

## SOCRATES ON SELF-IMPROVEMENT

What model of knowledge does Plato's Socrates use? In this book, Nicholas D. Smith argues that it is akin to knowledge of a craft that is acquired by degrees, rather than straightforward knowledge of facts. He contends that a failure to recognize and identify this model, and attempts to ground ethical success in contemporary accounts of propositional or informational knowledge, have led to distortions of Socrates' philosophical mission to improve himself and others in the domain of practical ethics. He shows that the model of craft-knowledge makes sense of a number of issues scholars have struggled to understand, and makes a case for attributing to Socrates a very sophisticated and plausible view of the improbability of the human condition.

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Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-51553-2 — Socrates on Self-Improvement  
Nicholas D. Smith  
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SOCRATES ON  
SELF-IMPROVEMENT

*Knowledge, Virtue, and Happiness*

NICHOLAS D. SMITH

*Lewis & Clark College*



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 978-1-316-51553-2 — Socrates on Self-Improvement  
 Nicholas D. Smith  
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**CAMBRIDGE**  
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
 New Delhi – 110025, India  
 79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781316515532](http://www.cambridge.org/9781316515532)

DOI: 10.1017/9781009025959

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First published 2021

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

NAMES: Smith, Nicholas D., 1949– author.

TITLE: Socrates on self-improvement : knowledge, virtue, and happiness / Nicholas D. Smith, Lewis & Clark College, Portland.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY, USA : Cambridge University Press, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2021013822 (print) | LCCN 2021013823 (ebook) | ISBN 9781316515532 (hardback) | ISBN 9781009025959 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Socrates. | Plato. | Knowledge, Theory of. | Self-actualization (Psychology) | Ethics. | BISAC: PHILOSOPHY / History & Surveys / Ancient & Classical | PHILOSOPHY / History & Surveys / Ancient & Classical

CLASSIFICATION: LCC B317 .S55 2021 (print) | LCC B317 (ebook) | DDC I26–dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021013822>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021013823>

ISBN 978-1-316-51553-2 Hardback

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## *Contents*

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
P.1 The Origins of This Project	ix
P.2 Intended Readership and Structure of the Book	xii
P.3 Methodological Issues	xv
P.4 Texts, Translations, Acknowledgments	xvii
1 Socrates as Exemplar	I
1.1 An Inconsistency in Plato’s Portrait?	1
1.2 Plato’s Socratic Hagiography: A (Very) Brief Review of the Evidence	3
1.3 Socratic Virtue Intellectualism	5
1.4 The Socratic Disclaimer of Knowledge	6
1.5 A Way Out: It Is Not “All or Nothing”	7
1.6 Craft and Definitional Knowledge	13
1.7 The Relative Importance of Different Skills	16
1.8 Two Alternatives Considered	18
1.9 Summary and Conclusion	19
 2 Socrates as Apprentice at Virtue	 21
2.1 Introduction	21
2.2 Is Socrates Not the First?	22
2.3 Only Socrates	23
2.4 Being an Artisan and Performing the Functions of a Craft	29
2.5 How Socrates Performs the Craft of Politics	31
2.6 Summary and Conclusion	34
 3 Socratic Motivational Intellectualism	 36
3.1 Introduction	36
3.2 Socratic Pragmatism	37
3.3 Eudaimonism	38
3.4 Egoism?	40
3.5 Making Motivational Intellectualism Explicit	42
3.6 The Denial of <i>Akrasia</i>	43
3.7 Nonrational Desires	44
3.8 Emotions and Appetites	47

