

Notes and Discussions

THE TECHNICAL CONCEPTION OF VIRTUE

In his book *Plato's Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues*,¹ Terence Irwin presents a challenging, original interpretation of the central moral concerns of these groups of dialogues. Irwin's arguments cast important new light upon the moral theory of the early dialogues (of "Socrates") in particular, and students of such issues as Socrates' opinion of the precise relationship between virtue and happiness, or the precise workings of Socrates' view of rational desire and rational choice, will long be in Irwin's debt. But this is not to say that the most original or the most challenging aspects of Irwin's interpretation are always correct. The intention of this brief essay is to demonstrate some important respects in which his interpretation of Socrates falls wide of the mark.

Irwin's portrayal of the Socrates of the early dialogues is most unusual and most original in the following respect. He argues that Socrates holds a "technical conception of virtue" (TV): "Happiness is a determinate end to which virtue prescribes instrumental means . . . or components already chosen under another description. . ." (p. 84). Irwin uses TV to argue that Socrates values virtue not in itself but only as an instrumental means to attain happiness (esp. p. 92). Irwin bases his interpretation on the Craft Analogy (CA). (All abbreviations are Irwin's.) A craft—shoemaking, for instance—is a highly rational form of activity, a set series of procedures designed to achieve a recognized end, in light of which their effectiveness can be evaluated. Socrates holds virtue to be analogous to a craft. Therefore, it too must be an instrumental means to achieve a predetermined end.

This essay will focus on TV, which is probably the central component of Irwin's account of Socratic ethics. What I will attempt to demonstrate is, quite simply, that Irwin has little or no evidence to support his attribution of this view to Socrates. The question of evidence here is especially important, in light of the fact that Irwin's view of Socrates runs sharply counter to traditional interpretations. We find in the Socratic dialogues a battery of statements to the effect that virtue is a sufficient condition for happiness (the "self-sufficiency of virtue" (see pp. 100–101). And the Socrates of most traditional accounts is the Socrates of the *Apology* and *Crito*, who willingly accepts death rather than commit injustice, who, according to the *Apology*, would be willing to die "many times over" (30b–c).

The problem is that Irwin's instrumentalist account of virtue does not rest well with Socrates' faith in the self-sufficiency of virtue. Irwin is aware of the conflict here (see, e.g., pp. 101, 281), but he does not pursue it in *Plato's Moral Theory*, and it is a

¹ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

serious weakness in his case.² Along similar lines, Irwin finds it to be no easy task to reconcile the CA and TV with the important Socratic doctrine that virtue is somehow inextricably bound up with the proper care of one's soul (cf. p. 93).

In light of these difficulties with TV, it would require strong evidence indeed to make us believe that Socrates actually held it. And it seems to me that the most serious weakness of Irwin's position is the fact that he is not able to proffer this evidence. While Vlastos, especially, has done an impressive job of marshalling the evidence *against* TV,³ I believe that an even more effective critique of Irwin is to show how weak the evidence *for* TV is, and this is the purpose of this essay. It should be noted that, in concentrating on TV, I do not mean to endorse Irwin's other views, nor to suggest that TV is the only weak link in his chain of argument. It seems clear that many of Irwin's other claims are equally susceptible to criticism. But in light of the central role that TV plays in his overall account, it seems reasonable to devote exclusive attention to this, since the downfall of TV must bring in its wake the downfall of many of Irwin's other questionable claims as well.

A word of qualification is in order before we begin. In light of the fact that Irwin's account of TV is closely bound up with his account of Socratic ethics as a whole, a complete criticism of this one aspect of his view necessarily entails becoming involved with numerous other related views as well, and detailed examinations of the textual and philosophical evidence upon the basis of which they are attributed to Socrates. For reasons of space, these additional matters cannot be pursued here, and so I will limit discussion to what appear to be Irwin's main arguments for TV. An additional point, however, is that it is not always easy to understand exactly what Irwin's arguments are. In his chapter on Socrates in particular, arguments are presented in a discontinuous form: points are developed, then dropped, then picked up again in what often appears to be an altered form. Thus it is not always easy to say *exactly* what Irwin believes he has established in any given section; and it is not always clear whether he believes he has argued for a given point or is merely asserting it as self-evident. The implications of this are seen below.

