness is, then one fails to know for any x that x is F, comes from two passages in Plato's *Hippias Major*.<sup>15</sup> Early on in the dialogue Socrates relates an imagined exchange he had with someone<sup>16</sup> concerning his critique of various parts of speeches he had heard.

(a) Not long ago, someone caused me to be at a loss when I was finding fault with things in some speeches as being foul and praising others as being fine; he questioned me in the following very rude way. (b) "How do you know what sort of things are fine and foul? Come now, can you say what the fine is? (c) I was at a loss because of my worthlessness and was not able to answer appropriately. Going away from the gathering I was angry at myself and reproached myself, and resolved that the first time I met one of you wise men I would listen and learn and study and then go back to the questioner and fight the argument again. [*Hippias Major* 286c5-d7]<sup>17</sup>

And again at the conclusion of the dialogue, Socrates reverts to the same theme, saying

(a) He asks me if I am not ashamed daring to talk about fine practices, when I have clearly been refuted concerning the fine, to the effect that I do not know what the thing itself is. (b) "And yet," he will say, "how do you know whether someone has spoken finely or not, or done any other thing whatsoever, when you do not know the fine? (c) Being in such a state, do you think it is better for you to be alive than dead?" [*Hippias Major* 304d5-e3]

Between these two passages Socrates professes to want to learn from Hippias the knowledge of what fineness is [*Hippias Major* 286d7-e2] which Hippias professes to have [*Hippias Major* 286e5-6]. Hippias proposes seven different answers to the 'What is fineness?' question all of which are found wanting by Socrates in much the same way presumably as Socrates' own

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<sup>15</sup>Concerning the Plato's authorship of the *Hippias Major*, see (Woodruff 1982) and (Kahn 1985). Its relative compositional date will be an issue below.

<sup>16</sup>By the end of the dialogue it has become fairly clear that this is Socrates' alter ego.

<sup>17</sup>All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

attempt to answer this question was found wanting by his imagined interlocutor. The key for our purposes is noticing that the (b) portion of both passages contains a nearly identical question that has led many commentators to take Socrates to be committed to the view that Socrates (or anyone else) cannot know which speeches are fine, if he fails to know what fineness is. But such a commitment is simply a substitution instance of the more general principle [P] with ‘fineness’ substituted for ‘F-ness’ and individual unnamed speeches substituted for ‘x’.

Of course, some commentators have focused on the fact that the (b) portions contain questions, not assertions, and have suggested that these questions are not meant to be rhetorical, but are genuine.<sup>18</sup> Socrates is not affirming that one cannot know which speeches are fine without knowing what fineness is. Rather Socrates is genuinely wondering how it is possible (assuming that it is possible) to know that a given speech is fine when one fails to know what fineness is. But this is difficult to square with the context. Socrates does not follow up the first question by looking for an alternative explanation for his knowledge of fine speeches, but with attempting to acquire the knowledge that the question in (b) indicates is necessary. In the second passage Socrates has no reason to be ashamed at lacking the knowledge of what fineness is if there are other ways he might have known that some speeches were fine. Rather the questions in the (b) portions of these two passages from the *Hippias Major* provide rather strong *prima facie* evidence that Socrates endorses a substitution instance of [P].<sup>19</sup>

Socrates appears to endorse a similar substitution instance near the beginning of the *Euthyphro* in the following passage.

EUTH: (a) [My relatives say] that it is impious for a son to prosecute his father for murder - knowing poorly, Socrates, how the gods view the pious and the impious .

SOC: (b) Euthyphro, do you think that you have such accurate knowledge concerning divine affairs, and concerning pious things and impious things that, the situation being as you say, you do not fear that by prosecuting your father you may be doing something impious?

EUTH: (c) Socrates, I would be useless and no different than the average man, if I did not know accurately all such things.

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<sup>18</sup>See, for example, (Leshner 1987:285).

<sup>19</sup>For a longer discussion of this passage along roughly the same lines see (Wolfsdorf 2004b:42–45).

SOC: (d) Tell me, then, what you just now asserted you knew clearly, what sorts of things you say the pious and the impious are in the case of murder and all other actions. [*Euthyphro* 4d9-5d1]

In the (a) portion of this passage Euthyphro explains that his relatives think he is making a mistake by prosecuting his father for murder on the grounds that doing so is impious. In the (b) portion Socrates is surprised that Euthyphro is not afraid that perhaps his relatives are right and supposes that Euthyphro must think that he knows ‘concerning divine affairs, and concerning pious things and impious things’. Socrates suggests here that knowledge that prosecuting his father is pious is required either for doing what Euthyphro is doing or for not being afraid that what he is doing is impious. In either case, in (c) Euthyphro boasts that he has the requisite knowledge, leading Socrates in (d) to ask Euthyphro to tell him what he had just claimed to know - what piety and impiety are. The movement in this passage goes from not being afraid to prosecute one’s father for murder to knowing that prosecuting one’s father for murder is pious, to knowing concerning divine affairs and concerning pious and impious things, to knowing what piety and impiety are. Whatever one thinks about the details of this movement, it appears to indicate a Socratic endorsement of the following substitution instance of [P]: if Euthyphro knows that prosecuting his father for murder is pious, then he knows what piety is. Lest we miss this endorsement Plato wraps up the dialogue with Euthyphro as follows:

For if you did not know clearly the holy and the unholy, it is not possible that you would attempt to prosecute your aged father for murder on behalf of a hired laborer, but you would have feared the gods, risking that you did not do this correctly, and would have been ashamed before men; now, I know well that you think you know clearly the holy and the not holy.” [*Euthyphro* 15d4-e1]<sup>20</sup>

In addition to these passages, Socrates concludes other dialogues with what appear to be substitution instances of [P]. Near the end of the *Charmides*, following a series of failed attempts to answer the ‘What is temperance?’ question, Socrates urges Charmides to see whether he is temperate, and if he is to ignore Socrates’ babbling. Charmides responds

But good heavens, Socrates, I don't know whether I have it or whether I don't—because how would I know the nature of a thing when neither you nor Critias is able to discover it, as you say? [*Charmides* 176a6-b1; Sprague trans.]

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<sup>20</sup>For a longer discussion of the first *Euthyphro* passage along similar lines see (Dancy 2004:41–47).

Here Charmides explains that he fails to know whether he is temperate because he fails to know what temperance is, suggesting another substitution instance of [P]. It is true that this is Charmides and not Socrates,<sup>21</sup> but the context of this passage provides no reason to think that Socrates would not endorse Charmides' sentiment.

Finally, again following a series of failed attempts to answer the 'What is a friend?' question, Socrates concludes the *Lysis* as follows

We have been ridiculous ... For the ones going away will say that we think that we are friends with each other and yet we have not been able to discover what a friend is. [*Lysis* 223b4-8; ]

Here Socrates finds fault with himself and his interlocutors, Lysis and Menexenus, for thinking they are friends when they fail to know what friendship is. Of course, Socrates cannot mean by this that it is impossible for Menexenus to think or believe that he is a friend to Lysis when he fails to know what a friend is (as he does). Counter-examples to that sort of principle are abundant.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Socrates, Lysis, and Menexenus are counter-examples themselves.<sup>23</sup> Instead, Socrates must have in mind something like his criticism of Euthyphro to the effect that the three friends are unjustified, unwarranted, unreliable, or in some other way epistemically at fault in thinking they are friends. They fail to know that they are friends. And the evidence for this is that they fail to know what a friend is. But this indicates yet another substitution instance of [P].

Similar evidence can be cited for [D].<sup>24</sup> Following Meno's introduction of his eponymous dialogue by asking how virtue is acquired, Socrates responds as follows.

(a) "Good stranger, you must think me happy indeed if you think I know whether virtue can be taught or how it comes to be; I am so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I do not know at all what virtue itself is." ... (b) If I do not know what something is, how could I know what qualities it possesses? (c) Or do you think that someone who does not know at all who Meno is could know whether he is good-looking

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<sup>21</sup> See (Santas 1972:138) who takes this to be the most explicit text for [P], but denies that Socrates is committed to it since it is put in the mouth of Charmides.

<sup>22</sup>Nearly every interlocutor in the Socratic dialogues professes to believe something about a relevant F-ness whose ignorance of which is subsequently revealed in the same dialogue.