3.9	Persuasion	49
3.10	Punishment	50
3.11	The Gadfly's Sting	57
3.12	The Pain of Shame	60
3.13	The Damage That Is Done by Wrongdoing	63
4	Socratic Ignorance	68
4.1	Introduction	68
4.2	Types of Ignorance	69
4.3	How to Tell That Someone Is Ignorant	71
4.4	The Sources of Ignorance	75
4.5	The Socratic <i>Elenchos</i>	76
4.6	<i>Elenchos</i> and the Rational Remediation of Ignorance	78
4.7	Definitional Knowledge and the Improvability of Epistemic Success	79
4.8	<i>Elenchos</i> and the Nonrational Sources of Ignorance	82
4.9	Deliberation in Ignorance	86
4.10	Rational Preference	86
4.11	The Threat of Skepticism (and Practical Paralysis)	89
4.12	Reining in the Problem of Ignorance	91
4.13	An Important Text	93
4.14	What Socrates Believes	95
4.15	Socrates' Reasons	102
4.16	The Lessons of Plato's <i>Euthyphro</i>	104
4.17	Summary and Conclusion	105
5	Is Virtue Sufficient for Happiness?	107
5.1	Prologue	107
5.2	Did Socrates Accept That Virtue Was Sufficient for Happiness?	108
5.3	Doing Well in the <i>Euthydemus</i>	111
5.4	The Luck Factor	113
5.5	Achieving Virtue	115
5.6	The Stoic Socrates	117
5.7	Human Vulnerability	119
5.8	Moral Harm	122
5.9	Summary and Conclusion	128
6	The Necessity of Virtue for Happiness	129
6.1	Introduction: Are We All Better Off Dead?	129
6.2	Death Is One of Two Things	130
6.3	The <i>Euthydemus</i> Again	131
6.4	Improvable Knowledge and Virtue Again	135
6.5	Virtue and Happiness in Other Dialogues	138
6.6	Just How Skillful Is Skillful Enough?	140
6.7	Degrees of Demandingness in Skills	141
6.8	The Teachability of Skills	142
6.9	Revisiting the Demandingness of Skills	145

	<i>Contents</i>	vii
6.10	Contextualizing the Demandingness of Skills	148
6.11	Returning to Virtue	150
6.12	Becoming and Being Positively Happy	153
6.13	Ashes to Ashes . . .	154
6.14	Summary and Conclusion	157
	<b>Afterword: Review and Assessment</b>	<b>159</b>
A.1	Charity in Interpretation	159
A.2	Socrates' Motivational Intellectualism	160
A.3	The Craft Model	161
A.4	Socrates on the Connections Between Virtue and Happiness	162
A.5	The Improvability of Knowledge, Virtue, and Happiness	164
	<i>References</i>	166
	<i>Index of Passages</i>	174
	<i>General Index</i>	179

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-51553-2 — Socrates on Self-Improvement  
Nicholas D. Smith  
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## *Preface*

### **P.1 The Origins of This Project**

In Thomas C. Brickhouse's and my 1994 book, *Plato's Socrates*, on p. 37, we said:

The only cases where Socrates without irony sanctions claims to wisdom are those involving the crafts. The craftsmen, he allows, do have a kind of knowledge that Socrates also lacks (*Apology* 22d3–4). So the kind of knowledge that makes one wise is comparable in some way to craft-knowledge.

In this book, I want to follow up on this idea, to a much greater degree than Brickhouse and I actually did in that or any of our subsequent works. Instead, Brickhouse and I focused mainly on the kind of knowledge that is by far more familiar in contemporary epistemology: propositional or informational knowledge – knowledge of *facts*. We articulated a version of what has recently been characterized as a kind of consensus that emerged in the debates about Socrates' knowledge and ignorance, according to which Socrates distinguishes two sorts of cognitive achievement that might be counted as different kinds of knowledge (McPartland 2013: 135). But it is instructive to see what is and is not present in the way the two different sorts of achievement are characterized:

One sort of achievement is relatively easy to attain and corresponds to weak knowledge – true belief with warrant sufficient for unhedged assertion and full confidence. . . . The second sort of cognitive achievement is extremely hard to come by. The person who manages such an achievement is an expert about a field of inquiry. She possesses definitional knowledge and has an explanatory account of what she knows. Her judgments in her field are authoritative and inerrant, and she has the ability to teach her expertise to others. (McPartland 2013: 135)

McPartland concludes that Socrates does suppose that he and many others can achieve and have achieved “weak knowledge”; but he also

declares that Socrates does not suppose that he has achieved the expertise required for the second sort of cognitive achievement. With a single exception, this has remained the relatively stable and generally accepted scholarly wisdom regarding Socratic epistemology.<sup>1</sup>

