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978-0-521-19040-4 - Plato's Charmides: Positive Elenchus in a "Socratic" Dialogue

Thomas M. Tuozzo

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PART ONE

APPROACHING THE DIALOGUE

1

Methodological Preliminaries

1. INTERPRETING THE *CHARMIDES*

The *Charmides* is a brilliant dialogue, as well as a puzzling one. The charm and urbanity of its opening scene are matched by the sophistication and extraordinary abstraction of the arguments that follow. The juxtaposition of these very different sorts of brilliance raises in an acute form a central question of Plato interpretation: How are the literary and the argumentative dimensions of a Platonic dialogue related to each other? Specific details both of the dialogue's dramatic setting and of its dialectical argumentation give rise to other interpretive questions, especially when they are viewed within the chronological framework that has until recently guided most contemporary Plato scholarship. Because the dialectical discussion of the dialogue is conducted by Socrates, is concerned with defining a virtue,¹ does not explicitly invoke transcendent Forms, ends in apparent failure, and has a vivid dramatic setting, the dialogue is generally thought to belong to a group of "early," "Socratic" dialogues. Yet the sophistication of the argumentation, as well as some particular substantive content of those arguments, gives our dialogue an affinity with dialogues generally viewed as "middle" or even "late." Perhaps even more problematic for the classification of the dialogue as early is that what seems to be Socrates' primary activity in the "early" dialogues, and what Socrates appears to claim in one of those dialogues (the *Apology*) to be his life mission – namely, examining people to determine whether they know what they think they know – is in this dialogue itself subjected

¹ The virtue in question, σωφροσύνη, is one for which there is no simple expression in English. I usually use the Greek term; when I do not (often when verbal or adjectival forms are at issue), I use forms of "temperance," "moderation," and "sound-mindedness," all traditional translations of the term.

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to prolonged examination, in the course of which it seems to be thoroughly discredited.

Plato's choice of Socrates' interlocutors in this dialogue is also puzzling. Critias and Charmides were prominent members of the oligarchic regime that briefly replaced the democracy in Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War. That oligarchy, subsequently known as the "Thirty Tyrants," had recourse to increasingly violent and bloody measures in its short existence. On the basis of his participation in, and probable leadership of, that regime, Critias was vilified in the ancient historiographical tradition. That vilification began with Critias' contemporary, the historian (and writer of Socratic *logoi*) Xenophon. It was still going strong in the Roman era when the Second Sophistic writer Philostratus passed the following verdict on Critias: "He seems to me to be the worst of all men who have gained a name for wickedness."² Charmides was Critias' cousin and joined him in the oligarchy; the two died in the decisive battle that led to the reestablishment of a democratic polity in the city. While he was not similarly vilified by ancient historians, his close connection with Critias has cast a pall over him. Furthermore, in later antiquity Critias was considered a sophist and an atheist, both of which we would expect, on the basis of views expressed in other dialogues, to count as marks against him in Plato's eyes. On the other hand, Critias and Charmides were also close relatives of Plato; Charmides was his uncle. Did Plato share the negative verdict on Critias' character that was virtually unanimous in antiquity, and if so, why did he choose to make him Socrates' main interlocutor in our dialogue? And how should that choice affect our interpretation of the arguments and of the dialogue as a whole?

Although the *Charmides* has not received as much scholarly attention as some Platonic dialogues, it has not been totally neglected; several works have made useful contributions to the elucidation of various parts of the dialogue. Nonetheless, I believe that the dialogue has much more to tell us about Plato's philosophical thought than previous work on the dialogue has revealed. This is in part due, I believe, to two factors. The first is the widespread conception of the nature of argumentation to be found in the "early" dialogues – what goes under the general label of "the Socratic elenchus." Although there has been debate about the details of this method, a certain basic understanding of it has been widely shared and informs a great deal of the literature on those Platonic dialogues considered early, among them the *Charmides*. I believe that this

² *Vitae sophist.* 1.16.10.

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general picture is flawed and argue for a different understanding of the purpose and method of the arguments conducted by Socrates in these (and other) dialogues. The approach to Socratic argumentation I propose takes Socrates' main purpose to be that of advancing in a substantive manner his interlocutor's philosophical insight into the topic under discussion. That is to say, I argue that Socratic argument is educative – or, perhaps more precisely, psychagogic, to borrow a term from the *Phaedrus*, which has been sometimes used by scholars who approach the dialogues along similar lines.

