SOCRATIC VIRTUE

Socrates was not a moral philosopher. Instead he was a theorist who showed how human desire and human knowledge complement one another in the pursuit of human happiness. His theory allowed him to demonstrate that actions and objects have no value other than that which they derive from their employment by individuals who, inevitably, desire their own happiness and, in addition, have the knowledge to use actions and objects as a means for its attainment. The result is a naturalized, practical, and demystified account of good and bad, and right and wrong. Professor Reshotko presents a newly envisioned Socratic theory residing at the intersection of the philosophy of mind and ethics. It makes an important contribution to the study of the Platonic dialogues and will also interest all scholars of ethics and moral psychology.

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Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad

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Preface

I was born with an appetite for metaphysics and action theory, but my taste for ethics has been slow to develop. I am uncomfortable (and often frustrated) with the initial steps taken in ethical theory. The foundations of ethical theory can be understood as forcing a choice between two horns of a dilemma: either we embrace relativism, or we acknowledge the existence of universal ethical principles. Both of these horns are problematic. The difficulties of ethical relativism have been understood at least since Plato's *Euthyphro*: ethical relativism does not allow us to ask why any particular culture or person exhibits a particular ethical practice. The only explanation that can be offered for why a practice has been adopted is that its practitioners believe it is correct. But relativism does not invite us to give a philosophical answer to the interesting and important questions about why any particular person or culture believes a particular practice is correct. On the other hand, if there are universal ethical principles, we are equally at a loss to explain why *these* principles exist and not others. We can no more say why these principles govern ethics than we can say why these laws of physics govern the physical world. In neither case can we uncover a reason to invest in a given set of moral principles or a particular ethical practice. Why are we supposed to adhere to a particular ethical system and entreat others to do so?

After many years of studying and defending the unusual theory of desire and action that my mentor, Terry Penner, has diagnosed in Plato's Socratic dialogues, I became intrigued by Socrates' equally unusual tripartite distinction between the good, the bad, and the neither-good-nor-bad. It is difficult to read the dialogues without noticing that Plato has Socrates make this division. Still, no scholar has treated Socrates' understanding of the neither-good-nor-bad as a distinct force in his psychology of action and ethics.

Over time, I came to see that in exposing his unique understanding of good, bad, and neither-good-nor-bad, Socrates has removed the falsely

dichotomous ethical framework of relativism versus universalism. A proper understanding of Socrates' contention that all human beings have a contingent, but natural and objective, goal toward which they are inevitably driven, combined with an exposition of his theories of how scientific knowledge allows human beings to make objectively better or worse choices in light of this goal, demystifies the abstract notions of good and bad, and right and wrong. Together, these ground the supposition that there is a viable, objectivist, foundation for ethics – without forcing us to embrace universal moral principles.

When I completed my doctorate in 1990, there were, as far as I knew, only two monographs which took themselves to be examinations of the philosophy of Socrates as represented in Plato's early dialogues. One was G. X. Santas' *Socrates* (1979); the other was Richard Kraut's *Socrates and the State* (1984). C. D. C. Reeve's *Socrates in the Apology* came out in 1989, but remained under my radar for a year or two. Gomez-Lobo's *The Foundations of Socratic Ethics* also existed before 1990, but appeared only in Spanish in 1989; the English edition did not come out until 1994.

These were, of course, quickly followed by Vlastos' two posthumous publications *Socrates*: *Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (1991) and *Socratic Studies* (1994). Brickhouse and Smith's *Plato's Socrates* arrived in 1994. And now there are many more. It is amazing and exciting that in fewer than twenty years we have come to the point where an author must explain to her readers why she is taking the time to write, and imposing upon them the opportunity to read, yet another book on the philosophical views of Socrates.

I would like to think that it is easy to make the case for the present book: this book starts on a completely different footing from those that have come before. I have found that most previous treatments of Socrates (and especially the book-length ones) read a post-Kantian notion of morality back into his ethical theory. My awareness of this is due to the teaching and scholarship of Terry Penner. He has always made it clear that this sort of "moralism" is foreign to Socratic ethics. Penner has provided the foundation upon which I build my own view.