<sup>23</sup>See (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:51) for this general line of criticism.

<sup>24</sup>(Leshner 1987) takes the evidence for [D] to be persuasive, but not the evidence for [P].

or rich or well-born, or the opposite of these? Do you think that is possible? [*Meno* 71a3-b8; adapted from Grube trans.]

The (a) and (c) portions indicate substitution instances of [D], viz. if Socrates fails to know what virtue is, then Socrates fails to know that virtue is teachable, and if Socrates fails to know who Meno is, then Socrates fails to know that Meno is good-looking, or that Meno is rich, or that Meno is well-born. But in between we find the most explicit evidence for the general principle that one could plausibly expect, viz. if someone fails to know what something (F-ness) is, then one fails to know what qualities, (G-nesses) it possesses.<sup>25</sup> Additional passages in the *Meno* suggest a similar commitment,<sup>26</sup> but none so explicitly as (b).

Socrates appears to endorse additional substitution instances of [D] in the *Laches*. In pursuing the same investigation as that posed at the beginning of the *Meno*, Socrates says in the *Laches*

Then isn't this necessary for us to begin, to know what virtue is? For if we do not know at all what virtue happens to be, how would we become advisors to anyone regarding how it might best be attained? [*Laches* 190b7-c2]

Here again, Socrates appears committed to the view that if one fails to know what virtue is, then one fails to know how it is acquired. Of course, one might object that this passage does not explicitly require knowledge of the nature of virtue for *knowledge* of how it is to be acquired, but rather for becoming an (appropriate?) advisor for how it is acquired. And we might imagine that Socrates envisions the requirements for being a virtue-acquisition advisor to exceed the requirements for knowledge of how virtue is acquired. But in an earlier passage which serves as a sort of epagogic inference to 190b7-c2, Socrates avers

For if we happen to know concerning anything whatever that its being added to something makes that thing to which it is added better and further we are able to cause that thing to be added to it, then it is clear that we know that thing itself concerning which we advise how someone might best and most easily attain it ... If we happen to know that sight added to the eyes makes them better and further we are able to cause it to be added to the eyes, then it is clear that we know what sight is concerning which we advise how someone might best attain it. For if we did not know what sight is or what hearing is, we

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<sup>25</sup>To be fair the (b) portion of this passage restricts the principle to Socrates, but the (c) portion makes clear that this is not philosophically salient.

<sup>26</sup>See, *Meno* 79c7-9, 86d3-e1, and 100b4-6.

would hardly be advisors or doctors worthy of attention concerning eyes and ears, how someone might best attain hearing and sight. [*Laches* 189e3-190b1]

Two features about this passage are noteworthy. First, Socrates is explicit that knowledge of the nature of F-ness is a requirement for *knowledge* of how F-ness is acquired, not simply advice concerning how F-ness is acquired. And second, while the passage continues to indicate a restriction to qualities (G-nesses) associated with the acquisition of F-nesses, it testifies to a broader principle than one restricted to virtue. Something like the following substitution instance of [D] is indicated: If one fails to know what F-ness is, then one fails to know that F-ness is G (for G-nesses associated with the manner in which F-ness is best acquired).

Two other dialogues testify to additional substitution instances of [D]. In the introductory dialogue between Socrates and Hippocrates in the *Protagoras*, Socrates indicates that if Hippocrates fails to know what a sophist is, then he fails to know that a sophist is good at *Protagoras* 312b8-c4.<sup>27</sup> And Socrates concludes the first book of the *Republic* as follows

Hence the result of the discussion, as far as I'm concerned, is that I know nothing, for when I don't know what justice is, I'll hardly know whether it is a kind of virtue or not, or whether a person who has it is happy or unhappy. [*Republic* 354d9-c3; Grube/Reeve trans.]

Once again, we appear to be presented with a substitution instance of [D] to the effect that failing to know what justice is entails failing to know that justice is a virtue or that justice is happiness-conducive. Indeed, Socrates' initial suggestion that the result of the dialogue so far is that he knows *nothing* may even be taken as indicating a more general principle to the effect that failing to know what justice is entails failing to know anything about justice. Indeed, when this is conjoined with the second passage from the *Laches*, something very close to the general statement in the (b) portion of the passage from the *Meno* is indicated.

If this were the end of the matter we would have little reason to rest content with Robinson's 'vague impression' that the Socrates of Plato's Socratic dialogues is committed to the  
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<sup>27</sup>See also *Gorgias* 462c10-d2 and 463c3-6 for a similar suggestion concerning rhetoric, although the *Gorgias* passages may be more suggestive of a procedural priority principle. For the procedural principle see also *Meno* 86d3-e1 and my discussion of (Brickhouse and Smith 1994) below.

priority of definition principle, i.e., [PD].<sup>28</sup> The evidence is considerably stronger than a vague impression. While Socrates never explicitly states [PD] in its full generality, he does appear to state [D] in its full generality, as well as endorsing at least six different substitution instances. In the case of [P], the general claim is never explicitly stated, but the manner in which the substitution instance of it is introduced in the *Hippias Major* does not suggest any restrictions are in the offing, and again at least three more substitution instances appear in surrounding dialogues. When the passages on behalf of [D] are combined with those on behalf of [P], it is difficult to imagine that we have stronger evidence for any other alleged Socratic thesis than we have for his commitment to the priority of definition principle,<sup>29</sup> if, as I say, this were the end of the matter. But as the qualification suggests, this is not the end of the matter. For in addition to the abundant evidence on behalf of Socrates' endorsement of [PD] there appears to be strong considerations that tell against his endorsement. Let us turn to those considerations now.

**Evidence That Socrates Does Not Endorse [PD].** The considerations offered against Socrates' endorsement of [PD] fall roughly into two categories: textual considerations and philosophical considerations. The textual considerations themselves follow three main lines of argument. According to the first, it is maintained that Socrates' method of searching for knowledge is inconsistent with a commitment to [PD]. This method of inquiry, it is averred, depends on possessing knowledge of things that are F and of properties of F-ness in an attempt to come to know what F-ness is. As such Socrates' method of inquiry presupposes that Socrates does not endorse [PD], for it presupposes knowledge about F-ness (its instances and its properties) prior to knowledge of what F-ness is.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>See (Robinson 1953:51), who was taken to task by (Beverluis 1987:211) for resting content with a 'vague impression'.

<sup>29</sup>In addition to this textual evidence, (Irwin 1995, 27–28) offers an argument that Socrates must have been committed to [PD] in order to plausibly take failure in an *elenchus* as evidence for an individual's general lack of knowledge.

<sup>30</sup>In addition to (Beverluis 1987) and (Vlastos 1990) who cite specific instances of this tension, see (Santas 1979:116), (Brickhouse and Smith 1984b:128), (Nehamas 1987:292), and (Woodruff 1988:22), who make the point somewhat more generally. To describe this and the following consideration as 'textual considerations' is a bit imprecise. The claim that Socrates employs a method of inquiry and of testing answers to his 'What is F-ness?' questions that depends on *examining* examples and properties of F-ness is a *textual* consideration. The further claim that such a method of inquiry and of testing depends on *knowledge* of those examples and properties of F-ness is a

For example, in the *Laches* Socrates proposes that Laches search out the answer to the ‘What is courage?’ question by searching for what various examples of courageous behavior have in common at 191c-e.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, at *Euthyphro* 6d-e, Socrates appears to encourage Euthyphro to answer the “What is piety?” question by examining a variety of pious actions and indicating the form itself by virtue of which those pious actions are pious. In the *Charmides*, after Socrates rejects Charmides’ first answer to the “What is temperance?” question, Socrates encourages Charmides to re-examine himself, an apparent example of a temperate individual, in order to try to answer again the “What is temperance?” question.<sup>32</sup> These and other examples, throughout the Socratic dialogues indicate that Socrates is committed to the possibility that one can know that particular actions or individuals are courageous, pious, or temperate while failing to know the answer to the relevant ‘What is F-ness?’ question? But that provides rather compelling evidence that Socrates would not endorse the view that one who fails to know what F-ness is cannot know which actions or individuals are F, viz. [P].

