

The Socratic Stance in Philosophy

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1. Philosophy is an activity. Taken in ancient Greek terms, it is also the way of life devoted to that activity.

Diverse conceptions of philosophy may arise from diverse descriptions of the activity in question. At least two relevant descriptions – and, thus, two diverse conceptions of philosophy – derive from ancient Greek thought.

One of them is the description of philosophy as the way of life devoted to *theôria*, that is, to spectatorship in cosmology and metaphysics,¹ concerning ultimate value and the make-up of the world. According to the other conception, philosophy is the way of life devoted to examining oneself and others in all kinds of excellence, including wisdom or expertise (*sophia*).

The former conception issues in the rationalist tradition of modern philosophy, and reappears in present-day naturalism. The latter conception issued in the critical tradition, and is still presupposed in the description of philosophy as a second order activity.

What it is to do philosophy in the rationalist tradition was brought out by Alfred N. Whitehead as follows.

“That we fail to find in experience any elements intrinsically incapable of exhibition as examples of general theory is the hope of rationalism. This hope is not a metaphysical premise. It is the faith which forms the motive for the pursuit of all sciences alike, including metaphysics.

In so far as metaphysics enables us to apprehend the rationality of things, the claim is justified. It is always open to us, having regard to the imperfections of all metaphysical systems, to lose hope at the exact point where we find ourselves. The preservation of such faith must depend on an ultimate moral intuition into the nature of intellectual action - that it should embody the adventure of hope.² Such an intuition marks the point where metaphysics - and indeed every science - gains assurance from religion and passes over into religion. But in itself the faith does not embody a

¹ On *theôria* as spectatorship see Heinemann 2005.

² Instead of referring to "the nature of intellectual action", Whitehead could have also appealed to an ultimate moral intuition into what "belongs to the self-respect of intellect" (*SMW* 185, cf. Heinemann 2006).

premise from which the theory starts; it is an ideal which is seeking satisfaction. In so far as we believe this doctrine, we are rationalists." (PR 42)

I will argue that the critical approach to philosophy is quite similarly guided by an ultimate moral intuition which in this case is brought out by the claim in Plato's *Apology* that the "greatest good for a human being (*megiston agathon anthrôpôi*)" is this: to talk about, and be examined in, excellence every day, whereas "unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apol.* 38a2-6).

2. Modern interpreters attempting to reconstruct the philosophy of Socrates agree that excellence (*aretê*) isn't just equated with happiness (*eudaimonia*) and,³ hence, counts as the greatest good it nevertheless is essential to the latter. For my present purpose, it may suffice to mention Gregory Vlastos who pointed out that "virtue" – i.e. excellence: *aretê* – is "the sovereign good" in Socrates' moral theory.⁴ There is much truth in this account. But there is also a tension in it between the "principle of the Sovereignty of Virtue"⁵ thus exhibited and the claim concerning the "greatest good" quoted above. This tension is quite clearly, if only implicitly, brought out by Vlastos who also described it as a "fundamental conviction" (*ibid.* 125) of Socrates that "unexamined life is not worth living" and that, one may conclude, talk about excellence rather than excellence is the "greatest good for a human being."

An obvious – but, I will argue, misleading – way to avoid this conclusion is this. Assume that

(A) excellence is (or, at least, is essential to) happiness.

Then, the claim that

(B) the "greatest good for a human being" is this: to talk about, and be examined in, excellence every day,

may be taken to involve two claims as follows. On the one hand, Socrates is taken to admit that it may be the case that

(C) there is no intrinsic value in talking about, and being examined in, excellence.

But, on the other hand, Socrates is taken to claim that

(D) to talk about, and be examined in, excellence every day, is instrumental to the acquisition, and thus participates in the value, of excellence.