This notion of expertise, I now believe, fails to attend adequately to the sort of knowledge on which it is explicitly modeled: craft-knowledge. Unlike knowing *that* something is the case, at least as such knowing is typically analyzed in contemporary epistemology, craft-knowledge is acquired *by degrees* – it is not a matter of either having it or lacking it at any given time. That is not the case with the kind of knowledge contemporary philosophy generally theorizes: propositional or informational knowledge, knowledge that some proposition (*p*) or information (*i*) is the case. McPartland’s description of this sort of knowledge seems to recognize only its final and most complete version. But craft-knowledge is not like this: anyone who ever deals with artisans recognizes that not all of them are equal in their expertise. Some are better than others, and at the bottom end, there are some who probably should not even be granted the title “artisan” at all. Even those, however, may be better than anyone who would rightly be regarded as completely innocent or ignorant of the craft.

If craft is constituted by knowledge, then the improvability of one’s achievement in a craft entails improvability in the knowledge that constitutes one’s level of achievement in the craft. We may then ask what sort of knowledge it is that would allow craft to be improvable in such a way. If we try to apply this insight to McPartland’s description, things seem to become either distressingly vague or simply incoherent. An incomplete degree of such knowledge would thus be an inferior sort of “definitional knowledge,” for example. But what might that be? On the one hand, if some inferior version of achievement in craft was due to a faulty definition, then on the basis of sentential logic it would appear that such knowledge would be no knowledge at all: propositional knowledge, as we all recognize, has a truth condition. On the other hand, if some less skilled artisan knew the definition at all, and knowing this definition constituted the craft, then how are we to explain the inferiority of this artisan to a better one? It could be, of course, that some artisans with the same knowledge might be more adroit than others in some significant way when it came to

<sup>1</sup> Only much more recently (and thus very belatedly) have I discovered an article by someone who made a contribution to this literature that was, I now think, completely on the right track. Unfortunately, no one seems to have picked up on her approach, and it is embarrassing to me to have taken so long to find her excellent paper. For a corrective to the approach I am criticizing here, see Smith 1998.

the execution of their craft. This would have the effect of separating the skill from the knowledge that was supposed to constitute it. Or, to go to a different part of McPartland's description, should we imagine that an inferior artisan would manage judgment that is "inerrant," but somehow the judgment would be less inerrant than what we would be able to get from a true master of the craft? But "inerrant" does not seem amenable to gradation. Is it that the less authoritative artisan would not know as many facts or propositions, and this lack of knowledge would thus make such an artisan more prone to error? If so, then, again, we would not have a degree of inerrancy, but simply an example of its opposite. But if such an artisan is no more prone to error than the true master, in what sense would the lesser one be somehow inferior to the master?

Because so much of this book relies on the craft model of knowledge, some readers may hope (or even expect) that I will provide a thorough analysis of everything Plato has Socrates say about craft. I do not doubt that an entire book dedicated to Socrates' conception of craft would be a useful addition to the literature.<sup>2</sup> But this would be a very different project from the one I have taken on here, and is one that would not be well accomplished with brevity. In this book, I actually seek to avoid any of the important technical aspects of what Socrates might think about crafts, precisely so as not to get lost in those questions. I concede that his references to craft throughout the early dialogues (and also in the way his thought is presented by other Socratic authors) are many and varied. It appears there are different kinds of crafts: some that produce distinct products, for example, and others that do not seem to be productive in the same way (for which see *Charmides* 165d4–166a2). Most crafts make use of things that are produced by other crafts, and in the *Euthydemus*, we find that the value of everything comes from its right use (*Euthydemus* 280c3–d7). But it begins to seem as if virtue might be a craft that makes use of what it produces itself, which would be very different from other crafts. So, too, it seems that *qua* craft, virtue should be what makes the one who has it most of all able to commit wrongdoing, and this seems to be such a puzzle that when it is discussed Socrates and his

<sup>2</sup> Not because there haven't already been some such studies. There have been – for example, Roochnik 1996 covers the topic as it appears in all of Plato's works, though not in ways that remain uncontroversial, and also with Plato and Platonic philosophy as the main focus. A better approach, I think, would merge a focus on Plato's early dialogues with remarks about craft in the works of other Socratic writers, especially Xenophon. I am not aware of any book-length study of that sort.

interlocutor both end up in perplexity (see *Hippias Minor* 375e6–376c6).<sup>3</sup> In these and many other puzzles, there are important scholarly questions to be asked and answered. My only excuse for neither asking nor answering such questions herein is that I don't need to do so. All I need to work on the problems that are my focus is the recognition that virtue and knowledge are at least mostly treated in Plato's early dialogues as craft, and then that, whatever kind of craft they may be, as craft they will be achieved in degrees and only improved through certain kinds of practice.