According to a second line of argument based on the text, Socrates tests proposed answers to his ‘What is F-ness?’ questions by appealing to examples and properties of the relevant F-ness. Indeed, Socrates frequently objects to proposed answers by citing counter-examples. Thus, Socrates objects to Laches’ initial answer to the ‘What is courage?’ question that courage is remaining in the ranks and facing one’s enemy by citing the courageous flight of the Scythian cavalry and of the Spartan hoplites at Plataea. In the *Charmides*, Socrates objects to the answer that temperance is quietness by appealing to various activities that are temperate but not quiet. And, in *Republic* I, Socrates famously objects to Cephalus’ answer that justice is giving to each his due by noting the injustice of returning a sword to a madman. Once, again Socrates’ method indicates that he thinks one can know that various things are F while failing to

*philosophical* consideration, one which as we will see below is denied by those who defend the sufficiency of true belief interpretation. See pp. 000 below.

<sup>31</sup>Cited by (Beverluis 1987:212) and (Vlastos 1990:6) as evidence against Socrates’ commitment to [PD]. See also Socrates’ example of how to answer the ‘What is swiftness?’ question at *Laches* 192a-b.

<sup>32</sup>(Beverluis 1987:212–213) cites the examples from the *Euthyphro* and *Charmides*.

know what F-ness is, contrary to [P]. Moreover, on those occasions in which Socrates does not appeal to a counter-example in opposition to a proposed answer, he appeals to properties of the definiendum which the definiens fails to have or vice versa. For example, in opposition to Charmides' second answer to the 'What is temperance?' question that temperance is modesty, Socrates points out that while temperance is always fine, modesty is not. Again, in opposition to Nicias' answer that courage is the knowledge of fearful and daring things, Socrates points out that while courage is a part of virtue, knowledge of fearful and daring things is the whole of virtue. These and numerous other examples<sup>33</sup> indicate that Socrates thinks one can know a variety of properties of courage or temperance, for example, while failing to know what courage or temperance is. In these cases, we appear to have rather straightforward evidence that Socrates does not endorse [D], and when these passages are combined with the counter-example passages, any suggestion that Socrates endorses [PD] looks hopeless.

A third line of argument connected to the text is independent of Socrates' characteristic method of searching for and examining answers to his 'What is F-ness?' questions. According to this line of argument, Socrates frequently professes knowledge of various things about F-nesses, while at the same time professing ignorance of what those F-nesses are.<sup>34</sup> The frequency of these Socratic professions of knowledge is a matter of some dispute,<sup>35</sup> but not that Socrates does sometimes profess to know things. Two such professions are well known from the *Apology*.

I do know, however, that it is bad and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man. I shall never fear or avoid things of which I do not know, whether they may not be good rather than things that I know to be bad. [*Apology* 29b6-9; based on Grube trans.]

Am I then to choose in preference to this something that I know very well to be an evil and assess the penalty at that? [*Apology* 37b7-8; Grube trans.]

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<sup>33</sup>See (Beverluis 1987:222 n. 17) who cites in addition the following passages against [D]: *Charmides* 160e9, 160e11, 160e13, and *Laches* 192c5-7, 192c8-9, and 192d7-8. He also cites the following passages against both [P] and [D]; *Crito* 54d4-6, *Gorgias* 474b2-4, *Protagoras* 329e6-333b4, and *Gorgias* 470d8-11. But in fact, the number of passages in which Socrates appeals to a property of the definiendum in the course of examining an interlocutor's answer are nearly too numerous to list.

<sup>34</sup>For perhaps the clearest statement of this line of argument see (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:45).

<sup>35</sup>For more detailed accounts of Socrates' various knowledge avowals and disavowals see (Vlastos 1985), (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:30-72), (Benson 2000:223-238), (Forster 2007), (Wolfsdorf 2004a), (Fine 2008), and (Wolfsdorf 2008:131-145).

In the first passage Socrates explicitly professes to know that disobeying a superior is bad and shameful, while in the second passage he professes to know that saying that he deserves some punishment other than death would be among the bad things. If Socrates endorses [PD], or more specifically [P], he should profess to know what badness is and what shamefulness is, since he professes to know instances of badness and shamefulness. But while Socrates never to my knowledge explicitly professes ignorance of what badness or what goodness is in the Socratic dialogues,<sup>36</sup> it is difficult to believe in light of his general professions of ignorance that he would profess to know this. Moreover, as we saw in the *Hippias Major*, Socrates does maintain his ignorance of what fineness is and so presumably his ignorance of what shamefulness is.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, given Socrates' professions of knowledge of instances of badness and shamefulness and yet the strong presumption, if not explicit expression, of his ignorance of what badness is and shamefulness is, we have good reason to conclude that Socrates does not endorse [PD], or at least [P].<sup>38</sup>

In addition to these textual considerations on behalf of denying Socrates' endorsement of [PD], there is a philosophical consideration. [PD] is simply too implausible to be charitably attributed to anyone approaching Socrates' philosophical acumen. What is philosophically implausible about [PD] is perhaps best captured by Peter Geach, who following Wittgenstein, writes the following: "We know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Geach finds this principle so implausible that, in perhaps a momentary lack of interpretive generosity, he dubbed it 'the Socratic Fallacy' and blamed Socrates for a style of mistaken thinking more damaging to the progress of philosophy than

<sup>36</sup>He does, of course, profess ignorance of the form of the Good at *Republic* 506b-c.

<sup>37</sup>It is noteworthy that the *Hippias Major* passage appears to indicate that knowledge of what fineness is is necessary not only for knowledge that something is fine, but also that something is shameful. This may be connected to the general Greek committed to knowledge of opposites. See, for example, *Phaedo* 97c6-d5.

<sup>38</sup>Arguably less explicit professions of knowledge together with corresponding professions of ignorance of answers to 'What is F-ness?' questions provide similar evidence against Socrates' commitment to [D], as well as [P]. See, e.g., *Protagoras* 357d7-e1, *Republic* 351a5-6, and *Euthydemus* 296e3-297a2.

<sup>39</sup>(Geach 1966:371). Geach follows this by indicating the philosophical implausibility of successful inquiry given a commitment to [PD]. See (White 2008:33) and n. 31 above. But it seems clear that Geach's main objection is the one quoted above.

Plato's theory of Forms.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the obvious falsity of the principle would have lead a more generous interpreter to doubt Socrates' commitment to [PD], as it has a variety of scholars since Geach's influential paper. Indeed, I suspect that Geach's forceful repudiation of the principle was partially responsible for rediscovering the texts that argue against Socrates' endorsement.

### **The Landscape of Interpretations<sup>41</sup>**

Thus, we face an interpretive tension in the Socratic dialogues, not uncommon in the history of philosophy. On the one hand, considerable evidence indicates that Socrates endorses the priority of definition principle, [PD]. While precious little textual evidence indicates the general principle, numerous passages testify to a commitment to various substitution instances of [PD]. If there were not evidence to the contrary, we would have rather compelling evidence for Socrates' endorsement of [PD]. But, on the other hand, there does appear to be considerable evidence to the contrary. His method of searching for and testing answers to his 'What is F-ness?' questions appears to presuppose that Socrates does not accept [PD]. Moreover, various Socratic professions of ignorance and knowledge are contrary to an endorsement of [PD], and of course, [PD] is philosophically implausible. How then are we to resolve this interpretive tension?

As one might expect there are three general approaches to this tension in the literature. Some interpreters simply accept the tension, and ala Geach proclaim so much the worse for Socrates. I will call this 'the embrace the tension approach'. Some interpreters re-examine the alleged textual evidence *on behalf* of [PD] and explain it away. I will call this 'the reject [PD] approach'. And some interpreters re-examine the alleged textual evidence *against* [PD], explain it away, and offer a philosophically respectable understanding of the principle. I will call this 'the embrace [PD] approach'. Let us look more closely at each of these three general approaches.

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<sup>40</sup>See (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:51 n. 34) who suggest that I am alone in attempting to deny [PD]'s implausibility. For some potential fellow travelers see (Penner 1992:168 n. 78) and (Prior 1998).

<sup>41</sup>The taxonomy of interpretations is an imprecise and subjective business, and nothing of philosophical importance hangs on the way I have chosen to carve up the interpretations. My hope is simply that it may help the reader see the various options for responding to the interpretative tension. See n. 65 below.