To say that a Kantian notion of morality is *foreign* to Socratic ethics is not *necessarily* to claim that such a reading of Socrates is *anachronistic*. Some scholars argue that, to the extent that contemporary authors read Socrates to support a Kantian or Christian notion of morality, these readings are anachronistic. However, others might argue that Kant did not simply *invent* morality: Kant was analyzing and theorizing a foundation for a

certain tendency to think in what we now consider "moral" terms. This tendency has been around for many years, existing not only in a Christian framework, but in any culture that made use of notions like shame, blame, or punishment. Thus, it is possible that some of Socrates' contemporaries and ancient interpreters were also operating within what we would now call a Kantian framework; I take no stand on this issue. If his contemporaries did operate in this way, then Socrates' way of thinking about ethics was a radical departure from their approach as well. I will refer to these notions of ethics as "neo-Kantian" even while acknowledging that I might also be referring to thoughts and thinkers who pre-dated Kant. I think that, for we, who live in a post-Kantian world, our immersion in a society that embraces an almost completely segregated notion of moral good makes it hard for us to understand Socrates' approach to the good while biasing us against it. Throughout this book, I also describe this Kantian tendency to segregate moral good from any other kind of good as "moralistic."

One reason for finding a Kantian notion of morality off the mark when it comes to Socratic ethics is Kant's embrace of universal moral principles. But this is not the most important reason. In the *Laws* II, at 662e, the Athenian comments that a lawgiver would appear in an odd light if he were to separate the life of greatest pleasure and happiness from the just life, for he would be making it sound as if the two were separable – as if a person could lead one life without leading the other. No one who appreciates a contemporary, post-Kantian, notion of morality would think it odd to separate these two; according to that conception, one's pleasure and happiness are necessarily connected to the contingent events of one's life, while one's justness is determined by how one reasons about *a priori* truths. This separation now typifies the intuitions of the Western layperson, as well as the student of philosophy. It is the adoption of Kant's categorically unique notion of moral good – transcendental, otherworldly, *a priori*, and inexplicable in scientific terms – that will do the most harm to our understanding of ancient ethics generally, and Socratic ethics in particular. We must not knowingly import it, and we must be vigilant lest we allow it to creep in unawares.

I believe that such vigilance will be rewarded – not only through the realization of a more satisfying explanation for our concern with ethics, but also with a more concrete understanding of what Socrates relates about things that we find very important – like good, bad, virtue, and happiness. I defend what I say both as an interpretation of Socrates' views and as a viable philosophy of motivation and goodness in human action. I hope that those

who reject it as a reconstruction of the thought represented by the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues will nevertheless be intrigued by it as an original view. It lays out a theory of human motivation and its consequences for ethical behavior that challenges and eclipses many of the assumptions that have been, and continue to be, made in the discourse which constitutes the intersection of ethics and action theory.

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Eric Brown, James Butler, and Mark McPherran each served as an APA commentator for a paper that was a predecessor of one of the chapters in this book. Each allowed me to string him along far beyond the commitment required for his presentation, so that I could milk him for more of his incisive and helpful reactions to my work. James Butler also read five of the chapters when they were closer to their present form. His keen eye helped me refine my view, in many places. George Rudebusch was an APA commentator for an earlier version of Chapter 8, he has, in addition, been a stimulating, provocative, and understanding interlocutor concerning these ideas for many years. Christopher Shields provided illuminating feedback on the paper that became Chapter 6, followed by loads of helpful advice and moral support during the time that I was revising the material for the book. Nicholas Smith read an early draft of the book and gave me copious notes, for which I thanked him by pestering him with further questions – which he always took seriously and answered at length – for many months. Gerasimos Santas' warm and enthusiastic response to my original proposal gave me the courage to shop it around. Antonio Chu has made himself available to offer an educated and critical reaction to every stage of every idea that has entered my mind for the decade that we have both lived in Denver. I have already made clear the scholarly debt that I owe to Terry Penner. His interest and support – for which I am more grateful than I can say – have made as large a contribution to this endeavor as has his scholarship. Christopher Rowe always seemed to know what I was trying to say better than I did myself, and he often amazed me by causing me to suddenly see a new way through a passage or an argument with only the briefest and most subtle comment. Friends, colleagues, and mentors like these make working in the field of Socratic philosophy not only productive but also enjoyable. I am enormously grateful to all of them.

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Two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press enabled me to approach these ideas in ways that I had not yet imagined until I read their reports. While Reader A challenged me on the subject of my departure from the status quo, Reader B pushed me to make that departure more radical. I would not be surprised if I have fallen short of the standards that they set for me, but this book is better for my having tried to live up to them. It was a privilege to be the focus of their exacting scholarship.

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I am grateful for the loving support of my parents, my sisters, and my friends. I am particularly grateful to Sanford Watzman who moved to Denver just in time to look over the first full draft of the manuscript with an editor's eye. I also offer a deep and loving thank you to my nearest and dearest, PB, Sasha, and Yevanit, who, all three, in innumerable and sometimes surprising ways, guide and assist me in making the best of the neither-good-nor-bad.