In particular, Socrates would be thus justified in claiming to have "conferred" upon his fellow citizens "the greatest benefit" (*Apol.* 36c3-4: *euergetein tèn megistên euergesian*),

³ In the sequel, "happiness" is just meant to translate the Greek *eudaimonia* (on the meaning of which see, e.g., Vlastos 1991, 201 ff., Annas 1993, 43 ff., Long 2002, 190).

⁴ Vlastos 1991, 211. It should be noted that, according to Vlastos, a "narrowly moral construction of *aretê* is characteristically Socratic" (*ibid.* 200n6). Accordingly, Vlastos renders *aretê* by "virtue" rather than "excellence". My present argument is not affected by this. But see below, section 4.

⁵ Vlastos 1991, 209 ff.; capitals his (p.213).

"by trying to persuade each of you not to care for any of his belongings before caring that he himself should be as good and wise as possible (*hôs beltistos kai phronimôtatos*)."(Apol. 36c5-7. Grube's tr., with correction)

This claim in the 2nd speech of the *Apology* echoes a well known passage in the 1st speech worth quoting at length.

"I shall not cease to practice philosophy (*philosopheôn*), to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: 'Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom (*sophia*) and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth (*chrêmata*),⁶ reputation and honours as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom (*phronêsis*) or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?' Then, if one of you disputes this and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once or leave him, but I shall question him, examine him and test him, and if I do not think he has attained the goodness (*aretê*) that he says he has, I shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things. [...] Be sure that this is what the god orders me to do, and I think there is no greater blessing (*agathon*) for the city than my service to the god." (Apol. 29d4-30a7. Grube's tr.)

3. Obviously, the passages quoted ought to be understood in view of the doctrine, adumbrated earlier in the *Apology*, that human (as opposed to animal) excellence isn't just a matter of educational skill. In particular, Socrates explicitly denies to be "an expert (*epistêmôn*) in this kind of excellence, the human and social kind (... *tês anthrôpinês te kai politikês*)."⁷ To possess the relevant expertise would amount to be

"wise (*sophos*) with a wisdom more than human (*meizô tina ê kath' anthrôpon sophian*)." (Apol. 20e1. Grube's tr.)

There is, therefore, no making some person excellent in any straightforward sense. Rather, the acquisition of excellence is described as a matter of self-care and, in particular, of care for one's soul. That is one of the reasons why Socrates doesn't teach. The best he can do is to proceed as described: to stir up and put to shame his interlocutors and thus to point to their being in need of care for their souls.⁸

⁶ Both Grube and Vlastos (1991, 219, translating *Apol.* 30b2-4) render *chrêmata* by "wealth". But "money", as in Burnyeat's translation of that passage, is far more appropriate. On *Apol.* 30b2-4 see below section 4).

⁷ *Apol.* 20b4-5, Grube's tr. Of course, "*politikê* should be rendered "political" rather than "social".

⁸ Another way of benefiting is love. See Aeschines, fr. 11 (Socrates speaking): "... though I had no knowledge through which I could benefit him [i.e. Alcibiades] by teaching it to him, nonetheless I thought that by associating with him I could make him better through my love." (tr. Vlastos 1991, 247; cf. *ibid.* 247 f. and Döring 1998, 204 f.)

If so, however, the benefit from the acquisition of excellence isn't just conferred by Socrates. Rather, his interlocutors are called by Socrates to benefit themselves. One might argue that this makes but a minor difference. Yet, the difference is great if viewed against the background described. Socrates cannot have it both ways. He disavows expertise in human excellence. But his claim to have conferred to his interlocutors the benefit from their acquisition of excellence makes no sense unless he also claims that his own behaviour was instrumental to this and, after all, unless he ascribes to himself the expertise he disavowed.

Accordingly, Socrates is not in the position to substantiate his claim to have "conferred" upon his fellow citizens "the greatest benefit" by pointing out that

- (D) to talk about, and be examined in, excellence every day, is instrumental to the acquisition, and thus participates in the value, of excellence.