**Embrace the Tension.** Geach may perhaps be the most famous representative of those interpreters who appear happy to embrace this tension in Socratic thought. Indeed, Geach is so happy to attribute to Socrates a principle that Geach considers obviously fallacious that he never even considers the evidence to the effect that Socrates does not endorse [PD]. But another, perhaps more generous, representative of this sort of interpretation can be found in Russell Dancy's recent book.<sup>42</sup> Dancy spends considerable time responding to those interpreters who attempt to explain away the passages which appear to testify to Socrates' endorsement of [PD].<sup>43</sup> None of their attempts, Dancy maintains, are compelling. Nevertheless, Dancy does not deny that Socrates' endorsement of [PD] is incompatible with his method of searching for and examining purported answers to his 'What is F-ness?' questions.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, he even agrees that the principle is false.<sup>45</sup> According to Dancy

Various attempts have been made to read the dialogues in a way that gets around the apparent conflict between Socrates' claims and his practice. The way I'm going to read them, the conflict is there, and is one of the driving forces tending toward the theory of recollection we find in the *Meno*. Attempts to make Socrates come out smelling like roses will be dealt with along the way. But a Socrates who is inconsistent on this score strikes me as more interesting than these consistent ones. (Dancy 1999:41)

Notice that Dancy's interpretation is motivated by two considerations. First, he rejects a strong form of the principle of charity as a guiding principle in interpreting philosophical texts.<sup>46</sup> According to Dancy, we should not assume that philosophers, even great ones, fail to make mistakes, even big ones, or are always consistent. Indeed, the reverse is more likely to be true. An interpretation according to which Socrates is mistaken and/or inconsistent is not only likely to

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<sup>42</sup>(Dancy 2004). Other scholars who might be placed in this general category of interpreters include (Charles 2006:125) and (Wolfsdorf 2004b:esp. 67). But neither of them are as explicit as Dancy nor do they maintain a longer term resolution of the tension as Dancy does. To this extent Charles and Wolfsdorf may be closer to Geach. See also (Irwin 1995, 358 n. 32) who concedes this possibility.

<sup>43</sup>Dancy dubs this principle the Intellectualist Assumption; (Dancy 2004:36 n. 40). For Dancy's defense of Socrates' endorsement of [PD] with which I am in substantial agreement see (Dancy 2004:42–64); see also (Wolfsdorf 2004b:40–55).

<sup>44</sup>See (Dancy 2004:39–41).

<sup>45</sup>(Dancy 2004:37–38).

<sup>46</sup>Dancy is not rejecting the principle of charity completely. He would endorse the principle that one should not understand a philosopher in such a way that he or she is inconsistent "if there are viable alternatives. The trouble," according to Dancy "is that here no alternatives seem to me really viable" (Dancy 2004:41).

be more plausible, but also, according to Dancy, more philosophically interesting. Second, the thesis of Dancy's book is to defend "a developmental view [of Plato's dialogues] with an analytic emphasis" (Dancy 2004:1). Part of his defense of this developmental interpretation is seeing Plato as attempting to resolve this tension between Socrates' commitment to [PD] and Socrates' (or any reasonable) philosophical method. As Dancy sees it, at least by the time of the composition of the *Meno*, Plato recognizes this tension in Socratic philosophy and resolves it by rejecting [PD] by means of the theory of recollection.<sup>47</sup> So, in the end, while Socrates may not 'come out smelling like roses', Plato does, or at least sort of.<sup>48</sup>

**Reject [PD].** By far the most popular approach in recent years to the interpretive tension surrounding Socrates' endorsement of [PD] involves explaining away the alleged evidence offered on behalf of his endorsement. According to this reject [PD] approach, the passages we cited above on behalf Socrates' endorsement of [PD] are understood in one of three ways. [1] Either they fail to testify to any principle at all and are contextually explained away;<sup>49</sup> or [2] they testify to some other less general or weaker principle or principles which are compatible with his method of searching for and testing answers to his 'What is F-ness?' questions and his professions of knowledge and ignorance, and are philosophically respectable (or at least more respectable than [PD]); or [3] they fail to testify to Socratic, as opposed to Platonic views.<sup>50</sup> Various combinations and applications of these three ways of dealing with the passages which suggest Socratic endorsement of [PD] lead to roughly four distinct versions of this general approach.

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<sup>47</sup>That Plato abandoned [PD] in the so-called middle and late dialogues is a matter of some dispute. For some passages which might be cited for his continued commitment, see *Republic* 336c, 354b-c, 402b-c, 462c, 505a-506a, *Symposium* 199c-d, *Theaetetus* 147b, 196d-e, 210a, *Sophist* 260d-261a, and *Philebus* 12c-d. Of course, each of these passages need individual examination and can be interpreted otherwise, just as in the Socratic dialogues. It is interesting to note that the Vlastos-Beverluis interpretation discussed below takes the opposite approach. It denies that Socrates endorsed [PD] in the Socratic dialogues, but concedes that Plato endorsed it in the post-Socratic dialogues. See also (Kahn 1996:esp. 163) who, though rejecting Dancy's developmentalism agrees that the tension can be found in dialogues like the *Laches* and resolved in dialogues like the *Phaedo* in virtue of the introduction of the theory of recollection and theory of forms. But Kahn does not think that Plato abandons [PD].

<sup>48</sup>I doubt that Dancy thinks the theory of recollection smells like roses.

<sup>49</sup>This is how, for example, Vlastos understands *Charmides* 176a-b and how Brickhouse and Smith understand *Lysis* 223b.

<sup>50</sup>For perhaps the earliest version of this general approach in the recent literature, see (Santas 1972).

The first version of the reject [PD] approach is represented by Gregory Vlastos and John Beversluis.<sup>51</sup> It is characterized by two features. First, some of the passages we cited above, for example, *Hippias Major* 286c-d and 304d-e for [P] and *Meno* 71a-b for [D], do indeed testify to an endorsement of [PD]. But they do not testify to a Socratic endorsement. Rather they testify to a Platonic endorsement. According to Vlastos and Beversluis, the *Hippias Major*, *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*, and *Meno* are transitional dialogues. They were composed by Plato between the dialogues that represent the philosophy of Socrates and the middle dialogues that represent a distinctly new and different Platonic philosophy. As such these transitional dialogues contain elements of the older Socratic view (in particular its moral doctrines) and elements of the emerging Platonic view (in particular a new emerging methodology borrowed from Plato's new interest in mathematics). Far from being at odds with the new emerging methodology of these dialogues (as [PD] is with the methodology of the earlier dialogues), [PD] is rather an essential component of the methodology of the middle dialogues. Consequently, according to Vlastos and Beversluis, [PD] can be found in the *Hippias Major*, *Meno*, and *Lysis* passages,<sup>52</sup> but these passages testify to Plato's endorsement of [PD], and not to Socrates'.

Second, according to Vlastos and Beversluis, the remaining passages that allegedly indicate a Socratic endorsement of [PD] do not indicate anything as general (and hence as implausible) as [PD]. For example, while they do not explicitly discuss *Euthyphro* 4d-5d, they evidently take it to indicate a commitment to a more restricted and hence more plausible principle roughly to the effect that if an individual fails to know what piety is (perhaps what any F-ness is), then that individual fails to know controversial and/or borderline instances of piety

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<sup>51</sup>The interpretation is presented in the following essays (Vlastos 1985), (Beversluis 1987), and (Vlastos 1990). The dependence on each other is clear from the notes (see esp. (Beversluis 1987:223 n. 29) and (Vlastos 1990:13 n 1)), although the direction of influence is more difficult to determine. Such differences as there are between these two scholars on this issue will be for the most part set aside for our purposes.

<sup>52</sup>They consider *Republic* I to be a Socratic dialogue, but they take the concluding passage of this book, which contains the evidence for [PD], to be tacked on to facilitate the book's new role as the introduction to Plato's *magnum opus*. See, for example, (Vlastos 1990:15 n 31).

