THE ELENCHUS AND INERADICABLE TRUTH

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> And of all inquiries, Callicles, the noblest is that which
> concerns the very matter with which you have reproached
> me—namely, what a man should be, and what he should
> practice and to what extent, both when older and when
> young. (*Gorgias* 487e-488a)

Socrates searches for moral truths. He is not concerned with epistemology or metaphysics. Nevertheless, *prima facie*, it seems possible that his method, the elenchus, be employed in the search for these latter truths with which he is not concerned. Truth is truth wherever one finds it and so the "true" method should be usable in the realm of any study. Gregory Vlastos argues in "The Socratic Elenchus" that a specific logical problem with the elenchus can be solved by ascribing certain methodological assumptions to Socrates which are supported by textual evidence in the *Gorgias*. Throughout his discussion, Vlastos correctly assumes that the Socratic elenchus is used only with regard to moral beliefs. However, again there is nothing in Vlastos's argument that would, in principle, restrict the use of the elenchus to the search for moral truths. The purpose of this paper is to recognize a problem with the assumption attributed, by Vlastos, to the Socrates of the *Gorgias* and show that the only way to solve this problem is to restrict the use of the elenchus to moral questions. Vlastos's argument and textual evidence is sufficiently persuasive that I will not question whether or not Socrates really held the methodological assumptions that Vlastos ascribes to him. I will assume that Vlastos is right and attempt to solve this problem which arises for the Socrates that Vlastos has shown us in the *Gorgias*.

I.

To begin, we must understand what "the problem of the elenchus" is, as Vlastos sees it, and how he goes about solving this problem. Traditionally, the elenchus has been seen as a negative method (Robinson 19; Teloh 61-64). This raises the question as to how Socrates arrives at his positive doctrines. Some have answered this by claiming that the elenchus is a *reductio ad absurdum* (Robinson 28) and others have claimed that there is some method above and beyond the elenchus (Teloh 61-64). Both of these approaches are wrong. Vlastos points out that if the elenchus were a *reductio* then it would have to derive the contradiction from the interlocutor's first assertion (usually some definition). But, in fact, Socrates

elicits further assertions from the interlocutor in order to "refute" him (29). Therefore, in the elenctic method, the contradictions are derived from a set of premises and can only constitute a proof of the inconsistency of the set. Secondly, the idea of a method beyond the elenchus is problematic for several reasons, but I do not have the space here to address them directly.[1]

Assuming that the elenchus is Socrates's "first and last search" (31), the fact that the elenchus can only show that a set of propositions is inconsistent is *the* problem of the elenchus, as Vlastos sees it:

> [H]ow is it that Socrates claims to have proved a thesis false when, in point of logic, all he has proved in any given argument is that the thesis is inconsistent with the conjunction of agreed-upon premises for which no reason has been given in that argument? (49)

Moreover, Socrates himself recognizes that inconsistency is all he has shown:

> Then which statement are we to give up? The dictum `one thing one contrary' or the statement that wisdom is a distinct thing from temperance, both being parts of virtue . . . which shall we renounce? The two statements *are not very harmonious. They don't chime well together or fit in with each*

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[1]The positive method that Teloh argues for is called *psychagogia*. He argues: "While the negative dialectic coerces the answerer's assent, and directly attacks his beliefs, positive dialectic, or *psychagogia* (*psyche* leading) is noncoercive and benign. *Psychagogia* is the drawing out of beliefs by argument, suggestion, innuendo, and paradox . . . . [It] is a testing, evaluating, and defending of one's beliefs. The object is to turn mere belief into knowledge; this is done by evaluating the belief from different perspectives, turning over and over the arguments, and finally fastening the belief in the *psyche* . . ." (63). So it would seem that somehow through the endurance of many arguments our beliefs can become knowledge. The problem with this account is that it involves an affirmation of the consequent. For if a belief is known to be true it will endure all scrutiny (*Protagoras* 97e-98a). Therefore, a belief's ability to endure argumentation will be an effect of its being known. But it can also be an effect of an argument's inability to have refuted the belief, i.e. the argument's weakness. Some false beliefs may prove to be very stubborn and thus may very well endure an inordinate amount of argumentation. Hence, it does not follow from the fact that a belief endures many arguments and examinations that it is true. A belief's endurance of scrutiny is a *necessary* but *not sufficient* condition for knowledge.