At any rate, as I thought about the very close connections that Plato has Socrates make between knowledge, wisdom, virtue more generally, and happiness, it occurred to me that recognizing a kind of knowledge that either explained or constituted wisdom and virtue, but that was either a kind of craft or at least relevantly like craft that might be achieved *in varying degrees*, would have a very significant impact on how we would need to understand Socratic philosophy.

## P.2 Intended Readership and Structure of the Book

Although each chapter provides a different focus than the others, each one also further develops the overall theme of the book, which is what Socrates has to say about self-improvement. Even so, I have designed each chapter so that it can stand alone and be read by someone interested mainly (or only) in the specific topic of that chapter. Partly, this is how I organize my work on these topics, but partly this is a response to the increasingly common practice of publishers to allow electronic access to individual chapters for a lower price than it would cost to access the entire book. This will allow interested users to decide in what order they would like to read things, and even if someone were to read the book's chapters in reverse order, I think the way I have structured it would allow each chapter to be understood well. When I recall something in a later chapter that was explored more thoroughly in an earlier chapter, I note that, so readers who do not choose to read the book from the beginning to the end can know where to find details. The downside of this way of structuring things, however, is that certain main points that affect several chapters are repeated

<sup>3</sup> I actually do not accept that there is a difference between other crafts and the craft of virtue in this regard, because I think the impossibility of those with virtue doing what is vicious is not that virtue does not provide the sort of knowledge that would allow the most effective wrongdoing. It does provide such knowledge; the barrier against wrongdoing does not come from the craft of virtue *qua* craft, but from the universal human desire for whatever is best for us. Socrates is convinced that wrongdoing is never in our best interest. For discussion, see Chapter 3.

in each one, though I hope this repetition will not become too burdensome for those who read the book in the traditional way. I have tried not to allow such repetitions to become too lengthy.

This structure, too, seemed to me to be best for the readers I would most like to reach – upper-level undergraduates, graduate students, and younger faculty members who have not yet made up their minds about the things I discuss herein. I hope more senior scholars will also be interested, but I expect that many of them will already be so invested in certain ways of thinking about Socrates (or Plato) that my arguments will not be able to dissuade them from their prior commitments. I have tried to cite as much of the important recent scholarship as I could, and thus to engage with other well-worked-out views about my subjects. But I have tried to structure both the book and my arguments and explanations to make them most suitable to younger scholars and readers who might be able to consider them with fresh eyes and fewer prior commitments.

Despite their relative independence, I did try to structure the chapters to allow my overall argument to be developed in a way that would make each new step to occur in a reasonable order.

I begin in Chapter 1 by paying careful attention to the way in which Plato treats Socrates as an exemplar for us to emulate, and show how his doing so seems to present problems when compared to some of the philosophical views that Socrates is supposed to exemplify. In effect, I argue that what Gregory Vlastos (1971) once called “the paradox of Socrates” can only be resolved if we take seriously that Plato’s Socrates must be understood as operating with a very different model of knowledge than the one with which contemporary philosophers are most familiar – again, a model of knowledge based on craft (*technē*).

In Chapter 2, I then turn to a claim that we find Socrates making about himself in the *Gorgias*, a claim that has perplexed many scholars. Socrates says that he has taken up and practices “the true craft of politics” (*Gorgias* 521d6–e1). I review each of the several claims Socrates makes in this passage and show why at least some of them have seemed deeply problematic to scholars evaluating them, but show that, in fact, good sense can be made of each one as something that Socrates actually believes. Once again, it is a peculiar feature of craft that allows me to interpret Socrates’ claim as entirely sincere; without this feature, or using the model of knowledge more familiar to contemporary philosophers, Socrates would not be able to make such a claim.