(like whether prosecuting one's father for murdering a murderous slave is pious).<sup>53</sup> Since, Socrates does not (and does not need to) appeal to controversial or borderline cases of F-ness in order to search for and test answers to his 'What is F-ness?' questions, this more restricted principle is compatible with the method of the Socratic dialogues and moreover is philosophically plausible. Similarly, they take the *Laches* passages as testifying only to something like the following principle: if one fails to know what F-ness is, then one fails to know how F-ness is best acquired.<sup>54</sup> Once again this principle is not as general as [PD] (or even [D]) and so does not rule out knowing various properties of F-ness (other than how F-ness may best be acquired) prior to knowing what F-ness is. Knowledge that F-ness possesses these properties then can be appealed to in searching for and testing answers to his 'What is F-ness?' questions. Thus, according to Vlastos and Beversluis, we can avoid the interpretive tension associated with [PD] by taking those passages which are most indicative of [PD] as attributable to Plato and his new methodology, and the remaining passages as either not indicating any principle at all or as indicating a variety of less general and so more plausible principles and, moreover, ones perfectly compatible with Socratic method and professions of knowledge.<sup>55</sup>

The second version of this general approach, represented by Alexander Nehamas, does not resort to the distinction between Socratic and transitional dialogues in order to address the interpretive tension. Rather, Nehamas takes all of the passages cited above to testify to Socratic views, but he maintains that they testify to more restricted principles than [PD]. Thus, like Vlastos and Beversluis, Nehamas takes *Euthyphro* 4d9-5d1 to testify to Socrates' endorsement of

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<sup>53</sup>See (Beversluis 1987:214). Somewhat surprisingly neither Vlastos nor Beversluis discuss *Euthyphro* 4d-5d. They do, however, rightly point out that *Euthyphro* 6d-e, cited by Geach on behalf of [P], testifies not to the necessity of definitional knowledge, but rather to its sufficiency. (See also (Santas 1972:136).) They maintain that *Euthyphro* 15d-e is a 'spin-off' of 6d-e ((Vlastos 1985:23 n. 54) and (Beversluis 1987:215). But reading *Euthyphro* 15d-e in this way is difficult to understand; see (Dancy 2004:47 n. 68).

<sup>54</sup>(Beversluis 1987:215) only cites *Laches* 190b-c and takes it to testify to the view that "if you do not know the nature of virtue, you cannot usefully advise anyone about how best to achieve it", but as we saw above *Laches* 189e-190b requires something more. (Vlastos 1985:23 n 54), who does cite *Laches* 189e-190b only says that it does not assert [PD] in full generality. Vlastos says the same thing about *Charmides* 176a-b, and neither of them say anything about the *Protagoras* passage.

<sup>55</sup>See (Vlastos 1985) for how Socrates' professions of knowledge are to be understood on this approach.

the principle that one cannot know whether controversial and borderline cases of piety (like Euthyphro's prosecution of his father for murdering a murderous slave) are pious unless one knows what piety is.<sup>56</sup> But, unlike Vlastos and Beversluis who take the *Hippias Major* passages as evidence of Plato's endorsement of [PD] in full generality, Nehamas maintains that these passages testify to the principle that one cannot know *in general* which things are fine, if one fails to what fine-ness. Thus, the *Hippias Major* passages permit knowledge of uncontroversial examples of fine-ness, but not knowledge of fine things in general, when one fails to know what fine-ness is.<sup>57</sup>

In the case of *Meno* 71a3-b8, Nehamas maintains that, while the (b) portion of the passage does appear to be fully general, the examples on either side importantly circumscribe the principle. Nehamas points out that the properties of being good-looking, being rich, and being well-born are thought (in the culture at the time) to be essential properties of an individual. So, in claiming that one cannot know whether Meno is good-looking, rich, or well-born, unless one knows who Meno is, all that Socrates means to be endorsing is that one cannot know *essential* properties of a thing, unless one knows what that thing is. He is not maintaining that one cannot know *any* of the properties of the thing. Similarly, being teachable (or not) is plausibly thought to be an essential property of virtue, and so in maintaining that one cannot know whether virtue is teachable unless one knows what virtue is, Socrates is again only endorsing the restricted principle.

Nehamas deals with the concluding passage of *Republic* I in a similar way. He points out that being a virtue and being happiness-conducive are plausibly thought to be essential properties of justice, and so in maintaining that one cannot know whether justice possesses these properties unless one knows what justice is, Socrates is only endorsing the restricted principle that if one

<sup>56</sup>(Nehamas 1987:278).

<sup>57</sup>(Nehamas 1987:287).

fails to know what justice is, then one fails to know whether justice is G (where ‘G’ is a variable for essential or controversial properties of justice).<sup>58</sup>

Nehamas concludes his discussion of the passages offered in support of Socrates’ endorsement of [PD] as follows:

Socrates’ insistence on the priority of definition is therefore very narrowly circumscribed. First, it seems to concern primarily the virtues and not every thing or every term, ... Second, it seems to apply only to specific issues, and not to all the features of virtue, ... Socrates seems to believe that we need to know the definition of a virtue in order to decide whether certain disputable features (either traditionally disputed, like teachability, or disputed on particular occasions, like its benefits in the case of Thrasymachus) are or are not true of it. We also need to know it in order to discourse generally about it, that is, in order to present ourselves, as Hippias does, in the guise of experts in this regard. None of this amounts to a fallacy and none of it requires a broad methodological response.<sup>59</sup> (Nehamas 1987:290–291)

Notice that Nehamas’ version of the reject [PD] approach proceeds primarily<sup>60</sup> by restricting the application of the variables in [PD]. Recall that [PD], as we introduced it at the beginning of this essay, is a fully general conjunction of [P] and [D] and so can be represented as follows:

[PD] For any A, and for any F-ness, if A fails to know what F-ness is, then A fails to know, for any x, that x is F, and, for any G, that F-ness is G.

While Nehamas leaves unrestricted the application of ‘A’ (the principles Nehamas attributes to Socrates apply to everyone), he takes Socrates to restrict the application of ‘F-ness’ to ‘primarily the virtues’, and the application of the ‘x’ and ‘G’ to controversial or disputable instances and properties of F-ness or instances and properties in some way connected to the essence of F-ness. I mention this here because the third version of the reject [PD] approach has much in common with Nehamas’ approach in that it does not take any of the passages to require a Socratic or Platonic endorsement of [PD] but only of weaker and less general principles, but it does so, not -----

<sup>58</sup>(Nehamas 1987:290). The connection between a property being essential (or nearly so (see (Nehamas 1987:284–285)) and being controversial is brought out by Nehamas’ suggestion that the essential properties of F-ness are in as much dispute as the nature of F-ness itself. See (Nehamas 1987:284 and 292).

<sup>59</sup>(Nehamas 1987:290–291). Nehamas does not explicitly discuss *Euthyphro* 15d-e, *Charmides* 176a-b, *Laches* 189e-190b, or *Protagoras* 312b-c, but one suspects he would deal with them similarly.

<sup>60</sup>I say ‘primarily’ because Nehamas’ talk of discoursing generally may have inspired Brickhouse and Smith’s distinction between expert and ordinary knowledge below. See (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:60 n. 41) where they explicitly acknowledge the influence of (Nehamas 1987).

by restricting the application of the variables but by distinguishing between distinct types of knowledge.

Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith represent this third version of the reject [PD] approach.<sup>61</sup> They are unique in addressing each and every one of the passages cited above on behalf of Socrates' endorsement of [PD]. But they do not treat all these passages in the same way. Rather they appear to see the passages as falling roughly into three groups.

They understand some of the passages as simply failing to testify to Socrates' endorsement of any very general substantive epistemic principle at all. This is, for example, how I understand their reading of *Lysis* 223b, *Meno* 71a-b, *Charmides* 176a-b, and *Protagoras* 312c. For example, after considering a variety of ways of understanding *Meno* 71a-b that fall short of [PD] in its full generality, they appear to settle on the idea that the question in the (b) portion is rhetorical and it is Meno who commits to the impossibility of knowledge of what properties F-ness has, when one is ignorant of what F-ness is.<sup>62</sup> Brickhouse and Smith take Socrates to be maintaining in the *Lysis* simply that Menexenus and Lysis look ridiculous in failing "to understand what they take themselves so plainly to instantiate" (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:51), i.e., a friend. And in the *Protagoras*, they take Socrates to indicate only that "one ordinarily does not go to a carpenter [or any other expert] for some assistance without some fairly clear idea of what the carpenter is skilled at doing, unless, of course, one has some other, very exceptional ground for doing so" (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:53). In none of these passages, then, according to Brickhouse and Smith does Socrates endorse an exceptionless epistemic principle on the order of [PD].