The interpretative approach I develop is one specific version of a general approach that recognizes the important role that the drama (the ἔργον) of the dialectical encounter has for the meaning of its arguments (λόγοι). This approach is susceptible of a great variety of different specifications. One way of developing this general approach constitutes the second factor that has led to what I think are distorted interpretations of the *Charmides*. This approach holds that in his arguments the Platonic Socrates is often motivated by something more aggressive and adversarial than a wish to lead his interlocutor to philosophical insight. On this view, Socrates (and Plato) are concerned, especially in the “early” dialogues and especially when Socrates is faced with unsympathetic interlocutors or those who (as is thought) would be recognized by Plato's first readers as otherwise disreputable, to expose the moral and/or intellectual bankruptcy that lies hidden beneath the self-important and self-satisfied exterior of those interlocutors. Given the reputation passed on Critias by the mainstream ancient historiographic tradition, it is perhaps not surprising that some writers on the *Charmides* who are sensitive to the dramatic aspects of the argument have adopted an approach of this sort.

In the present chapter, when developing my own approach to Socratic argumentation, I argue that Socrates' overriding intention is always psychagogic, with respect both to his immediate interlocutor and to those present at the discussion; he never aims merely to expose or humiliate an interlocutor. In Chapter 2 I address the more specific question of Plato's choice of Critias and Charmides as Socrates' interlocutors in this dialogue. There are good reasons to believe that the negative view of Critias in the historiographic tradition was formed in the period immediately following the restoration of Athenian democracy at the end of the fifth century and that it reflects the peculiar political and ideological pressures prevailing in Athens at the time. There is some evidence of an alternative tradition that presents a more positive view of Critias, and I argue that it is likely that Plato also had a more positive view of

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Critias than the one we find in the historiographic tradition. In order to support this claim, which runs counter to that adopted by almost all philosophical writers on our dialogue, it will be necessary to treat the remaining fragments of Critias' literary work. For although these are often read through the lens of the dominant negative view of Critias, when approached without such preconceptions they reveal a thinker with whom Plato could feel some sympathy, even while he recognized the catastrophic failure of his political engagement.

In this chapter, my concern is to replace the view of Socratic elenchus that has informed much recent work on the dialogue with a different one. In the next section, I outline that standard view and briefly show how it bears the stamp of the broad philosophical framework of twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy. In section 3, as a broad corrective to the anachronistic features of the standard view of elenctic argument, I examine the role of argument in the cultural practice of ancient *philosophia* generally. Then, in section 4 I turn specifically to Plato, to an analysis of the role he assigns argumentation in the attainment of philosophical insight and of the complex way that imitations of philosophical argument in written dialogue may figure in the process of attaining such insight. In this section, I address the celebrated discussions of writing in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*. In section 5, I turn to passages in the *Republic* and the *Sophist* that, I argue, give added support to the interpretation developed in the preceding section. Lastly, I turn to the implications of my view of elenctic argumentation for the relation of the drama and characters of a dialogue to the arguments in it.

2. THE "SOCRATIC ELENCHUS"

Although the details of the purpose, procedure, and outcome of Socratic elenchus have been the subject of considerable debate,³ there is a general characterization of it that most Anglophone scholars (and increasing numbers of scholars writing in other languages) endorse. On this view, the elenchus is, in its individual applications, an essentially negative practice. Socrates asks his interlocutor a general moral question (often concerning the definition of a virtue); he then elicits, by questioning,

³ The label "elenchus" seems to have first been used as a semitechnical label for the argumentation of the "early" dialogues by Grote (1865). An influential account of the elenctic method was given by R. Robinson (1962), which was superseded by the standard-setting account of Vlastos (1983), which has strongly influenced all subsequent writers. Recently Forster (2006) has argued for a return to Robinson's original account.

other beliefs that the interlocutor sincerely holds; lastly, he shows how, taken together, the answers the interlocutor has given lead to a contradiction. The immediate upshot is that the beliefs of the interlocutor are shown to be inconsistent, from which we may conclude, at a minimum, that the interlocutor does not possess knowledge of the subject on which he was questioned.