I then, in Chapter 3, turn to another position defended by Socrates in Plato’s early dialogues that contributes to what Socrates calls his philosophical “mission” in Athens. Socrates, as most scholars now agree, is a motivational

intellectualist, which is to say that he believes that every action done by a human agent indicates and is to be explained in terms of what the agent believes is in their best interest, among the options available and salient to them at the time of action. That means, as Terry Penner has famously claimed, that “for Socrates, when people act badly or viciously or even just out of moral weakness, that will be merely a result of intellectual mistake.”<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I argue for a picture of Socratic moral psychology that explains how and why Socratic intellectualism nonetheless requires for its explication the positing of an etiology of belief-formation that most scholars have missed. Once we see that his intellectualist conception of motivation is influenced by this novel view about belief-formation, we can better understand just how human cognition is associated with virtue and happiness in the particular way it is within Socratic philosophy. It also allows us to understand what some scholars have found so troubling in various Socratic discussions that they have actually made special efforts to deny that Socrates in fact accepts what he seems to be saying: that he thinks there is a place for painful, physical punishments as a way to change the behaviors of certain kinds of wrongdoers. The connection of this chapter’s specific focus to the rest of the book will be, I hope, obvious: insofar as there is an etiology of belief-formation that may be considerably less veridically reliable than other etiologies, anyone who is interested in achieving better grades of virtue, skill, and happiness in life will need to be especially vigilant not to allow the less reliable etiology of belief-formation to “do their thinking for them.”

In Chapter 4, then, I give a more complete account of Socratic epistemology, and also the way in which Socratic philosophizing (including especially elenctic argumentation) reflects his views about the various etiologies of belief-formation. Most importantly, I show that the way in which Socrates engages in his discussions with certain interlocutors actually shows him attempting to manage the unusual etiology for belief-formation that I discuss in Chapter 5: Socrates sometimes seeks to shame his interlocutors in ways that clearly engage nonrational aspects of their psychologies, but in doing so, he intends to induce in them changes of *beliefs*. In the *Gorgias*, where this process is best exemplified, Socrates even acknowledges quite explicitly that what he is trying to do is to correct Callicles in the way that punishment corrects those who receive it (*Gorgias* 505c3–4). By engaging in the different ways in which people form the beliefs by which they live, Socrates encourages people to become more virtuous, more skilled in the ways that will also afford them greater happiness in life. I finish that chapter by considering how Socrates approaches our need

<sup>4</sup> Penner 2000: 165.

to engage in practical deliberation when none of us are even close to being master artisans in the craft of virtue. Socrates recognizes that all of us have moral decisions to make all of the time. But how are we to practice in such a way as to improve the way in which we make such decisions when we continue to be in a condition of ignorance?

In the final two chapters, I take up the questions of whether or not Socrates accepts either the sufficiency of virtue for happiness (Chapter 5) or the necessity of virtue for happiness (Chapter 6). The principle that virtue is sufficient for happiness entails the preposterous view that virtuous people have such complete control over their lives that nothing can damage their lives and spoil whatever happiness they might otherwise have. In Chapter 5, I argue that Socrates well understood the fundamental frailty and vulnerability of the human condition. The necessity of virtue for happiness has seemed to most scholars to have the effect of showing that no one – including Socrates himself – could ever be happy, since “no one is wiser than Socrates” (*Apology* 21a7), but Socrates says he is “very conscious that I am not wise at all” (*Apology* 21b4–5). Without wisdom, in Socratic philosophy, there can be no virtue. So if virtue is necessary for happiness, then no human being is happy. This unfortunate conclusion, however, can at least be moderated by bringing the craft model of knowledge to bear. If one seeks to improve in the craft (or craft-like) condition of virtue, then one’s relative lack of virtue may only entail a relative lack of happiness, rather than a complete lack of it. To put the point more positively, the improbability of virtue allows Socrates to associate our achievements in taking up and pursuing “the true political craft” or wisdom with the achievement of a similar degree of happiness in our lives. Since knowledge, wisdom, and virtue do not have to be achieved in an all-or-nothing way, so too can happiness be achieved in degrees. This way of reconceiving the debates about the sufficiency and necessity of virtue for happiness allows human beings, despite their frailty, to have some genuine hope of success in achieving the happiness that we all want in our lives. I hope my readers will find that this new emphasis on the improbability of knowledge, virtue, and happiness yields a more satisfying and plausible overall view than the one that has often been attributed to Socrates by others.