Hence, he is also not in the position to resolve the tension between the claims that

- (A) excellence is (or, at least, is essential to) happiness (or, as Vlastos has put it, is "the sovereign good")

and that

- (B) the "greatest good for a human being" is this: to talk about, and be examined in, excellence every day,

by admitting that it may be the case that

- (C) there is no intrinsic [but only instrumental] value in talking about, and being examined in, excellence.

Rather, Socrates is bound to attribute intrinsic rather than instrumental value to talking about, and being examined in, excellence and thus to deny (C).

4. The tension described does not necessarily amount to inconsistency since the application of (A) – i.e., of the claim that excellence is essential to happiness – is questionable. The trouble with (A) is this. One of the virtues which, according to the traditional catalogue adopted by Plato, make up human excellence is expertise (*sophia*). But Socrates disavows expertise and even suggests that awareness of one's own lack of expertise is the maximum of expertise human beings will ever attain (*Apol.* 23b2-4). Since expertise is a constituent in excellence (*aretê*), lack of expertise entails lack of excellence.⁹ And if excellence is essential to happiness, complete happiness is as unattainable by human beings as complete excellence is.

Hence, the "greatest good for – i.e., available for¹⁰ – a human being" must be something less than this. The way of life devoted to the awareness of one's own lack of expertise and, hence, of excellence appears as a second best, and arguably the best available, choice.

⁹ Accordingly, there is a strict correspondence in the *Apology* between of the formulas "believes to know but doesn't" (21d5 etc.), "believes to be expert (*sophos*) but isn't" (21c8 etc.), "has no excellence, but claims to have" (29e5-6), and "believes to be something but is worth nothing" (41e7).

¹⁰ Cf. Heitsch 2002, 152 (commentary on *Apol.* 37e3-38b6): "... das größte Gut, das dem Menschen zuteil werden kann."

A more or less explicit statement in the *Apology* of the "principle of the Sovereignty of Virtue" is the claim that "for a good man there is no *kakon* (i.e., nothing by which he may be harmed)" (*Apol.* 41d1). But the troubling question is this. Is Socrates or anybody else, lacking *sophia* and, hence, complete excellence, a good man?

Interpreters have argued that Socrates, in the *Apology*, considers himself as a "good man", if only in a weaker, i.e. moral, sense compatible with his lack of complete excellence.¹¹ Vlastos, by contrast, presupposes a "narrowly moral construction of *aretê*" (which he therefore renders by "virtue" rather than "excellence").¹² But he also admits that the equation of virtue with knowledge is "a cardinal Socratic doctrine".¹³ Accordingly, Vlastos does not deny that *sophia* is one of the five "constituents" of *aretê* but insists that (the term) *sophia* is just a "term of *moral* commendation".¹⁴

As far as I can see, the equation of virtue with knowledge has no role to play in Plato's *Apology*.¹⁵ But, I will argue, the weaker claim that *sophia* is a constituent of *aretê* has.

The significance of *sophia* is manifest in the piece of exhortation (*Apol.* 29d4-30a7) quoted above. The Athenian addressed is put to shame (cf. d9: *aischynê*;) by pointing to the contrast of his

"being a citizen of ... the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both expertise (*sophia*) and strength (*ischys*)" (d7-8)

with his

"not car[ing] for ... wisdom (*phronêsis*) or truth, or the best possible state of [his] soul" (e1-2).

Obviously, this will not do if there is no equivalent to *sophia* in the second phrase. One may take *phronêsis* to be that equivalent.¹⁶ But one may also argue that *sophia* must be involved

¹¹ See, e.g. Brickhouse and Smith 1989, 264. But the authors also admit that this modest conception of a "good man" gives no support to the claim that "no evil comes to a good man". In conclusion, they suggest a weaker claim – "that *in so far as* one's soul is good, it is not subject to evil ..." – to apply to both Socrates and the jurymen he addresses (ibid. 265, italics theirs; for the equation of "man" with "soul" see ibid. 263 f.).