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<sup>61</sup>(Brickhouse and Smith 1994:45–60). See also (Woodruff 1988) who at times appears to offer a similar resolution based on a distinction between expert and non-expert or ordinary knowledge, as opposed to Brickhouse and Smith's distinction between clear and unclear knowledge or knowledge how (or why) and knowledge that; see (Woodruff 1988:80, 85, and 92) and (McPherran 1988:esp. 126) who prefers Brickhouse and Smith's version of this resolution to Woodruff's. At other times Woodruff's view resembles Nehamas's approach; see (Woodruff 1988:104). See n. 41. Brickhouse and Smith's discussion is more extensive and so I will focus on their account. See also (Brickhouse and Smith 1984b) for an earlier version of their resolution.

<sup>62</sup>(Brickhouse and Smith 1994:52). Similarly, they appear to maintain that it is Charmides, not Socrates, who endorses [P] at *Charmides* 176a-b; (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:59 n. 40).

A second group of passages, according to Brickhouse and Smith, testify to Socrates' endorsement of something like the following principle:

[BS] If A fails to know what F-ness is, then A fails to know *clearly* anything about F-ness.

Thus, Brickhouse and Smith understand *Laches* 189e3-190b1 as well as the passages from the *Euthyphro* and *Hippias Major* as testifying to Socrates' endorsement of the view that failing to know what F-ness entails failing to know in general what things are F. According to Brickhouse and Smith, Socrates distinguishes between two types of knowledge, a kind that is constitutive of wisdom (expert or clear knowledge) and a kind that is not (ordinary or unclear knowledge).<sup>63</sup> The former kind of knowledge requires knowing how or why something is the case; the latter sort of knowledge requires knowing simply that something is the case. It is only the former sort of knowledge that allows one to know in general what things are F, and the *Laches*, *Euthyphro*, and *Hippias Major* passages indicate that according to Socrates knowing in general what things are F requires knowledge of what F-ness is. Consequently, they indicate a Socratic commitment to [BS]. But given Brickhouse and Smith's distinction between two types of knowledge we should not confuse [BS] with

[BW] If A fails to know what F-ness is, then A fails to know in the ordinary way anything about F-ness.

Whatever plausibility that accrues to [BS] in virtue of the nature of clear knowledge is absent from [BW].

According to Brickhouse and Smith, Socrates does not need to appeal to knowledge how or why specific actions are pious in order to search for an answer to his 'What is piety?' question. Nor does Socrates need to know why the Spartans were courageous at Plataea in order to accept it as a counter-example to Laches' answer that courage is remaining in one's ranks. Moreover, Socrates own professions of knowledge should not be understood as the sort of knowledge that constitutes wisdom, i.e. as knowledge how or why it is bad to disobey one's superior. On the

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<sup>63</sup>See (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:30–45).

contrary, given Socrates' repeated expressions of his failure to be wise, we should understand Socrates' professions of knowledge to be knowledge of the ordinary sort. Finally, while it is philosophically implausible to think one needs to know what virtue is in order to know in an ordinary way *that* Meno is virtuous, it is not so implausible to so suppose that one might need this definitional knowledge in order to know *why* Meno is virtuous. Thus, the evidence against [PD] which we discussed above tells against [BW], but the *Laches*, *Euthyphro*, and *Hippias Major* passages only commit Socrates to [BS].

The final group of passages (*Laches* 190b7-c2, *Meno* 100b4-6, and *Republic* 354d9-c3), according to Brickhouse and Smith, fail to testify to an *epistemological* principle at all. Rather, according to Brickhouse and Smith, they testify to a *procedural* priority principle. For example, when at the end of the *Meno* Socrates says

We shall have clear knowledge of this when, before we investigate how it comes to be present in men, we first try to find out what virtue in itself is. [*Meno* 100b4-6; Grube trans.]

he is not simply testifying to his commitment to [BS] - the principle according to which *clear* knowledge of how virtue comes to be acquired requires knowledge of what virtue is, he is also endorsing a particular procedure which can lead to the acquisition of *unclear* knowledge of how virtue comes to be acquired. The idea is that seeking to come to know what virtue is would enable one to acquire *clear* knowledge of how virtue comes to be acquired, if one's inquiry were to succeed in coming to know what virtue is.<sup>64</sup> But proceeding to inquire what virtue is will also enable one to acquire *unclear* knowledge of how virtue comes to be acquired, without succeeding in knowing what virtue is. Brickhouse and Smith maintain that one of the ways that one can acquire *unclear* knowledge according to Socrates is by means of repeated elenctic episodes devoted to an inquiry concerning what some F-ness is. Thus, when Socrates encourages an inquiry concerning what virtue is at the end of the *Meno*, this is not because Socrates thinks knowledge of the nature of virtue is necessary for *unclear* knowledge concerning how virtues

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<sup>64</sup>According to Brickhouse and Smith, Socrates takes such knowledge to be impossible for mere humans to acquire.

come to be acquired, but because he wants to encourage a kind of inquiry which has the potential to lead to the acquisition of *unclear* knowledge over the long run. Even so, Brickhouse and Smith are quick to point out, Socrates recognizes other methods of acquiring *unclear* knowledge besides searching for answers to his ‘What is F-ness?’ questions - through dreams, divinations, or the like.

A fourth and final version of the reject [PD] approach appears in a recent paper by Michael Forster. Forster argues against what he maintains is the orthodox interpretation of Socratic definitions which consists of the following three claims:

First, Socrates’ motive in demanding ethical definitions was a desire to attain them in order to achieve ethical knowledge in and through them. Second, Socrates expected these definitions to provide substantive explanations of the qualities referred to by the definienda, and accordingly to be scientifically abstruse and complex in character (not the sort of definitions that it would be reasonable to expect the ordinary man to have at his fingertips). Third, and relatedly, Socrates expected these definitions to be more than mere statements of the meanings of the definienda, more than mere statements of what anyone must know in order to understand the definienda (in the everyday semantic sense of ‘understand’).

As part of his argument against the third claim that Socrates expected more than mere statements of meaning in response to his ‘What is F-ness?’ questions, Forster cites what at first blush appears to be Socrates’ endorsement of [PD], but more precisely, turns out to be Socrates’ endorsement of a considerably weaker version of [PD].<sup>65</sup> According to Forster, we should understand the passages that have been cited as evidence for [PD], instead as evidence for

[MF] If A fails to understand ‘the meaning that the word ‘F-ness’ bears’<sup>66</sup>, then one fails to know anything else about F-ness.

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<sup>65</sup>It is, of course, somewhat arbitrary whether we consider Forster as maintaining ‘a reject [PD] view’ or as ‘an embrace [PD] view’. I have located Forster’s view in the former because he denies that Socrates endorses [PD] under the orthodox construal of Socratic definition. Nevertheless, the view that I endorse below also attempts to explain away the evidence against [PD] in part by recommending a non-orthodox understanding [PD], and yet I categorize it as ‘an embrace [PD] view’. Indeed, one might take Forster’s view to be an attempt to explain away the evidence against [PD] by endorsing a weakened version of [PD], while I attempt to explain away the same evidence by endorsing a strengthened version of [PD]. Understood in this way, one would assume that Forster’s and my approach ought to fall within same taxonomical genus. What this shows, of course, is simply that taxonomies of interpretations are arbitrary and typically reflect the taxonomist’s interests and prejudices. Nothing of philosophical importance hangs on whether Forster’s view should be seen as rejecting Socrates’ endorsement of [PD] or my view should be seen as embracing Socrates’ endorsement of [PD]. See n. 41 above.

<sup>66</sup>(Forster 2006b:34–35): “though not necessarily that the word [‘F-ness’] bears it, since, for instance, you might happen not to know English ...”