### P.3 Methodological Issues

Developmentalism is the approach to Plato’s dialogues that (i) perceives differences between the philosophical views that Socrates either explicitly endorses or at least seems to be committed to in different groups of

dialogues, and then (ii) seeks to explain these differences in terms of Plato's own intellectual development.<sup>5</sup> Developmentalism has gone out of fashion among contemporary scholars, and no general defense against the criticisms that have been made of it has been offered recently. When we published our 2010 book (*Socratic Moral Psychology*), Brickhouse and I did offer a kind of rearguard defense of developmentalism by showing that the kinds of arguments normally given in favor of alternative approaches were actually quite poor. We also tried to show that the alternative approaches had not yet managed to confront the very difficult problems they faced themselves. We went on to defend developmentalism as a research program, conceding that while some assumptions of a research program might turn out to be false or misunderstood, the program itself might still provide interesting and valuable results.

I continue to think that the developmentalist approach can and does provide important insights into the interpretation of what may be found in the putatively early dialogues. I also continue to think that the portrait of Socrates that Plato gives in his putatively early dialogues is an intriguing one that is worth our specific attention. As Brickhouse and I complained in our 2010 defense of developmentalism, the other general approaches that have increased in popularity lately have the effect of eliminating the Socrates of Plato's putatively early dialogues from the history of philosophy. Instead, antidevelopmentalists insist that what appears in Plato is Plato's and tells us nothing at all reliable about Socrates or anyone else.<sup>6</sup>

One recent event may have some impact on how we think about Socrates in future generations, and so deserves special notice. In 2019 in Buenos Aires, scholars interested in Socratic studies – that is, in all of the works by many ancient authors in which Socrates appears – created a new academic society, the International Society for Socratic Studies. One specific question was addressed as the group created this new scholarly organization: should works by Plato be included within the focus of this group? The answer was affirmative, and so future years may (and I hope will) include many studies in which the commonalities and differences in the way Socrates was represented in antiquity will be explored. By neither privileging Plato's portrait of

<sup>5</sup> In Brickhouse and Smith 2010: 18, we list the relevant works, in alphabetical order, as follows: *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic I*. We also noted that the moral psychology in the *Meno* seemed to belong with what we find in this group of early dialogues. I continue to regard these as the relevant group of works and will be citing these in subsequent chapters as evidence for my claims about "Socratic philosophy."

<sup>6</sup> Clear examples of this kind of view, from significantly different perspectives, may be found in Gerson 2013; Kahn 1996; Kamtekar 2017; Nails 1995; Press 2010.



Socrates nor excluding it, new opportunities for understanding this charismatic philosopher from ancient Greece can be engaged. My focus in this book is obviously Plato's portrait. But how that portrait fits with those by other ancient writers is a matter of great interest to me, and to other members of this new organization. I hope that at least some of what I present herein may prove useful to studies of different Socratic authors in antiquity.

#### P.4 Texts, Translations, Acknowledgments

Citations of text will be from the Oxford Classical Greek texts, including the standard Stephanus page numbers and letters plus line numbers from those texts. Unless otherwise noted, I will use the translations given in Cooper 1997, if only because they are so widely used, but also because I find them mostly reliable and accessible to readers. I often found that I could not entirely agree with these translations, however, and so I have made a note of such when I have made some adjustment. Most of the changes I have made to these translations derive from their use of gendered nouns and pronouns where the Greek does not require them.

When I thought it would be useful to my intended readers, I have included transliterations of specific Greek words or phrases. Since my citations give the line numbers in the Greek text, it will be easy for those who want to find the original Greek for what is given in the translations I offer.

Some of the materials that appear in this book are revised from earlier publications. These are:

- “A Problem in Plato's Hagiography of Socrates,” *Athens Journal of Humanities and Arts* 5, 2018, 81–103; [www.athensjournals.gr/humanities/2018-5-1-5-Smith.pdf](http://www.athensjournals.gr/humanities/2018-5-1-5-Smith.pdf), is revised herein as Chapter 1, with permission of the journal.
- “Socrates: Apprentice at Politics,” forthcoming in T. Angiers, ed., *Skill in Ancient Ethics*, London: Bloomsbury), is revised herein as Chapter 2, with permission of the publisher.
- “Ethics in Plato's Early Dialogues,” forthcoming in D. Wolfsdorf, ed., *Early Greek Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 432–454), is revised herein as Sections 3.1–3.4, with permission of the editor and publisher.
- “Socrates on Practical Deliberation,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 30.2, 2013, 93–113, is revised herein as Sections 4.10–4.16, with permission of the publisher.