The foregoing, minimalist characterization of Socratic elenchus corresponds well to the description Socrates gives of his mission in the first part of the *Apology*. According to the story he tells there, his friend Chaerephon had asked the oracle at Delphi whether anyone was wiser than Socrates. When he brought back the answer no, Socrates, conscious, as he says, of not being at all wise, went to test those who had a reputation for wisdom. By conversing with them, he came to the conclusion that they were not wise. In trying to bring home to them that, “though [they] thought they were wise, they were not” (21c8–d1), Socrates incurred their ill will. Nonetheless, he continues in this practice, feeling it to be a divine mission:

So even now I continue investigating as god wills, and examine anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think to be wise. And when he appears to me not to be so, I come to the god’s assistance by pointing out that he is not wise. (23b4–7)

This minimalist account of Socrates’ practice is in some tension with the second account of his activity that Socrates gives later in the *Apology*. In that account, the refutative aspect of Socrates’ mission seems to be subordinate to his practice of moral suasion:

[A]s long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease practicing philosophy and exhorting you and declaring to any one of you whom I happen to meet, saying what I usually do: “Best of men, . . . are you not ashamed that you take great care to acquire as much as you can of wealth, and reputation and honor too, but take no care for, or give any thought to, wisdom and truth and how your soul might become as good as it can be?” And if any of you disputes this and says he does care, I shall not immediately let him off, or go away myself, but I shall question him and examine him and subject him to refutation, and if he does not seem to me to possess virtue, I shall reproach him. . . . (29d4–30a1)

Gregory Vlastos, who did more than anyone else to make the Socratic elenchus a theme of scholarly investigation in the last quarter of the twentieth century, resolved the tension between Socrates’ confidence in his beliefs about value in this second account and the apparently purely negative use of the elenchus in the first account by arguing that

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the refutative elenchus was actually a method of positive inquiry that had led to Socrates' moral views: these were the only beliefs that no one was ever able to deny successfully in refutative argument with Socrates. Numerous scholars have adopted variations of this position.⁴ Others, noting that, outside of the *Gorgias* at least, Socrates seldom if ever claims that his elenctic practice provides support for his moral beliefs, prefer to stress the first, negative account: with the elenchus, Socrates does nothing more than show his interlocutor that the latter is ignorant of what he thought he knew.⁵ Socrates hopes by doing so to encourage the interlocutor to begin earnestly seeking for the knowledge he thought he had.

The debates engendered by Vlastos's work have taken place within a framework governed by two basic convictions: that the argumentative procedure of the "early" dialogues is indeed importantly distinct from that of the other dialogues⁶ and must be understood without reference to them; and that Socrates' comments about his procedure, including his disavowals of ignorance and his insistence that he is as much in *aporia* as his interlocutor at the end of a failed investigation, must be taken as straightforwardly as possible, without significant appeal to Socratic or Platonic irony.⁷ Without engaging in detailed debate over these principles, in the rest of this chapter I make a case for an interpretation of Socratic argument in the "Socratic" dialogues that rejects them. In my view, the refutative argument of those dialogues should be seen as of a piece with the methods of argumentation of dialogues generally considered to come after them, and some of the methodological reflections of the latter may be used to help understand Socrates' practice in the former. Similarly, I do not think there is any good reason for supposing the Socrates of the "Socratic" dialogues to have achieved less philosophical understanding than he displays in the "later" ones. His professions of ignorance – which are also present in "later" dialogues – should be read as expressing the peculiar nature

⁴ Cf. Woodruff (1992), Brickhouse and Smith (1994) ch. 1, Irwin (1995) ch. 2, McPherran (2002).

⁵ The most prominent defender of this view is Benson; see especially Benson (1995).

⁶ Argued for extensively in Vlastos (1991) ch. 2.

⁷ See, in addition to the works cited in the previous notes, Vlastos (1985) and (1991) ch. 1, Leshner (1987), and, more recently, Wolfsdorf (2008a) appendix 2. I speak of "significant appeal" to acknowledge Vlastos's use of what he calls "complex irony" to reconcile Socrates' disavowal of (certain) knowledge with his possession of (elenctically justified) knowledge.

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of philosophical understanding and its difference from other kinds of knowledge, and not taken to be Socrates' avowal that he has acquired no such understanding.