There is a general problem that any such "positive method" theory would seem to encounter. Surely such a theory must reconcile the hidden nature of any positive method in the Socratic dialogues with its central importance in solving the problem of the elenchus. In other words, if *psychagogia* is the only way by which Socrates can attain truth then it would seem that Socrates should give it prominence in his discourse—the fact that he hides it must be explained.

other. (*Protagoras* 333a, my emphasis)

But then after recognizing that Protagoras could logically reject either one of these theses, Socrates claims that temperance and wisdom must be the same, rejecting Protagoras's initial proposal. What gives Socrates the right to make such a jump? He has only proved that the assumptions they started with are inconsistent, but he has not proved which one is false. Robinson puts the problem thus: "[The elenchus] only tells you *that* you are wrong, and does not also tell you *why*" (17). But I think it is better put that the elenchus only tells you *that* you are wrong and it does not also tell you *where*, or in which premise.

Socrates's practice of showing an interlocutor's beliefs to be inconsistent and then rejecting those beliefs with which he (Socrates) does not agree can only be vindicated if this quest for consistency can be shown to be identical with a quest for truth, i.e. if consistency is a gauge for truth. To put it in anachronistic terms, the elenchus encounters the traditional problem of the coherence theory of truth: it seems that one *could* have a consistent set of beliefs of which some are false. Thus, to show that consistency is a test for truth, one must show that one *could not* have a consistent set of beliefs of which any are false. In other words, one must show that if a system of belief entails any falsity, then it follows that such a system is inconsistent. Vlastos points out that Socrates must hence assume that *A*: "Any one who ever has a false moral belief will always have at the same time true beliefs entailing the negation of that false belief" (52). His textual evidence for Socrates's assuming this comes from the *Gorgias* 482a:

> You must either then prove against her, as I said just now, that to do wrong and evade punishment for wrongdoing is not the worst of all evils; or if you leave this unrefuted, then by the dog that is god in Egypt, Callicles himself will not agree with you, Callicles, but will be at variance with you throughout your life.

By assuming *A*, it seems that Socrates holds consistency to be a test of truth. This is because *A* implies that for any given person X, X holds a set of true beliefs which entails contradictions of every false belief held by X. And this implies that as long as there is a false belief remaining in X's belief system, then X's belief system is inconsistent. Consequently, if X obtains a consistent system of beliefs, then X has no false beliefs. Moreover, one need not worry that one might inadvertently throw out a true belief (say, for example, when Socrates throws out Protagoras's proposal that temperance and wisdom are separate), for if such a case occurs, *A* implies that there is always a true belief left that will entail the negation of the

remaining false belief (Vlastos 52).

Vlastos recognizes that A is a very strong assumption (52). But since he argues that Socrates does not examine his own methodological assumptions (27), Vlastos does not examine the possible reasons why A would be such a strong assumption. However, even if it is the case that Socrates does not examine his own assumptions, it remains a question as to whether or not his method is a good one. And if his methodological assumptions are not acceptable, then his method is not acceptable. So, in order to interpret Socrates as charitably as possible we must examine what might be wrong with his assumptions and speculate as to how he might answer any objections.

The problem with A is exhibited by the following argument: Suppose that I have a false belief that Q. It is possible that I have only one true belief that entails not-Q, even by assumption A. I do not know which belief is the true one which entails not-Q, and I may reject any given belief that I have. Therefore, it is possible that I unknowingly reject the one true belief which entails not-Q. And, by the definition of consistency, it follows that it is possible that I have a false belief in a consistent set of beliefs. But, of course, this contradicts A.

To put the problem in another way, it seems intuitively possible that one can reject any given belief and, thus, that one could reject enough beliefs to eliminate one's ability to contradict some of one's false beliefs. But since this entails that one can have a consistent set of beliefs, of which some are false, it contradicts A. Therefore, A must presuppose that enough of any given person's true beliefs are *ineradicable* for her to always have the ability to contradict any given false belief. Put in this light, A seems to be a problematic assumption.

II.

To solve this problem Socrates needs to have a way of ensuring that he does not reject any true belief which is essential to the denial of any false belief (e.g. he could reject any true belief that is entailed by other true beliefs that are themselves ineradicable). To find a way of ensuring that we do not reject any true beliefs seems to be a formidable task.[2]

Vlastos could argue at this point that I have missed the important second assumption that he attributes to Socrates, which solves this whole problem: "*B:* The set of moral beliefs held by Socrates at any given time is

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[2]Of course, one may just *claim* that there is some set of true beliefs which entails the negations of all possible false beliefs, which everyone has, and which no one can eradicate. But since this claim would be extremely bold in that there is little reason to support it, most philosophers would find it unacceptable. Thus, we shall attempt to find reason to believe it in Plato's text.

consistent" (55). For if both *A* and *B* hold, then Socrates has true beliefs and these beliefs can act as a standard against which one may measure the beliefs of others. If one is Socrates's interlocutor then one need not worry that one might reject a true belief essential to the denial of some given false belief, because Socrates will only allow his interlocutors to reject false beliefs.