“Socrates on the Human Condition,” *Ancient Philosophy* 36, 2016, 81–95, is revised herein as Chapter 6, with permission of the journal.

In other cases, I have not simply revised but have nonetheless relied so heavily on work done with coauthors that my debt to them must be acknowledged. These works are really just presented in a somewhat different form in the following chapters and sections:

“Socratic Moral Psychology,” with T. Brickhouse; in N. Smith, ed., *The Bloomsbury Companion to Socrates* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 185–209, is the basis of what I present in Sections 3.5–3.13, with permission of the coauthor and publisher.

“Socrates on Knowledge,” with J. Lorenço; in N. Smith, ed., *Knowledge in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 1 in S. Hetherington, gen. ed., *The Philosophy of Knowledge: A History* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2019), 67–83, is the basis for Sections 4.4–4.9, with permission of the coauthor and publisher.

“Socrates and the Sufficiency Thesis,” with Joel Martinez, forthcoming in C. Marsico, ed., *Socratica IV* (publisher not yet named) and “Socrates, Sully, and the Sufficiency Thesis,” also with Joel Martinez (paper presented to the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division, 2019), provided the bases for Sections 5.1–5.6, with permission of the coauthor. Our work together on Socrates’ aversion to being a victim of wrongdoing (Martinez and Smith 2018) certainly influenced Sections 5.7–5.8, which mostly repeats in very abbreviated form what we argue for more extensively in that work.

I am extremely grateful for the interactions involved in these collaborations, and I am grateful to my coauthors for their insights and contributions to our joint efforts. I am also grateful to Lewis & Clark College for hosting and to the National Endowment for the Humanities for their funding of a Summer Seminar on Socrates that I directed in the summer of 2014, where I got the opportunity to try out many of the ideas in this book and get feedback on them from the participants and guest speakers, which was most helpful. A 2019 Summer Stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities also helped me to complete the book, and I am especially grateful to Hugh H. Benson and Russell E. Jones for agreeing to serve as referees for the submitted proposal.

I have also had the opportunity to present various parts of this book at a number of different conferences, which allowed me to learn from many

comments and criticisms I received. These conferences include: the International Plato Society United States Regional Meeting, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2012; the conference on “Appetite, Voluntariness and Virtuous Action: A Workshop in Ancient Philosophy” at Uppsala University, 2012; the Northwest Workshop in Ancient Philosophy 2013, 2014, and 2018; the International Plato Society Meeting, Tokyo, Japan, April 2014; the International Conference on *Technê* in Plato, St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, 2015; the III Congreso Internacional de Filosofia Griega, Lisbon, 2016; the 10th West Coast Plato Workshop 2017; the International Conference on Virtue, Skill, and Practical Reason, Cape Town, South Africa, 2017; the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division meetings, 2017 and 2019; the Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities, 2018; Socratica IV, Buenos Aires, November 2018; the Royal Conference in honor of Paul Woodruff, Austin, 2019; the Fonte Aretusa conference, Siracusa, 2019; and the special joint session of the International Plato Society and the International Society for Socratic Studies held with the American Philosophical Association Central Division Meetings in 2020. Various versions of sections of this book were also presented at specific colloquia at the Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (Brazil); the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (Brazil); the University of Bergen (Norway); and the Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Santiago, Chile. I am grateful to my hosts and to the audiences at each of these venues for their responses and suggestions.

Last but not least, I am grateful to all of the students at Lewis & Clark College with whom I tried out all of the ideas presented in this book during my triennial seminars on Socrates. I am fortunate to have worked with so many talented and engaged students.

This book is dedicated to Tom (Thomas C.) Brickhouse, with whom I collaborated for over forty years. I hope he will forgive me for the ways in which I have deviated from some of our earlier conclusions, and am convinced that this would be a better book if I had been able to persuade him to work with me on it.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-51553-2 — Socrates on Self-Improvement  
Nicholas D. Smith  
Frontmatter  
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