

SOCRATES' THESIS AT PROTAGORAS 358B-C

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IN A RECENT stimulating article¹ on Socrates' argument at *Protagoras* 352a-358d Professor Vlastos put forward a new, and for me startling, interpretation of Socrates' statement at 358b7-c1 that "no one does what he does when he knows (*εἰδώς*) or believes (*οἰόμενος*) that there are better courses of action than what he is doing, and it is in his power to do them." Vlastos argued that what the statement "probably means," in its reference to belief, is "that we cannot act contrary to what we believe *when we do have knowledge*."² He considered this meaning to be a reasonable inference from (i) the fact that in his statement at 358b-c "Socrates is not advancing a new thesis but merely summing up what he thinks (with the consent of the company) has been proved in the foregoing argument (352a-357e),"³ and (ii) "the fact that there is no argument for a power-of-belief thesis"⁴ in this foregoing argument (as there would have to be, he thinks, if the distinction between knowledge and belief at 358b-c were a distinction between knowledge and "belief ungrounded in knowledge").

The thesis which is summed up at 358b-c is, according to Vlastos, the thesis, announced at 352c, that "if a person knows what is good and bad, he will not be overpowered by anything so that he does anything other than what knowledge bids him to do; knowledge is a sufficient safeguard for him." The alternative interpretation of 358b-c is that Socrates is there summing up the thesis that no one voluntarily does what he either knows or believes (without knowing) to be wrong. This is the thesis which we customarily refer to as the Socratic paradox that no one does wrong willingly. And in an article discussing that paradox I interpreted *Prt.* 358b-c as a statement of it.⁵

Vlastos's principal criticism of this interpretation is that, by ascribing to Socrates a "power-of-belief" thesis as well as a "power-of-knowledge" thesis, it ignores "the fatal disanalogy between belief and knowledge which is implied by what is said in 356d-357a." Vlastos characterises this disanalogy as one between, on the one hand, the sure control and stability which knowledge brings to our moral behaviour and, on the other hand, the "ups and downs" and the lack of "that stability of conviction so essential for moral self-control"⁶ which result from having only belief without knowledge. And the "power-of-belief" thesis which he thinks

¹ *Phoenix* 23 (1969) 71-88.

³ *Ibid.* 72, n.9.

⁵ *Phronesis* 10 (1965) 91-94.

² *Ibid.* 72 (Vlastos' italics).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Op. cit.* (above, n.1) 72-73, n.9.

irreconcilable with this disanalogy is construed by him as the thesis that belief, analogously with knowledge, has the power and command to safeguard a person against acting contrary to what he believes to be right.⁷ Hence Vlastos thinks that *Prt.* 352a-358d, while explicitly arguing that no one acts contrary to what he knows to be right, at the same time implicitly argues that there are voluntary actions contrary to what the agent believes (without knowing) to be right. My view is (i) that Socrates' argument rules out the possibility of such voluntary actions, and (ii) that the "power-of-belief" thesis propounded by Socrates, while it shows that in one respect knowledge and belief are analogous, is in no way inconsistent with the kind of "disanalogy" between them implied at 356d-357a.

On one important point Vlastos and I agree. We agree that the reference to belief at 358b-c is not a reference to "true belief," and that the statement there "could scarcely have been meant to suggest that in the absence of knowledge true opinion would do as well for the purpose of Socrates' thesis."⁸ If Socrates were suggesting this he would be suggesting what is later argued explicitly at *Meno* 97a-c, i.e., that belief, when it happens to be true, is as good as knowledge in directing a person to do what is in fact right. This argument of the *Meno* is introduced as a criticism of the thesis that virtue is knowledge. Its criticism is directed not against the claim of the thesis that knowledge of what it is right to do is a sufficient condition of doing it but against its claim that knowledge is also a necessary condition. For the *Meno* argues (97b-c) that to say that "knowledge is the *only* guide to right action" is to neglect the fact that belief, when it happens to be true, is "just as good a guide to rightness of action." I agree with Vlastos⁹ that this is a Platonic, not a Socratic, argument. And I take the argument of *Prt.* 352a ff. to be an attempt to substantiate, *inter alia*, the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge, the same thesis fundamentally as that put forward later in the *Meno* and there criticised, i.e., the thesis that in all voluntary action knowledge of what it is right to do is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of doing it. Thus there is no room for "true belief" in this argument of the *Protagoras*.¹⁰ Since Vlastos, too, excludes from his interpretation of 358b-c the notion that knowledge, though a sufficient, is not also a necessary condition of doing what is right, presumably he takes the passage to be a summing-up not merely of the

⁷*Ibid.* 72. What Vlastos means by a "power-of-belief" thesis is clear from his characterization of what he calls the "power-of-knowledge" thesis, as described at *Prt.* 352b-c.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.* 72, n.8.