Irwin has two main grounds for attributing TV to Socrates: (a) philosophical reasons: he argues that Socrates holds various other views that logically commit him to TV; and (b) textual reasons: he is able to muster some direct textual evidence. We will consider these two grounds in turn.

Irwin's philosophical grounds center around the craft analogy and are quite weak. He has a general argument and a specific argument. The general argument is, very basically, that Socrates holds virtue to be a craft; and so TV is required, for without it the CA breaks down. Now, this in itself is unsatisfactory. The craft analogy is only an analogy. Although there is good evidence that Socrates holds it in certain respects (see pp. 71–73), this alone does not allow us to attribute it to him in other respects as well (cf. p. 334, n. 42). Irwin contends that TV is necessary to provide the CA with a high degree of "rationality, explicability, and objectivity" (p. 85). In order for the CA to

² The implications are explored in the correspondence between Irwin and G. Vlastos in the *Times Literary Supplement*, prompted by Vlastos's review of *Plato's Moral Theory*, in which the above point is made at length. See *TLS*, February 24, 1978 (Vlastos's review), March 17, April 21, May 5, June 9, June 16, July 14, and August 4; especially important is Vlastos's letter of June 9.

³ See the last note.

“prove something important and controversial about virtue,” TV must be true (p. 85). But Irwin never demonstrates that Socrates demands this high degree of rationality from the CA—and the CA alone—that Socrates is not content with the degree of rationality provided by a far looser craft analogy. As we shall see, Irwin’s central contention that, for Socrates, all moral knowledge is craft knowledge is never adequately defended, and unless Irwin can prove this, he has no justification for his view that the high degree of rationality that he believes to be found in Socrates’ ethics is based on the CA and not on some other component of the theory. I think it is clear that these general claims alone cannot support TV, and so we turn to Irwin’s specific argument.

Irwin argues for TV (on p. 84) by attempting to show that a “non-technical conception of virtue” (NTV) is unacceptable.⁴ NTV must be rejected because (i) Socrates’ proof that knowledge is sufficient for virtue (KSV) “is explained by the CA, and (ii) he recognizes no moral knowledge which is not a craft; and so NTV destroys his defense of KSV, since it destroys the CA.”

Irwin’s argument is invalid. As it stands, ii—which, as we have seen, is central to Irwin’s general argument—is never proved, and is probably unprovable. Certainly, Socrates never *says* that all moral knowledge is craft knowledge. Again, Irwin seems to assume that (a) since Socrates’ only paradigm for rational practical knowledge is a craft, and (b) since virtue is analogous to a craft in some respects, it follows that *all* moral knowledge must be craft knowledge. An argument such as this is hopelessly weak, but there is one context in which Irwin could be thought to argue for ii. On page 72 he lists a few instances in which Socrates moves from talking about virtues to talking about crafts and concludes, “[Socrates] must assume it [virtue] is no more than a craft.” However, a brief look at the evidence Irwin provides shows that this conclusion does not follow, and insofar as Irwin bases his rejection of NTV on ii, believing he has established ii earlier, he is mistaken.⁵

Reason i, which is Irwin’s more important reason, is incorrect. Irwin has not shown that KSV requires the CA. All he has established (in sec. 3.12, pp. 78–82) is that KSV (and other possible difficulties) “do not undermine the CA” (p. 75)—that is, that KSV is compatible with the CA.⁶ The move from “the CA can support one version of KSV” to “KSV requires the CA” is clearly fallacious. In light of the fact that alternative accounts of Socratic morality have been developed, which rest on neither TV nor the CA, and which can support KSV without undue difficulty (such as that developed by G. Santas in *Philosophical Review*, 1964), Irwin’s rejection of the nontechnical conception of virtue is unacceptable.