In the rest of this section, I briefly sketch some ways in which the foregoing conceptions of Socratic method resemble certain contemporary views of proper philosophical method. These contemporary views, I suggest, in part explain the attractiveness of the relevant interpretations of Socratic method to contemporary scholars. Bringing these connections to light will, I hope, at least make explicit the anachronistic bias many scholars may have toward interpretations of this sort and so secure a fairer hearing for the interpretation I advance.

I have distinguished two versions of the dominant view of the Socratic elenchus. The first takes it to be a rather specific method that can produce substantive philosophical results; the second takes it to be, more generally, an expression of the basic philosophical attitude of critical rationality and a means of challenging persons to adopt such an attitude in place of their habitual, unreflective acceptance of conventional beliefs. Both of these have their counterparts in contemporary philosophical practice.

According to the more specific version, Socrates uses the elenchus fundamentally to test the consistency of his own and his interlocutors' sincerely held beliefs. Consistency is a necessary condition of the truth of a set of beliefs about any subject matter; a love of truth requires, at the very least, the pursuit of consistency. Socrates solicits his interlocutor's view on an important moral topic; he then elicits others of his interlocutor's views, which, together with the original answer, turn out to entail a contradiction. Such a situation is intolerable for anyone who wishes to follow reason; the proper response is to consider carefully which of the set of inconsistent beliefs one is most ready to abandon or modify to remove the inconsistency. The outcome of this thoughtful mutual adjustment of our moral beliefs, undertaken with others who may help point out the inconsistencies in our own views and thereby call into question beliefs we might not otherwise have subjected to scrutiny, will be a consistent set of moral beliefs we can all rationally endorse. And, because we are not gods, that is the best we can hope for, and the best for which we can rationally aim, in the matter of moral truth. Or, to put the upshot more positively, expecting anything else stems from a failure to recognize the specific nature of moral knowledge.

I am not the first to see affinities between this view of Socratic method and two late twentieth-century conceptions of philosophical method.

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The first and most obvious of these is Rawls's method of reflective equilibrium.⁸ The sincerely held beliefs in the preceding account answer to the moral intuitions that are the starting points for the process of mutual adjustment that leads to reflective equilibrium. Indeed, Socrates' insistence that the initial answer to his question be a definition of a moral universal can be seen to correspond to the fact that intuitions about general moral principles, as well as more specific moral intuitions, serve as these initial starting points.⁹ The second, perhaps more distant contemporary analogue is Davidson's theory of radical interpretation. The affinity here, to which Davidson himself drew attention,¹⁰ becomes more obvious when we consider the views of those interpreters who are concerned to explain Socrates' faith that modifications made to our belief set to attain consistency will be a movement toward truth and not toward consistent falsehood. If we assume that Socrates believes that everyone has some true moral beliefs that he or she will never modify,¹¹ then we get close to Davidson's view (arrived at through the very different route of reflection on the nature of meaning) that, in order to communicate at all, we must suppose that both our interlocutor and we ourselves possess a large number of true beliefs, including beliefs that express our moral evaluations.

These two contemporary philosophical perspectives share with the view of Socratic elenctic method described previously the absence of any controversial metaphysical commitments. In this connection, it may be instructive to note the way in which the antimetaphysical stance of much Anglophone philosophy throughout the twentieth century has influenced the periodization and interpretation of Plato's work. The distinction between early, middle, and late dialogues has served in some sense to quarantine the transcendent metaphysics of such dialogues as

⁸ This connection has been noticed both by interpreters of Plato (e.g., Rorty 1998 161) and those working in the tradition of Rawls (see Kessels 1998). Rawls himself recommended his notion of reflective equilibrium on the grounds that "moral philosophy is Socratic." Rawls (1971) 49.

⁹ One significant difference between discussions of the elenctic method and the descriptions of reflective equilibrium is that interpreters of the former emphasize that, because the beliefs being brought into order are sincerely held beliefs about value that structure one's life, any such reordering of them to attain consistency is likely to involve major changes in the way one lives one's life.

¹⁰ Davidson (1994, 2005).

¹¹ Cf. Vlastos's formulation of what he calls Socrates' "tremendous assumption": "Whoever has a false moral belief will always have at the same time true beliefs entailing the negation of that false belief." Vlastos (1994) 25.