The problem with this response to "the problem of ineradicable truth" is that Socrates could only arrive at a state in which he holds B by using the elenchus. So it cannot be the case that one justifies the use of the elenchus by an appeal to *B*. What did Socrates assume when he started his search? He could not have assumed that he already had inductive evidence that his beliefs were consistent, as Vlastos argues (55), since he had no cases on which to base an inductive inference. The elenchus needs an assumption that will justify its use until Socrates does have inductive evidence for *B*.[3]

With that caveat, we can get back to the formidable task of ensuring that we do not reject any true beliefs that are essential to the denial of any false beliefs. The task, however, may not be as difficult as it seems. It *seems* that we practically must *know* which beliefs are true to avoid eliminating them. But it is possible that we only need to have knowledge of a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of truth in order to avoid eliminating the essential true beliefs. This is because it is the nature of a necessary condition to be present in, at least, every case of which it is a necessary condition. Moreover, a necessary condition does not require knowledge of that of which it is a necessary condition. For a necessary condition can be present in cases where there is no sufficient condition. Therefore, if we find a necessary condition X_1 of truth, then we would be able to avoid eliminating true beliefs (by not eliminating any belief with characteristic X_1) without having to know which particular beliefs are true, i.e. there could be some false beliefs which also have characteristic X_1. And then, with the remaining beliefs, we could find another necessary characteristic X_2 of true beliefs and avoid eliminating them similarly (each

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[3]We must note two things at his point: 1) This does not mean that Socrates did not assume *B* at all. It only means that Socrates would have had to use the elenchus to arrive at *B* and so he must have made another assumption to begin with. 2) It could be the case that Socrates's use of the elenchus was initially philosophically unmotivated. For example, it could have been motivated by his desire to verify what the Oracle of Delphi had said of him, i.e. that he was the wisest man in Athens (*Apology* 21a-23b). Indeed, Socrates relates this incident in the context of explaining his questioning techniques to the jury. However, even if such is the case we must still explain why Socrates felt that the elenchus was the best method for this task and, more importantly, why he continues to use it throughout most of the "Socratic" dialogues. Again, using the principle of charity, if we can show that he is justified in using this method, we may very well understand, at least in part, why he felt he should use it.

time using a new necessary characteristic) until we have a consistent system. But what could these necessary characteristics $X_1, X_2 \ldots X_n$ be?

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates hints at what might be the answer to this question:

> I am convinced that if you *agree* with the opinions held by my soul, then at last we have attained the actual truth. For I observe that anyone who is to *test* adequately a human soul for good or evil living must possess three qualifications, all of which you possess, namely knowledge, good will, and frankness. (486e-487a, my emphasis)

Here Socrates claims that the ability of a soul to "test" another is in the first soul's knowledge and willingness to assert what he believes. The actual testing itself, however, is portrayed as "agreement." So, Socrates believes that if a learned and honest soul agrees with him, then he must be right.

This is not as problematic an assertion as it may seem when it is seen in light of the rest of Socrates's theory. For indeed, two persons who know something will never disagree on that something. Moreover, two persons who correctly believe some one thing will never disagree on that one thing either. And Socrates, on Vlastos's account, is assuming that we all correctly believe a certain set of beliefs that is sufficient to deny our false beliefs. And since for every possible true belief there is a possible false belief, it follows that one must have every true belief—thus one must agree with everyone else on one's true beliefs. So it could be the case that agreement is the necessary, but not sufficient condition, that we are looking for.

One problem with making agreement the necessary condition for truth is that it does not *appear* to be necessary. Even assuming that we all start out with the true beliefs necessary to deny our false ones, it would still seem possible that a person could have rejected some of those true beliefs and could then disagree with someone else who has not rejected them. However, this problem can be circumvented. For if everyone has the necessary true beliefs at the philosophical outset, i.e. before one begins the elenchus, then this criterion of agreement would be plausible *at the philosophical outset* (e.g. before one becomes corrupted by sophistic oratory). And perhaps this is the reason that Socrates accepts Callicles as one with whom agreement will suffice to test the truth of his (Socrates's) beliefs whereas others who no longer have this knowledge will not do (486e-487b).[4]

An advantage of agreement is that it cannot only suffice as the first

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[4]Of course, the fact that Callicles seems to be a sophist problematizes this argument.

necessary (but not sufficient condition) for truth, but it can also continue to be this condition even after the initial elimination of inconsistent beliefs. For when one has finished a dialogue with a given interlocutor with whom one has successfully eliminated a set of beliefs, one can then go on to another interlocutor and, pending the interlocutor's fulfillment of the requirements in the above quotation from the *Gorgias*, this new interlocutor can help one to eliminate a different set of beliefs. In other words, our respective necessary conditions, $X_1, X_2, \ldots X_n$, could be fulfilled by agreement alone: agreement with Callicles, agreement with Parmenides . . . agreement with n.