When it comes to textual evidence, it is more difficult to show where Irwin goes wrong, but on the whole he fares little better. He is able to muster evidence only from the *Lysis* 219c1–220b5, and so the question is whether or not, in this passage, Socrates commits himself “to the rejection of NTV and to a strong version of TV” (p. 85). In order to appreciate Irwin’s claims about the *Lysis*, it is necessary briefly to examine passages from the *Meno*, the *Euthydemus*, and the *Gorgias*, which afford the main evidence for the broad outlines of Socratic ethics.

⁴ NTV “Happiness is an indeterminate end for which virtue prescribes components not already chosen under another description. . . .” (p. 84).

⁵ Irwin’s evidence is examined briefly in an Appendix, below.

⁶ See also p. 78: the “CA requires” KSV.

For present purposes it is necessary to establish two rough points central to Socratic ethics: (a) actions and choices must be accounted for in light of the goods they seek to realize; and (b) the distinction between (what we can call) “weak goods” and “strong goods.” The clearest account of *a* is found in *Gorgias* 467c–468a.⁷ Here Socrates makes a distinction between three classes of things, those that are ἀγαθόν, those that are κακόν, and those that are οὔτε ἀγαθόν οὔτε κακόν (467e1–3). Wisdom, health, wealth, and so on, are called good; their opposites are bad; and things neither good nor bad—called ἃ ἐνίστε μὲν μετέχει τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἐνίστε δὲ τοῦ κακοῦ, ἐνίστε δὲ οὐδετέρου (467e7–468a1)—are sitting, walking, and so forth and such things as sticks and stones and similar things (467e4–468a4). Socrates argues that intermediates are done for the sake of (ἔνεκα) goods. We must explain the commission of an intermediate action (or the use of an intermediate object) in reference to the good it seeks to realize (468a5–b3). In this passage, Socrates does not take into consideration the possibility of doing (or using) a good for the sake of another good, or a bad for the sake of some good. But it seems that we can extract a general formula for all actions from this discussion. In all cases, according to Socrates, we do (or use) something intermediate in order to attain some good.

The account of actions Socrates gives here is made clearer in light of the—already anticipated—distinction between weak goods and strong goods. Socrates’ position is basically that *agatha* are the ends of action, chosen for themselves—because they are ὠφέλιμα and contribute to making us happy.⁸ Strong goods are these producers of benefit and so are the ends of actions and choices, while weak goods correspond to the intermediates described in the *Gorgias*—especially as they are described at 468a1. The basic idea established in the protreptic in the *Euthydemus* (esp. 278e2–282c1) and the *Meno* (87d8–89a7) is that most of the things people generally regard as good are not necessarily ὠφέλιμα, but, in order to be so, must be used properly. Thus Socrates argues that only wisdom is always good, and that these other goods (weak goods) must be used properly, used in accordance with wisdom, if they are to be beneficial (if they are to be converted into strong goods). Like the intermediates in the *Gorgias*, weak goods are good only under certain conditions, only, we can infer, when they help us to attain strong goods. The doctrine that emerges from these passages is that weak goods are not good in themselves but should be regarded as good for the sake of the strong goods they help us to attain.

These points are relatively straightforward and should be acceptable to most scholars—regardless of how one chooses to work them out in detail. These points are also supported by the evidence of *Lysis* 219c–220b. The interesting question, however, is whether this passage says *more* than our rough account of *a* and *b*. Irwin’s argument requires that two additional points be established:

- (c) The “value theorem”: If *A* and *B* are goods and *B* is chosen for the sake of *A*, then *B* is not chosen for itself, and *B* is not valued for itself but for the sake of *A*.⁹

⁷ This passage is not discussed in this connection by Irwin in his chapter on Socrates, though it is discussed briefly, along similar lines, later on (p. 117).