¹² Vlastos 1991, 200n6.

¹³ Vlastos 1991, 124. Of the passages cited (ibid. n. 71), *Men.* 87b and *Prot.* 361b have *epistêmê*, *La.* 194d has *sophos* and *sophia* for "knowledge". In addition, Vlastos mentions Aristotle's report that Socrates conceived of the virtues as "branches of knowledge" (*E.E.* 1216b6, *M.M.* 1182a16-7: *epistêmas*; see T15 and T16 on p. 95 f.). In the language of Plato's earlier dialogues, shared by Socrates with his contemporaries, *sophia* is excellence in any such branch: *aretê technês* (Aristotle, *E.N.* 1141a12; note that *technê* and *epistêmê* are interchangeable in that language). It is, therefore, quite a safe guess that nothing depends on the fact that, in the majority of the relevant passages, *aretê* is equated with *epistêmê* rather than with *sophia*.

¹⁴ Vlastos 1991, 200 (italics mine).

¹⁵ Kahn 1996, 90.

in a good state of one's soul and, therefore, the maximum of *sophia* attainable by human beings is involved in "the best possible state of [one's] soul".

Further, the significance of *sophia* as a constituent of *aretê* is required by the subsequent claim that

"virtue does not come from wealth, but through virtue, wealth and everything else, private and public, become good for men."¹⁷

Burnyeat (2003, 4) rightly points out that this "is in perfect harmony" with the claim at *Apol.* 41d1-2 that

"for a good man no evil comes either in life or death, nor are his affairs neglected by gods."¹⁸

Taken together, the two claims are boiled down by Burnyeat to saying that whatever may happen in one's life or after death, including lack of wealth or its possession, will be good for a virtuous person who will, Burnyeat adds, "make good use" of it (*ibid.*). The key virtue in this is "wisdom" (*phronêsis*), without which wealth is no good at all.¹⁹ The kind of

¹⁶ See, e.g. Brickhouse and Smith 1989, 88 where *phronêsis* is taken to refer to the "actual attainment" of the "wisdom" (*sophia*) the interlocutor is found to pretend (cf. *Apol.* 23b7, referred to by the authors). Grube's translation has "wisdom" for both *sophia* (d8) and *phronêsis* (e1).

¹⁷ *Apol.* 30b2-4, tr. Vlastos 1991, 219, following Burnet's commentary; see *ibid.* n. 73 and, particularly, the discussion in Burnyeat 2003 (where the traditional translation rendered thus: "... but from virtue money and all other good things come to human beings in both private and public life" (*ibid.* 1). There is side-swipe against Burnyeat's treatment of this passage in Leigh 2008, 105n2. Leigh's topic overlaps with part of the evidence Burnyeat adduces but I don't see any impact of her discussion on the interpretation of *Apol.* 30b2-4.

¹⁸ Burnyeat's tr. (2003, 4). The beginning of the passage is my "for a good man there is nothing by which he may be harmed" (see above). The two parts of the complete statement are misleadingly conflated in Kahn's "as a good man, he is protected by the gods from evil" (1996, 90). But it should be noted that Kahn thus avoids the difficulties discussed by Brickhouse and Smith (1989, 164 ff.).

In the concluding clause of the statement quoted, "his affairs" (*ta toutou pragmata*, 41d2) may be taken to correspond to "his belongings" (*ta heautou* 36c5-6) and, thus, to refer to such things as wealth (29d8 and *passim*), reputation and honours (29e1) and body (30b1). Thus understood, the clause suggests that he who cares himself for *aretê* may leave the rest, insignificant as it is, to the gods. But *pragmata*, like *pragma* at 20c5 and *to hymeteron pratein* at 31b3, may be also understood as referring to one's more essential concerns and, particularly, to the business the "good man" has to do by virtue of, and in addition to, his being a good man. Taken in this way, the clause suggests that it must be ultimately left to the gods that the case of a "good man" prevented by circumstances to act as a good man (i.e. Priam's case in Aristotle, *E.N.* 1100a8 ff.) does not occur. For my present purpose, it suffices to note that both Vlastos' "principle of the Sovereignty of Virtue" and Burnyeat's interpretation (to be quoted presently) require the former interpretation.