¹⁰I have argued this more fully elsewhere: *The Philosophy of Socrates* (Macmillan 1968) 108-109.

thesis announced at 352c (that knowledge is a sufficient condition of doing what is right) but of the full thesis that virtue is knowledge.

Having defined the area of agreement between Vlastos and myself, it is possible to define more precisely the area of disagreement. Vlastos thinks that 358b-c is a statement of the thesis that virtue is knowledge, and of nothing more than this. Hence he construes belief in the sense of the assured belief or conviction which belongs to knowledge, and not in the sense of opinion falling short of positive knowledge. I think that Socrates' statement *includes* the thesis that virtue is knowledge, but that it adds the thesis that no one acts contrary to what he believes, without knowing, to be right. The two theses together constitute the paradox that no one does wrong willingly. Thus I construe belief in the sense of opinion which falls short of positive knowledge, and, moreover, as *false* belief (since the thesis that virtue is knowledge leaves no room for true belief in the paradox). In what follows I wish to substantiate this interpretation of belief by showing that both the argument which precedes Socrates' statement at 358b-c (354e-357e) and the argument which follows it (358d-360e) clearly imply that Socrates' distinction in that statement between knowing and believing is a distinction between knowing and falsely believing.

My understanding of the preceding part of the argument, in so far as it is relevant to the interpretation of 358b-c, is as follows:

- (1) It is popularly thought that there are acts of moral weakness which are instances of doing what is wrong (and known to be wrong) or of doing something contrary to what is right (and known to be right) (355a-b).
- (2) Against this popular view Socrates argues (355b-357e) (i) that knowing what is right is a sufficient safeguard against doing anything contrary to what is right, and (ii) that doing what is wrong implies not-knowing what is right (being "mistaken" about or "ignorant" of what is right). So that there are no instances of doing willingly what is wrong (and known to be wrong) or of doing willingly something contrary to what is right (and known to be right). So that there are no instances of acts of moral weakness as specified under (1).

Socrates now (358a-d) rounds off his argument by restating it in the summary (and more striking) form of his paradox that no one does wrong willingly. He can now say that if a person does what is wrong it cannot be the case that he knows it to be wrong (this is ruled out by 2(i)) or that he believes it to be wrong (this is ruled out by the argument of 2(ii) that if he does wrong he is "ignorant" of what is right, or, to use the definition of "ignorance" at 358c, he has a "false belief" as to what is right, i.e., he believes that it is right to do something when it is in fact wrong to do it). So that no one does what he knows or believes

to be wrong (358c, where τὰ κακά means what is “really” bad, what is known to be bad, as opposed to what is only apparently bad, what a person believes to be bad), or, in the preceding formulation, no one does other than what he knows or believes to be the better course.

Socrates’ application of his argument to the analysis of courage and cowardice (358d–360e) is confirmation that the distinction between knowledge and belief at 358b–c is the same as the earlier distinction between knowledge and ignorance.

The purpose of the first part of the analysis (358d–359e) is to show that in one important respect both the brave man and the coward are alike. Each pursues what he believes to be right. Socrates points out (359d) that since it has been shown earlier that apparent acts of moral weakness (the only apparent cases of a person doing what he believes to be wrong) are really acts done in “ignorance,” then there are no cases of a person doing what he believes to be wrong. The implication here is that a person who acts in ignorance does what he believes to be right.¹¹ So that when a person does what is in fact wrong, as well as when he does what is in fact right, he is doing what he believes to be right. Both the brave man and the coward are alike, then, in pursuing what they believe to be right and shrinking from what they believe to be wrong.

Up to this point Socrates has deliberately avoided using the distinction between knowledge and ignorance to distinguish the brave man from the coward. For he wishes to show, on the basis of the paradox he has already established, in what respect the brave man and the coward are alike. He therefore states his paradox in the form “that no one willingly pursues what he believes to be bad” (358e, 359d), using “believe” (ἡγεῖσθαι) as a term wide enough to allow him to treat as kinds of belief both the knowledge and the ignorance in terms of which he intends to distinguish the brave man from the coward.