⁸ The problems concerning Socrates’ conception of the “beneficial” and its relationship to happiness, though central to Irwin’s account of Socrates, cannot be discussed in this essay.

⁹ The value theorem, as stated here, closely corresponds to Irwin’s LC and LG (p. 85).

Now, Irwin does not adequately demonstrate that if *B* is chosen for the sake of *A*, *B* is chosen *only* for the sake of *A* and so valued *only* for the sake of *A*.¹⁰ But this is a relatively minor point; we can let it pass and grant the value theorem. Irwin's next point, which we can call "comprehension," is far more difficult to accept. Comprehension is based heavily on *Lysis* 219c5–d1:

- (d) Comprehension: There is one final good, for the sake of which all other goods (οὐ ἔνεκα καὶ τὰ ἄλλα . . . πάντα φίλα) are chosen.

Irwin wishes to establish the existence of one final good, over and above weak goods and strong goods. Just as weak goods are chosen for the sake of strong goods (and, according to the value theorem, valued only as means to them), so strong goods are chosen for the sake of the final good—and valued only as means to it. (The continuation of Irwin's argument is, of course, the identification of εὐδαιμονία as the final good, and the subsequent deduction that virtue—like all other goods—is chosen solely as a means to εὐδαιμονία.)

It is my contention that *Lysis* 219c–220b does not support comprehension and, in fact, does little more than reiterate the rough account of Socratic goods given above. Comprehension requires two postulates: that there is only one final good, and that all other goods are chosen for its sake. Neither is established.

The belief that the passage establishes the existence of only one primary good—the πρῶτον φίλον—is based on the regress argument in 219c5–d2. If medicine is valued for the sake of health, and health for the sake of something else, and that something for the sake of something else, and so on, "we are bound to weary ourselves with going on in this way," unless we can arrive at some good valued for itself: and so the *proton philon*. But as Irwin himself admits (pp. 51–52), the argument establishes not the existence of *one proton philon* but *at least one*. This argument (like Aristotle's in *EN* 1094a18–22) does no more than demonstrate the need for some terminus of desire, without establishing any quality—including number—of this terminus. In order for us to believe that Socrates believes himself to have established one *proton philon*, we must believe Socrates to be fooled by the regress, and it is not clear that he is. There is nothing in the entire passage to demand *one proton philon*.¹¹

It seems that the language Socrates uses throughout *Lysis* 219c–220b is ambiguous. It is clear that the true friend is the end for the sake of which so-called friends are desired, but whether there is one true friend or many is not specified. Certainly, the example Socrates uses to illustrate his point (219d5–220a1) leads one to believe that the father values his son in himself, as the means to no other good, and thus that there are many *prota phila*.¹² In saying this, I am saying nothing new,¹³ and at the very least the burden of proof is upon Irwin to show that the language is not ambiguous, that Socrates be-

¹⁰ This point is addressed by Irwin, very briefly, on p. 85. His remarks require further substantiation. See *Resp.* 357b4–d2; Irwin, p. 93.

¹¹ For some points made in this paragraph, I am indebted to Kevin McTighe.

¹² See *Lys.* 210c5–d4.

¹³ See, for example, L. Versenyi, "Plato's *Lysis*," *Phronesis* 20 (1975): 193–94.

believes himself to have established the existence of the one all important *proton philon*. There is, however, one additional piece of evidence, which, to my knowledge, has not previously been noted, that tells very seriously against Irwin's case. It seems to me that one of the crucial sentences of the passage actually excludes the possibility of one final good. Because of the importance of these lines, I will reproduce them in full: ὅσα γὰρ φαμεν φίλα εἶναι ἡμῖν ἔνεκα φίλου τινὸς ἑτέρου, ὁήματι φαινόμεθα λέγοντες αὐτό· φίλον δὲ τῷ ὄντι κινδυνεύει ἐκεῖνο αὐτὸ εἶναι, εἰς ὃ πᾶσαι αὐταὶ αἰ λεγόμεναι φιλίαι τελευτῶσιν (220a7–b3).