¹⁹ Burnyeat 2003, 6, adducing *Laws* I, 631bc (*phronêsis*: c5). – A similar claim in the *Meno* (88a-d) applies to all virtues which are "different from knowledge" (b2: *allo epistêmês*). If, e.g., courage is no "wisdom" but mere "recklessness" (b4: *phronêsis* vs. *tharros*), the benefit from it depends on its "correct use" (a4-5: *orthê chrêsis*) which, in turn, is a matter of "understanding" (b5: *nous*) and "wisdom" (c2 and *passim*: *phronêsis*). In the language of that passage, no distinction is made between "knowledge" (*epistêmê*), "understanding" (*nous*), and "wisdom" (*phronêsis*). "Expertise" (*sophia*) is not mentioned in that passage, but it should be also noted that *sophia* does not seem to be used

knowledge involved in the "wisdom" required is no topic in Burnyeat's analysis of *Apol.* 41d1-2. But anyway, it is hard to deny that the lack of expertise (*sophia*) Socrates admits must impair that "wisdom" (*phronêsis*). The "narrowly moral construction of *aretê*" proposed by Vlastos is no basis for substantiating the claim that "no evil comes to a good man."²⁰

5. That intrinsic rather than instrumental value is attributed to talking about, and being examined in, excellence is also suggested by the immediate context of the relevant claim (*Apol.* 38a2-6).

Socrates was found guilty and, in the 2nd of the three speeches of which Plato's *Apology* is composed, has to assess his penalty (so as to counter its assessment by the accusers at death, cf. *Apol.* 36b3-4). He considers banishment which, however, won't do. On the one hand, he sees no reason to suppose

"that other men will easily tolerate my company and conversation (*tas emas diatribas kai tous logous*) when you, my fellow citizens, have been unable to endure them [...]." (*Apol.* 37c7-d3. Grube's tr.)

On the other hand, Socrates is not willing "to live quietly, without talking" (*Apol.* 37e3-4: *sigôn kai hêsychian agôn*) since, firstly, "that means disobeying the god" (e6) and, secondly, since "it happens to be", or in Grube's translation,

"is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing [i.e. examining: *exetazôn*] myself and others, for the unexamined life (*ho anexetastos bios*) is not worth living for men." (*Apol.* 38a2-6)

It is hard to deny that Socrates himself is the human being primarily addressed by the two occurrences in the passage quoted of *anthrôppôi* – that is, in Grube's translation, by the phrases "for a man" and "for men" (sic!). Socrates isn't willing to live quietly since, next to disobeying the god, he would thus harm himself by sacrificing what "happens to be the greatest good for a human being" (*megiston agathon anthrôppôi*).

This observation is confirmed by a passage in the 3rd speech where Socrates asks "what greater blessing (*meizon agathon*) could there be" than spending one's afterlife in the company of "all who have died" (*Apol.* 40e4-7). Socrates imagines himself "testing and examining people there," in the way he did during his life, "as to who among them is wise (*sophos*), and who thinks he is, but is not" (*Apol.* 41b5-7). He concludes that thus to converse with, and examine, such people as Agamemnon, Odysseus and Sisyphus (to name only the last mentioned in this passage) "would be an extraordinary happiness" (*Apol.* 41c3-4: *amêchanon an eiê eudaimonias*).

without irony as a term of praise in the *Meno*. The corresponding passage in the *Euthydemus* has *phronêsis te kai sophia* (281d8).

²⁰ Brickhouse and Smith 1989, 264 ff.