A second, but more pressing, objection to the idea that agreement could be this necessary, but not sufficient, condition for truth is that everyone may agree on some false premise. If such were the case then a philosopher would be left *with* an inconsistent system and *without* the knowledge of which belief should be recanted. And at the juncture where one has an inconsistent set of beliefs, and does not know which one to recant, is where we found the elenchus at the outset of this paper.

It may be possible to weaken the strength of this objection by appealing to the improbability of such a scenario. Indeed, it is common experience that there is always some person who disagrees with any given belief and so it would be unlikely for the scenario to occur. Moreover, this remote possibility of failure is not a problem for a Socratic methodology given the fact of Socrates's claim to ignorance. Perhaps, it is this lack of final certainty that keeps him from admitting knowledge and the fact that he recognizes that he lacks this final certainty that gives him the confidence to claim to know of his ignorance. Deciding to eliminate beliefs on the basis of disagreement could still be used to get quite far in the pursuit of consistency, which by *A*, is the pursuit of truth.

But the difficulty with this solution may even go back to the way we have set up "the problem of ineradicable truth" in the first place. If we are to search for a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of truth then we will always find a characteristic which will define a set in which there always *could* be some beliefs which are not true. If we end up with only true beliefs by the use of such a characteristic, then we are merely "lucky." Therefore, the use of any necessary, but not sufficient, condition of truth may run into problems similar to the ones encountered by the "agreement solution." And at the very least these problems weaken the force of this sort of proposal to solve "the problem of ineradicability."

Yet another problem with the "agreement solution" is that some, including Vlastos, have argued that Socrates *does not* use agreement as any sort of test of truth. Indeed, as Vlastos points out, this seems to be the gist of what Socrates says in the *Gorgias* 472b-c. Moreover, Vlastos argues "that Socrates uses endoxic premisses for all they are worth, should go with out saying. But without *some* contra-endoxic premisses how could he hope to

get contra-endoxic conclusions?" (43). But on the "agreement solution" account it does not necessarily follow that those beliefs which are true will be generally accepted by everyone, since the general public may not be *at the philosophical outset*—they may have already rejected many of the essential true beliefs. If this is the case, then Socrates could limit his encounters to the few people which he knows still have the bulk of their true beliefs. And such an agreement criterion would not constitute an appeal to *endoxic* premises. However, at this point, anyone familiar with Socrates will object that this just is *not* what Socrates does; he talks to anyone on the street, refuting anyone's endoxic premises.

A "last-ditch" effort to save the "agreement solution" may be to argue that one *can* go from endoxic premises to contra-endoxic conclusions. For if the latter holds, then the fact that Socrates accepts contra-endoxic conclusions does not preclude his exclusive use of endoxic premises. Of course, this would presuppose that there is no place in the dialogue where Socrates accepts contra-endoxic premises. I know of no such place. Nevertheless, there is something odd when a proposed theory has to continue to qualify itself, as we have been doing with the "agreement solution." It should not be surprising if such continued qualification is indicative of some deeper problem.

It seems that the underlying problem here is that the sort of method attributed to Socrates by the "agreement solution" is pragmatically problematic. It states that we can avoid the eradication of any truths necessary to the denial of our false beliefs by never throwing out any belief on which we agree with another person as long as that other person has never rejected any belief, i.e. *is at the philosophical outset*. But it would seem that no one is in such a state. No one is ever *at the philosophical outset*. From the point at which we are rational, we are always acquiring and rejecting beliefs. Therefore, the "agreement solution" is guilty of not being realizable in practice. This does not mean that it is not good to use agreement as a general checking device in philosophical dialogue, especially if one has confidence in one's interlocutors, but such a general tool cannot be the whole of a method.

III.

So suppose we reject the "agreement solution" for the reasons outlined above. How can we now solve "the problem of ineradicable truth?" In footnote 2 I argued that we cannot merely claim that the truths necessary for the denial of any false beliefs are ineradicable without giving a reason for them being ineradicable. In section II I have tried to argue for a way that persons themselves could avoid eradicating these essential true beliefs. But perhaps it is the case that these true beliefs are ineradicable by their very nature. Perhaps persons could not reject such beliefs even if they

wanted to. This will be the sort of solution we shall explore in this section.

