

Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge

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Socrates as portrayed in the Platonic dialogues is deeply preoccupied with the question of how one ought to live. He devotes his life to the pursuit of moral knowledge. And yet, while he seems to be profoundly committed to the importance of moral knowledge, he characterises himself emphatically as someone who does not at all know what answers are to be given to many of the fundamental questions of morality. This remarkable disavowal of knowledge has led some of Socrates' interlocutors and also many interpreters of the dialogues to believe that Socrates is insincere and that his professed ignorance is a mere pretence used to elicit answers from others – the so-called 'Socratic irony'.

The purpose of this class is to examine Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and to determine whether it is part of a coherent, compelling and intellectually sincere philosophy. To achieve this aim we shall address a number of key questions. What exactly does Socrates mean when he claims not to know something? And what kinds of things does he claim not to know? How can Socrates coherently espouse substantial moral views and make important moral decisions while also saying that he does not know the answers to the fundamental questions of morality? How can he take himself to be in a position to criticise and refute his interlocutors' answers to moral questions when he considers his knowledge of the right answers to be so limited? Moreover, why is it so important for Socrates to keep searching for answers while he can apparently live a moral life without ever finding them? And why does Socrates always search together with others, even though he finds time and again that his interlocutors do not know the answers either? Finally, what role does Socrates' disavowal of knowledge play within Plato's dialogues and why does the prominence of this role generally speaking decrease as one moves on from the earlier dialogues through the middle period to the later dialogues? We shall try to answer these questions by examining in depth a range of passages from Plato's dialogues in which Socrates reflects on his own epistemic state and his philosophical practice.

Translations and Secondary Literature

We shall study Plato's works in English translation. No knowledge of the Greek will be presupposed. Good English translations of Plato's dialogues are the ones collected in J.M. Cooper (ed.) (1997). *Plato. Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett. While we shall be studying passages throughout the corpus, some works which will be particularly central are *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, *Symposium*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic I*, and *Theaetetus*.