Having established that the brave man and the coward are alike in pursuing what they believe to be right, Socrates now has to explain, from this basis, the fact that the brave man willingly does what is in fact right (going to war), whereas the coward refuses to do this. What the one pursues is “completely opposite” to what the other pursues (359e), although each does what he believes to be right. Socrates explains the difference as the difference between the man who knows what is right and the man who is ignorant of what is right (360a–d).

Thus (i) the belief which figures in the formula “that no one willingly pursues what he believes to be wrong” at 358e and 359d is now divided into knowledge and ignorance, and (ii) this ignorance is identifiable with the false belief that it is right to do what is in fact wrong. Moreover,

¹¹Cf. *Meno* 77d–e.

in restating his paradox in the formula of 358e and 359d, Socrates explicitly refers to the conclusions of the earlier discussion (as stated at 358b–d), thus identifying the paradox as expressed in the formula of 358e and 359d with the thesis stated at 358b7–c1 and 358c6–d2. This confirms that the distinction between knowing and believing at 358b7 is a distinction between knowing and falsely believing.

It follows from this interpretation that the wrongdoing referred to in the paradox that no one does wrong willingly is to be understood neither in an exclusively objective nor in an exclusively subjective sense. Admittedly the brief formulations of the paradox, whether (i) “no one does wrong willingly” (*Prt.* 345d) or (ii) “no one willingly pursues what he believes to be wrong” (*Prt.* 358c7–d2, 358e, 359d), readily suggest these exclusive interpretations. It is easy to take (i) to be a succinct statement of the thesis that no one willingly does what he knows, as an objective truth, to be wrong, the negative counterpart of the thesis that virtue is knowledge; the fact that Plato later re-interpreted¹² the Socratic paradox in this exclusively objective sense makes it especially tempting to read this sense into the *Protagoras*. It is also easy to take (ii) to be the thesis that no one willingly does what he subjectively judges to be wrong for him. But the interpretation of the paradox in terms of the distinction between knowing and falsely believing shows that the paradox embraces both the objective and subjective senses of wrongdoing. The paradox assumes that any voluntary moral action is either objectively right or objectively wrong. And it asserts (a) that in the former case the agent knows what is right and invariably acts in accordance with his knowledge, and (b) that in the latter case the agent falsely believes that it is right for him to do a thing and invariably acts in accordance with his belief.

Aristotle confirms that the thesis of the *Protagoras* “that no one willingly does what he believes to be wrong” is properly interpreted in this way, and that this interpretation represents Socrates’ own interpretation of his paradox. In his discussion of the problem of ἀκρασία in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle examines (7.2), with obvious reference to the *Protagoras*, Socrates’ denial that there are any cases of ἀκρασία. He expresses Socrates’ views on this problem as (a) the view that it is impossible to act contrary to what is known to be best (1145b22–24), and (b) the view that, if a person does act contrary to what is best, then he is acting through ignorance, and it is never the case that he judges that he is acting contrary to what is best (b26–27). These are the two views which, as we have just seen, make up the paradox that no one does wrong willingly; thus views (a) and (b) correspond to assertions (a) and (b) at the end of the preceding paragraph.

¹²Initially at *Grg.* 509e.

Moreover, in going on to consider what truth there is, if any, in Socrates' apparently unacceptable views, Aristotle makes clear that Socrates' denial that there are cases of *ἀκρασία* is a denial not only that there are actions contrary to what the agent knows to be best, but also that there are actions contrary to what the agent believes, without knowing, to be best. Aristotle says (b31–35) that there are some who concede some points (*τὰ μὲν*), but not other points (*τὰ δ' οὐ*). It is clear that both *τὰ μὲν* and *τὰ δέ* refer to Socrates' views.¹³ And Aristotle specifies these as (i) the view that nothing is stronger than knowledge, and (ii) the view that no one acts contrary to what has seemed to him the better course, contrary to his opinion (*δόξα*) as to the better course. Thus Aristotle ascribes to Socrates a "power-of-belief" thesis.

This thesis, so far from ignoring the great gulf between knowledge and belief as guides to morally right behaviour, serves to emphasize the supreme importance of acquiring moral knowledge. Socrates recognised that the power of belief comes from the invariable conjunction of the belief that it is best to do a certain thing with the desire to do this thing more than anything else. And it is precisely because he was so acutely aware of the great moral danger belonging to this conjunction in belief of power and ignorance that he so urgently stressed the need to possess moral knowledge.

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¹³Sir David Ross' Oxford translation of the sentence makes this explicit.