Perhaps all the beliefs essential to the negation of any given false belief are part of a logical whole. What this means is illustrated by the following argument. Suppose that *P*: all true beliefs are entailed by a finite number, which are themselves ineradicable. From *P*, the rejection of "derived" or "unessential" true beliefs in favor of false ones would still result in contradiction (by *A*, of course). Therefore, *P* seems to contradict the premise that any belief is, in principle, one which may be rejected. And the premise that any belief is one which may be rejected is essential to the argument in section I, which concludes that there *can* be a set of beliefs which is consistent and contains a falsehood. So Vlastos's assumption *A*, which entails that there can be no consistent set of beliefs which contains a false belief, can be vindicated.

However, there are apparent problems with this "logical holism" solution as well. For one, we need a reason to accept the idea that some beliefs are ineradicable, since by intuition it seems that any belief could be, in principle, rejected. A more important problem is that true beliefs can be held about contingent facts which seem to preclude the idea that there are a finite number of true beliefs which entail all the necessary negations of false beliefs. For example, it is true that I am in front of a computer at the time of writing this paper. Now, it is possible that you believe that Dennis is in front of computer X at time T, and yet, it is also possible that you do not believe this. Thus, you could believe it at one time and then reject it at another. But then, what further belief of yours would entail that Dennis is in front of computer X at time T? It would seem that such a contingent fact cannot be deduced from other contingent facts. Its truth is independent of the truth of other facts. Therefore, if we can truly believe that contingent facts hold, then it would seem that all true propositions cannot be part of a logical whole.

A final problem with the "logical holism" solution is that it may be the case that such a position could not have been conceived of by Socrates. It seems anachronistic to ascribe holism to Socrates. For indeed, the holist/atomist disputes seem to be a more recent phenomenon.

Despite these problems, I think the "logical holism" solution actually works if we restrict the use of the elenchus to moral/ethical questions in the first place, making its use with regard to such subject matter a condition of its success. Such a condition responds to the above challenges to the "logical holism" solution. First, it is easier to believe that truths about the Good and Just are ineradicable, since such truths are in our own interest. For, according to Socrates, everyone wants the good and a lack of doing the good is due to a lack of knowledge, not a voluntary doing of evil. Being in our own interest, ethical beliefs are tangibly closer to the center of our network of beliefs. Indeed, it is in political and moral disputes in which we have the hardest time convincing one another.

But more importantly, the limitation of the elenchus to ethical questions avoids the problem of contingent truths. There seems to be many less facts about ethical questions and they seem to be inter-dependent as well. For example, the way in which we define Justice is dependent on the way in which we define the Good, and similarly with Courage, Piety, etc. So whereas truths about the location of objects in the world seem to be logically independent, i.e. one cannot derive one truth from another, truths about ethical issues seem to be logically inter-dependent. Therefore, it would make sense that a finite number of ineradicable truths could entail the denial of all possible falsehoods, *if* we are confined to the truths of ethics.

Finally, once restricted to the realm of ethics, this theory is certainly not foreign to Socrates. For example, the famous doctrine of the Unity of the Virtues seems, at least, to say that the virtues are logically equivalent: If a person has one virtue then that person has them all. Logical holism says that if a person believes a truth about one virtue then that person believes, at least covertly, the truths about them all. Socrates even uses the metaphor of the virtues as being one "whole" when he discusses the doctrine at the end of the *Protagoras*: "But if [virtue] turns out to be, *as a single whole*, knowledge—which is what you are urging Socrates—then it will be most surprising if it cannot be taught" (361b, my emphasis). Therefore, this idea of "logical holism" does not seem to be merely anachronistically attributed to Socrates, though it might be an anachronistic *term*. Moreover, it would fit, and make sense of, Socrates's own practice in only dealing with ethical questions and Plato's disenchantment with the method that Socrates never seems to question, since Plato was concerned with issues other than ethics (Vlastos 56).

IV.

When compared, these two solutions to "the problem of ineradicability," the "agreement solution" and the "logical holism" solution, logical holism seems to fare better. Though the proponent of the "agreement solution" can respond to many technical problems it faces, she must always do so at the expense of its plausibility. It seems that its restriction on the elimination of beliefs on which interlocutors agree can never work in practice, since no one is ever a philosophical "virgin." Moreover, the "logical holism" solution seems to solve the problems it encounters without sacrificing its plausibility. And it does this with the addition of a condition that is not *ad hoc*, namely that the elenchus is only successful when used with regard to ethical questions, since Socrates himself seems to adhere to it throughout his philosophical project.

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