What is striking about this sentence is φίλου τινὸς ἑτέρου in 220a7–b1. τινὸς, of course, is indefinite. By 220b2 we have shifted to the definite ἐκεῖνο αὐτό. This shift must be accounted for in translating the sentence, and so it reads—to modify Lamb's translation: "In speaking of all the things that are friends to us for the sake of some other friend, we find ourselves uttering a mere phrase; it seems that (in each particular case) the real friend is that in which these so-called friendships terminate." Thus understood the sentence does no more than reaffirm the distinction between weak goods and strong goods discussed above. To paraphrase: "Each time we speak of choosing a weak good for the sake of a strong good, we are uttering a mere phrase; in each case the (only) real good is that in which the other so-called goods terminate." Had Plato intended to say that all so-called friends terminate in *that one other friend* (the *proton philon*), he would surely have used ἐκείνου instead of τινὸς in 220b1. The fact that he did not is strong evidence that, at the very least, he was not interested in arguing for the existence of one terminus of all desire in *Lysis* 219c–220b.

Other language used throughout this passage tells less strongly against Irwin's case but certainly does not give it unambiguous support. The most plausible reading of ἃ εἶπομεν ἐκείνου ἔνεκα φίλα εἶναι in 219d3 is as a *restrictive* modifier of τᾶλλα πάντα—as opposed in the nonrestrictive modifier rendered by Lamb in his translation.¹⁴ The danger is that "all the other things *that we called friends* for the sake of that one friend may be deceiving us," not "all other things, which we called friends for the sake of that one friend." Irwin's argument clearly requires this second reading, but it is neither the only possible nor the most natural way to construe the text. Similarly, as Versenyi notes,¹⁵ that end οὐ ἔνεκα πάντα τὰ τοιαῦτα παρασκευάζεται in 219e9–220a1 does not exclude the possibility of there being many similar ends—other strong goods—also valued in themselves.

Thus, we are justified in concluding that *Lysis* 219c–220b as a whole does not establish comprehension, while, in the case of τινὸς in 220b1, it seems to exclude this possibility. The most reasonable way to interpret the entire passage is as doing little more than exploring the doctrine found in our rough account of Socratic goods. If we grant that the value theorem is established, we see that this passage goes beyond our previous account in asserting that, if an intermediate is chosen for the sake of some good, the intermediate is valued not in itself but only as a means to the good that is valued in itself. But, again, comprehension, that there is one final good for the sake of which all other goods are chosen, is not established. And so it seems that the textual evidence Irwin presents to justify attributing TV to Socrates is unable to bear this bur-

¹⁴ I owe this point to Kevin McTighe.

¹⁵ "Plato's *Lysis*."

den. Unless Irwin is able to proffer additional, new evidence, TV must be withdrawn. And, as any reader of *Plato's Moral Theory* knows, TV is central to Irwin's case. Unless he can defend it, he is not justified in moving on to argue that Socrates believes happiness to be the determinate final good for the sake of which all other goods are chosen (and valued), and thus that Socrates values virtue solely as a means to higher goods.