If we do, then we can understand why Socrates takes this principle to be so self-evident as not to need argument, at least on a plausible construal.<sup>67</sup> For example, according to Forster, one cannot plausibly think one knows that Helen is beautiful (i.e, that Helen has beauty), if one fails to understand the meaning that the word ‘beauty’ bears. In this way, Forster avoids the philosophical objection to Socrates’ commitment to [PD]. [MF], at least on one construal, is simply not philosophically implausible. On the contrary, it is self-evidently true, at least according to Forster. Consequently, all of the passages that testify to [MF], testify to understanding Socrates as taking answers to his ‘What is F-ness?’ questions as merely amounting to statements of meaning. For the best explanation of those passages is a Socratic endorsement of [MF], since an explanation that commits Socrates to [PD] would be uncharitable; and an endorsement of [MF] indicates a commitment to taking answers to ‘What is F-ness?’ questions as merely amounting to statements of meaning.

Unfortunately, Forster cites, but does not discuss, the passages that he takes as evidence for [MF].<sup>68</sup> He does, however, have a way of countering the textual evidence that has been cited against Socrates’ commitment to [PD], now understood as [MF]. Forster maintains that the view that Socrates has a method for searching for knowledge is at odds with Socrates’ view that knowledge is beyond a human’s ken.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, Forster rejects the evidence against Socrates’ endorsement of [PD]/[MF] based on his method of searching for and testing answers to his ‘What is F-ness?’ questions. Since knowledge of such answers is beyond a human’s ken,

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<sup>67</sup>Unfortunately, according to Forster, the plausible construal is not Socrates’. Forster maintains that according to Socrates in order understand ‘the meaning that the word ‘F-ness’ bears’ one must be able to give an informative synonym of that word. (See (Forster 2006b:27).) But such an assumption is false and has very damaging consequences for Socrates’ project; (Forster 2006b:45–46). For the inability of Socrates’ interlocutors to give an informative synonym does not show that they lack an understanding of ‘the meaning that the word ‘F-ness’ bears’ and so does not show that they fail to know anything else about F-ness. Thus, in the end, Forster agrees with Geach and Dancy that Socrates’ position is ‘fatally flawed’ (Forster 2007:32–33), but it is not because of Socrates’ commitment to [MF], but because of Socrates’ commitment to a particular version of the verbalization requirement. See [V] above; p. 000.

<sup>68</sup>See (Forster 2006b:nn. 81 and 82). Forster generously cites (Benson 1990b) as having “convincingly refuted” those who would reject Socrates’ commitment to a [PD]. I fear, however, Forster’s generosity considerably overestimates the results of my essay.

<sup>69</sup>See (Forster 2006b:6–22).

according to Forster, Socrates' method should not be seen as searching for such knowledge. Rather, Socrates' method is aimed simply at refuting his interlocutors' pretensions to wisdom, and Socrates can accomplish this aim, without professing to know examples and properties. This is because on Forster's account most of the interesting Socratic refutations are aimed at uncovering internal inconsistencies in the interlocutors' answers, while true belief concerning those examples and properties suffices for the remaining refutations found in the text.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, Forster explains how [MF] fails to conflict with Socrates' alleged professions of knowledge of examples and properties of F-ness whose definition he professes not to know. Forster simply denies that any such Socratic professions of knowledge are to be found in the text of the so-called Socratic dialogues. According to Forster, Socrates' and his interlocutors' ethical insights (insofar as they have them) are "at bottom an acceptance of [i.e. belief in] uncomprehended true sentences" (Forster 2007:18 n 27).<sup>71</sup> Forster appears somewhat uncomfortable with this consequence, but not enough apparently to overthrow the evidence on behalf of [MF].

### **Embrace [PD]**

With Forster's interpretation we come exceptionally close to the third and final general approach to the interpretive tension surrounding Socrates' endorsement of [PD]. According to this approach Socrates endorses [PD], the passages allegedly in conflict with this endorsement can be explain away, and [PD] is not as philosophically implausible as it has been supposed.

Let us begin with the version of this approach which Vlastos proclaimed in 1985 to be "now widely regarded to be the right solution to the [tension]" (Vlastos 1985:23 n 52) and which he dubbed 'the sufficiency of true belief' interpretation, or STB for short.<sup>72</sup> As the name implies,

<sup>70</sup>See (Forster 2006a). For the claim that true belief suffices for the remaining refutations see (Forster 2006a:19 n. 25).

<sup>71</sup>See also (Forster 2006b:14–16).

<sup>72</sup>To my knowledge there is no sustained defense of this approach in the literature. Various scholars appear to endorse it, but with varying degrees of enthusiasm. (Woodruff 1982:140) appeared to endorse, but then appears to abandon it in (Woodruff 1988). STB is not the main focus of (Burnyeat 1977), although he appears to endorse it, and (Irwin 1977:40–41) only devotes a couple of pages to the issue. See also (Irwin 1995:27–28) and (Santas 1979:115–126). Perhaps the most sustained defense is provided by Gail Fine given her defense of a sufficiency of true belief interpretation of *Meno's* paradox. Since she thinks Socrates endorses [PD], which she labels [PKW]

the key to the STB interpretation is that the evidence cited against Socrates' endorsement of [PD] does not require that individuals possess knowledge of instances and properties of F-ness prior to knowledge of what F-ness is. Rather it only requires that individuals possess true belief of instances and properties of F-ness.

For example, according to the STB interpretation, it suffices to refute Laches' definition that courage is remaining in the ranks and facing one's enemies to believe correctly that the Spartans were courageous in their retreat at Plataea. One does not need to *know* that the Spartans were courageous. Again, one does not need to know whether Charmides is an example of a temperate individual to begin one's search for the nature of temperance by looking at him. Rather it suffices to believe correctly that Charmides is temperate. Nor, does one need to know that temperance is fine and good to reject Charmides' definition that temperance is modesty. And finally, those passages in which Socrates expresses strong positive convictions concerning various F-nesses, whose 'What is F-ness?' questions he professes not to be able to answer, should not be read as knowledge claims, but rather professions of true belief.<sup>73</sup> Those who endorse STB point out, however, that [PD] does not prevent the possibility of true belief concerning the examples and properties of an F-ness when one fails to know what F-ness is. Rather, [PD] only prohibits *knowledge* of those examples and properties when one fails to know what F-ness is. Consequently, the alleged textual tension disappears. [PD] only prohibits *knowledge* of examples and properties prior to knowledge of what F-ness is. And the evidence of the text only requires *true belief* of examples and properties prior to knowledge of what F-ness is.

Unfortunately, advocates of the STB interpretation devote very little time responding to the philosophical implausibility of [PD]. Indeed, Irwin argues that Socrates must think true belief of examples and properties is sufficient for inquiry into what F-ness is, since such an

(Fine 2004:57 & 75), and she thinks the paradox depends upon [PD] (Fine 1992:201–204), her defense of her interpretation of how Plato/Socrates avoids the paradox amounts to a defense of Socrates/Plato's endorsement of [PD]. It should be noted, however, that she does not offer a detailed review of the evidence that creates the tension we have been trying to resolve.

<sup>73</sup>See (Irwin 1995:29) and (Fine 2008:72 and n. 40).

inquiry would be impossible if he did not, given his endorsement of [PD]. And, Irwin takes Socrates' endorsement of [PD] as the best philosophical explanation of Socrates' view that failure in an *elenchos* is evidence of an interlocutor's lack of knowledge.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, the alleged philosophical implausibility of supposing one can acquire knowledge of what F-ness is or reject answers to Socratic 'What is F-ness?' questions on the basis of examples and properties without knowledge of those examples and properties is at least open to debate.<sup>75</sup> But Geach's charge that "we know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge" goes explicitly unaddressed, at least as far as I have been able to determine.

I have reserved to the end my own response to the interpretive tension surrounding Socrates' endorsement of [PD].<sup>76</sup> Like the supporters of the STB interpretation, I embrace Socrates' commitment to [PD]. I take the evidence cited on behalf of Socrates' endorsement as providing a compellingly strong inference to the best explanation. I concede that no single passage requires a Socratic endorsement of [PD],<sup>77</sup> but the variety of passages which indicate substitution instances of [PD] or something very much like it provides good reason to maintain that the best explanation of all of those texts is Socrates' endorsement of [PD]. Of course, an inference to the best explanation is especially susceptible to counter-evidence, and so just as the defenders of STB needed to explain away the counter-evidence we rehearsed above, so do I.