Again, it is hard to deny (and interpreters agree) that Socrates' own happiness is at issue here. It is left open (to say the least) how much happiness would be provided for anybody else by conversing with Sisyphus, examining Agamemnon, or reproaching Odysseus for pretending to be wise. There is some irony in this passage, culminating in a joke: there is no danger that Socrates will be put to death for that there (*Apol.* 41c4-5). But the description quoted of his "happiness" isn't just a joke. For Socrates, "to test and examine people ... as to who among them is wise, and who thinks he is, but is not" is just his way of well-being: his *eudaimonia*.

6. It should be noted, however, that one item – not just to examine others but also to examine oneself and thus to practice philosophy – which was exhibited in the 1st and 2nd speeches is left out in the 3rd speech. That item pertains to the very definition of philosophy.

There is, neither in general nor with respect to Plato or his *Apology*, no definition of philosophy that isn't essentially a definition of what it is to practice philosophy. For Socrates, to practice philosophy is to examine himself and others and, thus, to care for (one's own and the others') *sophia*,²¹ and hence, *aretê*. It is this he claims in the 1st speech the god ordered him: "to live as a practitioner of philosophy (*philosophheôn*), that is, as a person whose business it is to examine himself and others."²² But in the 2nd speech he also claimed that this – "to talk about excellence day by day, and about the other things you hear me talking about and examining myself and others" (*Apol.* 38a3-5) – isn't just a matter of subordination to the god but "happens to be the greatest good for a human being" (*ibid.* a2).

Is the remark to follow, viz. that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being" (*ibid.* a6) meant to substantiate this claim? I hesitate to give an affirmative answer. The key term in the remark quoted is *biôtos*, "worth living." The question as to which "way of life" (*bios*) is "worth living" (*biôtos*) is, of course, the leading question of ethical reflection in Plato. Variant expressions of it are

"How are we to live?" (*Grg.* 492d5: *pôs biôteon*),

"Which way are we required to live?" (*Grg.* 500c3-4 = *Rep.* I, 352d6: *hontina chrê tropon zên*),

and

"What is a man required to be like?" (*Grg.* 487e9-488a1: *poion tina chrê einai ton andra*),²³

²¹ Thus to render *philosophia* as care for *sophia* isn't meant to be just a pun – no more than the interpretation in the *Symposium* (205cd and *passim*) of the prefix *philo-* as indicating desire (*erôs*) rather than acquaintance (*philia*, see Burkert 1960, 172 f.).

²² *Apol.* 28e5-6. My "that is, as a person whose business it is to ..." translates Plato's *kai* (which Grube represents by just a comma).

²³ Note that the questions "Which way are we required to live" and "What is a man required to be like?" reappear in Cicero as "Who and what like do we want to be, and in what kind of life?" (*quos nos et quales esse velimus et in qua genere vitae*, *De officiis* I 117), which, again, is equivalent with

all of which boil down to the fundamental question as to

"Who is happy and who is not?" (*Grg.* 472c9-d1: *hostis te eudaimôn estin kai hostis mē*)²⁴

Accordingly, the remark that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being" is a claim about happiness. It may be taken as a mere restatement of the claim that the way of life devoted to "examining oneself and others" provides the "greatest good for a human being." But there is more about this remark. It isn't just one claim about happiness among others. It is a claim about ultimate value. In particular, it is a claim which leaves nothing to add. "You won't believe me," says Socrates, and: "what I say is true, ... but it is not easy to convince you" (*Apol.* 38a6-8).

I have argued that Socrates is not in the position to ascribe instrumental value to "examining oneself and others" – i.e. to practising philosophy. If there is any value in this, the value must be, therefore, intrinsic. It must be ultimate in the strong sense that there is nothing else from which it derives. In particular, the value of "examining oneself and others" is neither derived from the (impracticable) value of excellence nor from the (tautological) value of happiness. Rather, it counts – to say the least: prominently – among the criteria of happiness.