In closing, I think it is necessary to say something of a more general nature about Irwin's handling of his evidence. For, especially in his section on Socrates, Irwin demonstrates a lack of sensitivity to the complex nature of his materials that should be pointed out. To begin with, Plato's use of the dialogue form is given clearly insufficient treatment. Irwin tends to abstract the arguments Socrates uses from their dramatic context and to pass them off as Plato's moral theory. *Elenchos* is the Greek word for "test" or "refutation," and the Socratic *elenchos* is first and foremost a negative, critical method of refutation. Plato's most complete account of the activity of Socrates (*Ap.* 21a–23b) describes it as a mission of refutation, to disprove claims to knowledge. Irwin never discusses this passage. He neglects the negative side of the *elenchos* almost completely (see pp. 37–41). His Socrates has a fully developed moral theory which he uses the *elenchos* to *teach*. His profession of ignorance is disposed of in a footnote (p. 293, n. 1); his use of irony falls in the same note, as does the vexed question of his use of arguments he knows to be fallacious. Irwin's view of the dialogues is suggested by his extremely odd remark that the "previous agreements" mentioned by Socrates in the *Crito* (46cd, 49a) refer to agreements reached in other Socratic dialogues (p. 59.)¹⁶

Irwin's Socrates is a curious figure. His relationship to the historical Socrates is never discussed, and the reader takes him to be the Socrates of the early dialogues. Yet Irwin cites Aristotle on Socrates without compunction, without explanation (e.g., pp. 40, 42, 87). The relationship of Plato to his Socrates is never discussed. Are we to take Plato as subscribing to every sentence Socrates utters? Irwin never broaches the topic. Many of the most serious difficulties encountered in interpreting Plato are virtually ignored.

And so, though *Plato's Moral Theory* is an ingenious and in many ways a rewarding book, I think it is clear that it contains an interpretation of Socratic moral thought that is not adequately defended, and is, I suspect, indefensible. And on crucial questions of Platonic scholarship, Irwin does not fare well.

APPENDIX

On p. 72, Irwin bases his conclusion that Socrates must assume that virtue "is no more than a craft" on the following evidence.

¹⁶ It should also be noted that Irwin has a disturbing tendency to read into various dialogues certain views that, he is repeatedly forced to admit, are not actually found *in* them (e.g., pp. 142, 144, 164, 185, 311, n.15: 323, n. 63, in particular, is a serious admission).

1. *Euthyphro* 13a2–e11, 14c3–e7. In 13a2–e11, Socrates uses the analogues of various crafts to elucidate the content of piety as *θεραπεία τῶν θεῶν* and then as *ὑπρετικὴ θεοῖς*. In both cases it is seen that the analogies break down. In 14c3–e7, Socrates establishes the hypothesis that piety is an *ἐπιστήμη* of giving and asking in relationship to the gods—a hypothesis that is immediately rejected (15b6 *et. seq.*).

2. *Laches* 194c7–d9. In this passage, Irwin argues, Socrates moves from a definition of courage as “wise endurance” to one of courage as some form of knowledge, without justifying “the elimination of any mention of an affective state.” Irwin neglects to mention that the definition of courage as wise endurance has been seen to be defective (192d10–193d10), and that the new definition comes in with a new interlocutor. Socrates’ failure to pay proper attention to affective states throughout the early dialogues (i.e., the espousal of KSV) is a striking feature of his theory. But this does not necessarily bear any direct relationship to the craft analogy.

3. *Charmides* 165c4–e2. In the *Charmides*, Socrates uses the CA to elucidate temperance. Irwin neglects to mention that the passage in question ends with Critias’s protest that there are differences between temperance and the crafts that must be taken into account (165e3–166a2). To Critias’s objection Socrates gives the telling reply: *Ἀληθῆ λέγεις* (166a3). Exactly what the *Charmides* establishes is not at all clear, but it seems to damage the CA more than to support it.¹⁷

On the basis of this brief look at Irwin’s evidence, it seems clear that his conclusion that, for Socrates, all moral knowledge is craft knowledge is at best unfounded.¹⁸

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¹⁷ See, for example, R. K. Sprague, *Plato's Philosopher-King: A Study of the Theoretical Background* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), pp. 29–41; cf. Irwin, pp. 75–76.

¹⁸ I am pleased to acknowledge my gratitude to Kevin McTighe for numerous contributions to this article, both general and specific. I am also grateful to Charles Kahn for comments on an earlier draft, and to Robert W. Hall for a number of helpful suggestions.