Perhaps the most significant difference between my version of the embrace [PD] approach and the STB version is the way I respond to the first two textual considerations. Recall that the first two textual considerations concerned Socrates' method of seeking to come to know answers to his 'What is F-ness?' questions and testing the answers offered by his various interlocutors. It was maintained that Socrates sought and tested those answers by appealing to

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<sup>74</sup>See, for example, (Irwin 1995:20–21 and 27–29).

<sup>75</sup>See (Fine 1992:212), *pace* (White 2008:43–44 n 13).

<sup>76</sup>See (Benson 1990b), (Benson 2000:ch. 6), and most recently (Benson forthcoming). See also (Prior 1998), and perhaps (Scott 2006:86–90 and n 25), although since Scott is only concerned with the views endorsed in the *Meno* he does not respond to the contrary evidence in the Socratic dialogues. Scott does appear to endorse something like my response to the philosophical objection.

<sup>77</sup>Although *Meno* 71b3–4 comes very close to requiring a Socratic endorsement of [D], at least in my view.

examples and properties of F-ness. The defenders of the STB interpretation agree, but deny that doing so requires knowledge, as opposed to true belief, of those examples and properties of F-ness. I, however, maintain that supposing Socrates to be seeking to come to know answers to his ‘What is F-ness?’ questions and to be refuting (i.e., showing to be false) answers to his ‘What is F-ness?’ questions is to misunderstand the nature of Socratic method, or at least a unique and prevalent aspect of it - the Socratic *elenchos*. I defend an interpretation of the Socratic *elenchos* according to which Socrates does not aim to come to know an answer to his ‘What is F-ness?’ questions nor refute the answers that he has been offered. Rather Socrates aims to test the knowledge claims of his interlocutors. And that Socrates can and does do that by examining the coherence of his interlocutors’ F-ness related beliefs.<sup>78</sup> But to examine and test the coherence of his interlocutors’ beliefs Socrates neither needs to know nor correctly believe that the examples and properties cited in the course of an *elenchos* are examples and properties of F-ness.

In the case of the texts in which Socrates professes to know examples and properties of F-ness despite disavowing knowledge of the relevant F-ness, I am sympathetic to the STB interpretation. I maintain that the alleged Socratic professions of knowledge are much less frequent than they have sometimes been taken to be, but that nevertheless a few such professions remain. In the cases that remain we should either understand Socrates to be professing a weaker sort of knowledge than the robust sort referred to in [PD], roughly along the lines of Brickhouse and Smith’s distinction between ordinary knowledge and clear knowledge, or we should understand those Socratic professions as misstatements made in the heat of the moment or in the

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<sup>78</sup>See (Benson 1987), (Benson 1995), (Benson 2000:ch. 2–4), and most recently (Benson forthcoming). I do not, however, deny that Socrates seeks to come to know answers to his ‘What is F-ness?’ questions in the elenctic dialogues. I simply deny that he does so by employing his *elenchos*, at least in the way it is typically understood. Rather, he seeks to come to know answers to his ‘What is F-ness?’ questions by finding someone who knows what F-ness is and learning from him or her. See, for example, *Hippias Minor* 369d1-e2. I hint at this view in (Benson 2003:9 & n. 12). I develop this view at length in (Benson 2002). Thus, unlike Forster who would agree that, at least in the interesting cases, Socrates’ elenctic method aims at uncovering an incoherence in the interlocutors’ beliefs, I concede that Socrates is seeking knowledge of answers to his ‘What is F-ness?’ questions. Rather, I deny that the method by which he seeks this knowledge as well as the method by which he tests others’ purported knowledge of these answers requires that Socrates know (or even truly believe) examples and properties of F-ness whose nature he fails to know, at least according to Socrates’ own lights.

manner of the vulgar.<sup>79</sup> Neither of these alternatives are entirely satisfactory, but it is noteworthy that this difficulty is not unique to those who embrace Socrates' endorsement of [PD]. Anyone who takes seriously Socrates' professions of ignorance must opt for one or the other of these alternatives.<sup>80</sup>

Finally, I want to turn to the philosophical implausibility of [PD], because I believe it is this objection that has driven the debate concerning Socrates' endorsement of [PD] more than any other. Indeed, I suspect that it was Geach's philosophical attack on Socrates that lead many Socratic scholars to become uneasy with Robinson's 'vague impression' that Socrates endorses [PD].<sup>81</sup> This lead them to re-examine the text, perhaps more carefully, and predictably texts were 'discovered' that testified against Socrates' endorsement.<sup>82</sup> But I wonder how genuinely implausible [PD] is. Consider, for example, Geach's assertion that "We know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge." Would Socrates agree that we know heaps of things about the good, virtue, justice, piety, courage, temperance, friendship, etc.? One fairly clear lesson Socrates learned from the Delphic Oracle story in the *Apology* is that most, if not all, of us (including Geach presumably) think we know a great deal more than we do in fact know. So Socrates would not find the results of his commitment to [PD] to be as implausible as Geach (and apparently most contemporary philosophers) would. But how are we to understand this difference? We can either think that Socrates is just mistaken in denying that we know the heaps of things that we think we know, or we can think that Socrates has in mind a more robust sort of knowledge than the sort that Geach (and others) do. In the latter case Socrates is not denying that we know - in the ordinary, justified true belief sense of -----

<sup>79</sup>See (Benson 2000:223–238) for longer discussion of these passages. See also (Irwin 1995:29), (Fine 2008:72 and n 40), and (Forster 2006b:14–16) cited above.

<sup>80</sup>This is true even if one does not take Socrates to be professing universal ignorance, as I do not. At *Apology* 23b2-4 Socrates professes ignorance of important things, and it is difficult not to take the knowledge professions made at *Apology* 29b6-9 and 37b7-8 to be about important things. See (Benson 2000:231–233) for why I do not think Vlastos' distinction between elenctic and certain knowledge can resolve this difficulty.

<sup>81</sup>See n. 29 above.

<sup>82</sup>I do not mean in any way to be critical here. This is how the history of philosophy makes progress. See (Vlastos 1983:46–47) for the idea of 'discovering' a text one has read numerous times before.

knowledge - the heaps of things that we think we do; rather he is denying that we know those things in a more robust way. If this is so, then [PD] does not require knowledge of what F-ness is in order to know - in the ordinary, justified true belief way - examples and properties of F-ness. Rather it only requires knowledge of what F-ness is in order to know - in the robust way - examples and properties of F-ness. But understood in this latter way [PD] loses whatever implausibility it may have had understood in the former way.<sup>83</sup> I maintain that it is not only the textual evidence on behalf of [PD] that indicates this latter way of understanding [PD] (based on a moderate principle of charity),<sup>84</sup> but also a variety of other evidence - independently of one's interpretation of the Socrates' endorsement of [PD] - indicates Socrates' endorsement of such a robust understanding of knowledge.<sup>85</sup> This latter evidence, however, serves to reinforce the textual evidence on behalf of Socrates' endorsement of [PD].

### **Conclusion**

In the end, I hope it is clear that the question of Socrates' endorsement of some sort of epistemic priority of answers to his 'What is F-ness?' questions remains open and hotly disputed. The textual evidence appears to cut in both directions as do the philosophical considerations. Moreover, attempts to address this interpretive tension involve a variety of other (equally controversial) features of Socratic and Platonic philosophy, including, but not limited to the compositional order of the dialogues, the nature (if any) of Plato's philosophical development, the nature of Socratic knowledge, the nature of Socrates' professions of ignorance and knowledge, the nature of Socrates' distinction between knowledge and true belief, the nature of Socratic definition, the nature of the Socratic *elenchos*, and, more generally, the nature of Socrates' philosophical mission and method. It also involves numerous philosophical questions, ranging from the nature of knowledge to the nature of the philosophical method. This, of course, should not surprise us. It is not unique to the question of Socrates' endorsement of [PD], but

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<sup>83</sup>See Brickhouse and Smith's [BS] above.

<sup>84</sup>See n. 46 above.

<sup>85</sup>See, for example (Benson 2000:ch. 9), (Fine 2008), and (Wolfsdorf 2008:ch. 3).

likely applies to every interesting question concerning Socratic philosophy. Indeed, it testifies to the depth and fertility of Socrates' philosophy and the texts of his most famous student.

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