7. According to Plato, criteria of good and bad, and, hence, of happiness, are ultimately exhibited by the Form of the Good (*Rep.* 505a2 ff., cf. 517b8 ff.). In Aristotle, such criteria are claimed to correspond to the function (*ergon*) peculiar to human beings (*E.N.* 1097b28 ff.). Of the former, no traces are to be found in the *Apology*. Only in the *Crito*, Plato's "notion of a moral *technê*" is adumbrated.²⁵ Forms make their first appearance in the *Euthyphro*, but Plato's full account of their significance for his moral *technê* – i.e., of the way ultimate value presents itself for spectatorship (*theôria*) – isn't given earlier than in the middle books of the *Republic*.

In the *Apology*, Socrates isn't explicit about criteria of happiness. He just talks about what it is his business to do, that is, about his *pragma* (*Apol.* 20c5). The claim that the way of life devoted to "examining oneself and others" provides the "greatest good for a human being" appears in the account he gives of that *pragma*. On the one hand, that claim is just an expression of his relevant commitment. But on the other hand, it is a claim about human beings in general and must even bear the burden of demonstrating the benefit Socrates claims

Tugendhat's "principal practical question" ("grundsätzliche praktische Frage") as to "What sort of human being do I want to be?" (Tugendhat 1979, 234: "... was für ein Mensch ich sein will").

²⁴ Note that the formula "how are we to live?" (*pôs biôteon*) is meant at *Grg.* 492d5 to make explicit the question thus answered by Callicles: "wantonness (*tryphê*), lack of discipline (*akolasia*), and freedom (*eleutheria*), if available in good supply, are excellence (*aretê*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*)" (ibid. c4-6, tr. Zeyl). Similarly, "which way are we required to live?" (*hontina tropon chrê zên*) at *Rep.* 352d6 echoes the question as to "whether just people also live better (*ameinon zôsin*) and are happier (*eudaimonesteroi*) than unjust ones" (ibid. d2-3, tr. Grube/Reeve).

²⁵ See Kahn 1996, 104 on *Crito* 47d1.

to have conferred to his fellow citizens. The expression of Socrates' commitment to his own *pragma* thus takes the form of a claim about what Aristotle would call the human *ergon* in general.

If you find fault with this I shall ask you to explain how claims about the human *ergon* shall be substantiated at all. You may, then, still object that this reply just amounts to indirectly confirming the truism that claims about the human *ergon* are pointless. But pointless as they may be, claims about the human *ergon* are nevertheless essential to the self-description of philosophy. Lacking the naturalist foundation Aristotle vainly deemed to provide, claims about the human *ergon* are just answers to such questions as Plato's "How are we to live?" or Cicero's "Who and what like do we want to be, and in what kind of life?"

Answers to such questions are not only a matter of commitment but also of confidence. In the *Apology*, confidence is expressed in religious terms: Socrates gains assurance from the oracle and fancies himself as obeying the god. Aristotle famously attempts to rely on (human) nature (and, to be sure, on the denial of divine envy). Plato's description, in the *Symposium*, of philosophy as a certain desire seems to involve a more sophisticated turn: just leave yourself to that desire and don't ask from where to gain assurance in this.

But it is quite a safe guess that only Socrates would be thus well advised. Ordinary folk, including ourselves, may fail to share his desires. What we nevertheless have is him as "the paradigm philosopher."²⁶ That is to say: We have Plato witnessing his hero's commitment and confidence. Failing to share his desires, we may nevertheless share both his commitment to practising philosophy in the way the *Apology* describes and his confidence that thus to practice philosophy is also our best thing to do. In short: we may share the stance in which the Socratic, or critical, conception of philosophy is founded ultimately.

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²⁶ Kahn 1996, 97.

²⁷ Quotations from Plato are referred to *Platonis opera*, rec. Ioannes Burnet, Oxford: Clarendon 1900 ff., repr. 1924.

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