Professor Vlastos, in a recent and most penetrating article on Socrates with the title 'The Paradox of Socrates', claims that Socrates' 'lack of interest', as he puts it, in ordinary empirical facts, — facts, especially, to do with how people behave — explains why Socrates stuck to the view that virtue was knowledge and, also, to the corollary of that view, which is that a person who has the required knowledge cannot but fail to act in accordance with that knowledge. Vlastos goes on to say, and I quote:

But to explain Socrates' failure merely in this way would be itself to concede more to Socrates' theory than the facts allow, for it would be to explain it as only a failure of knowledge. I will put all my cards on the table and say that behind this lay a failure of love. In saying this I am not taking over-seriously the prickly exterior and the pugilist's postures. I have already argued that he does care for the souls of his fellows. But the care is limited and conditional. If men's souls are to be saved, they must be saved his way. And when he sees they cannot, he watches them go down the road to perdition with regret but without anguish. Jesus wept for Jerusalem. Socrates warns Athens, scolds, exhorts it, condemns it. But he has no tears for it. One wonders if Plato, who raged against Athens, did not love it more in his rage and hate than ever did Socrates in his sad and good-tempered rebukes. One feels that there is a last zone of frigidity in the soul of the great erotic; had he loved his fellows more, he could hardly have laid on them the burdens of his 'despotic logic', impossible to be borne.

(The phrase 'despotic logic' is an adaptation of a phrase used by Nietzsche in his book Birth of Tragedy. Nietzsche referred to Socrates as 'this despotic logician') (p.16)

Vlastos has written about Plato and Socrates for many years with great imagination, intelligence and sympathy. One can feel certain, therefore, that the above remarks are not the outcome of any casual observation; on the contrary, they must, or at least they may be, the outcome of a long and growing understanding of Socrates, the man and the philosopher.

In this paper I shall argue, nonetheless, that Vlastos' general claim in the above passage is mistaken. I want to do that not because I want to do any work of restoration on one of the traditional portraits of Socrates (and there are several of these portraits), but rather because I think that Vlastos' claim in-

volves a misunderstanding of Socrates’ philosophical method. I want to discuss Socrates’ method not merely for scholarly reasons; for, I believe, Socrates’ method of doing (and teaching) philosophy reflects a view of the activity of philosophizing which is still both viable and to a large extent right. Even if this is not so, still Socrates’ influence on the art of teaching philosophy has been considerable. It would, in any case, be worthwhile to examine whether this Socratic influence underlies and perhaps explains the impression that many people, including students, have of philosophy — the impression that this subject, in some of its manifestations, does not care deeply enough for the souls of human beings. Certain existentialist writers (Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel and Unamuno, for example) have talked about philosophy along these lines.

The substance of Vlastos’ claim is this: the Socratic ‘paradox’ that no man does evil knowingly (to concentrate on one of Socrates’ famous ‘paradoxes’ in ethics) is the outcome of a certain systematic misperception, a sort of blindness, about how people behave in situations of various kinds, e.g. in situations of moral conflict (where they are likely to experience things like fear or a strong temptation). This systematic misperception, however, was not simply due to any general misguidance in Socrates’ mind — which misguidance was produced by, say ‘unscientific’ observations of people’s behaviour, or by a sheer lack of knowledge of certain operating factors in people’s behaviour. It was, deep down, due to Socrates’ attitude to his fellow human beings. Involved in that attitude was a failure of love. If Socrates cared more for his fellows, he would have come to perceive more of the realities which go on in people’s lives; he would have realised, for example, that people sometimes act in irrational ways even though they know only too well that their behaviour is irrational. There is, it would seem, an air of a priori detachment in Socrates’ generalisations about virtue; the detachment is due to the fact that he was not sufficiently in touch with people; and he was not in touch because he didn’t care, he didn’t love people deeply enough.

Before proceeding to some aspects of Socrates’ philosophical method I would like to make some general observations about Vlastos’ claim. It is true that the absence of real love for one’s fellows can produce a kind of blindness about human beings — about what they want, what they fear, and so on. Errors in theories about human nature need not be intellectual in origin; in some cases, the errors may be traceable to certain psychological attitudes buried but alive in the theorist in question. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that love for one’s fellows, even when it is accompanied by anguish for their weaknesses and follies, may produce a kind of idealisation of human behaviour. John loves Jane ‘with all his heart’, as we might put it, and mean it too. Jane has had certain difficulties in her living. She meets Bill and after this,

2. I put this in inverted commas because I do not want to beg questions about Socrates’ view.
that and the other, she sleeps with Bill. John becomes aware of the evidence; but he cannot bring himself to believe that Jane has been unfaithful to him. He loves Jane so much that he wants to believe that he is still her one and only love. Now, unless there is some important difference in kind between the love John has for Jane and the love one may have for one’s fellow human beings, then a certain amount of idealisation may take place in the second case. If that is so, then it would not be absurd to suppose that Christ’s love for his fellow human beings was such that Christ was, perhaps, inclined to believe that all human beings without exception were capable of loving their neighbours, no matter how bad their neighbours might be and no matter what hurt such neighbours might inflict on them. In the same way, Socrates’ view that no human being does evil knowingly may be the outcome of a certain amount of idealisation of human beings in general — which idealisation was, in turn, produced by an underlying warm-hearted love for his fellows (despite Socrates’ prickly exterior and pugilistic postures). Socrates’ love for his fellow Greeks may have been such that he could not bring himself to believe, really believe, that any Greek would know that a certain action was, all things taken into account, bad, but who would nonetheless go ahead and do that bad thing. I do not think this is an absurd supposition. I cannot do much with it, however, because we know so very little about Socrates’ personal life. I only mention the supposition as a counter to Vlastos’ view. According to Vlastos’ view, Socrates was rather blind, rather out of touch with human beings because he did not love them enough. But this need not be so: for it may be that one becomes rather blind, as it were, about human beings, about what they do and want and decide, etc., as a result of an outgoing and generous love for them. For that, that generous loving, may produce a certain amount of idealisation.

Let me assume, as Vlastos and many other commentators do, that Plato, especially in the early dialogues, gives a good and fairly true account of Socrates’ philosophical method. The dialogues have this kind of structure: Socrates is the main speaker. Socrates asks questions of this form: ‘What is courage?’ ‘What is virtue?’ ‘What is knowledge?’ Other speakers in these dialogues try to answer these Socratic questions. Quite often, the same speaker will suggest at least four different answers — sometimes indeed anything up to seven answers. Most of the answers are fairly sensible and worthwhile. Socrates examines, he criticises his fellows; sometimes he leads them into various logical traps; these traps seem to hurt, for they are often in the form of contradictions. At the end he says things like this: ‘Well, now that we’ve got rid of the mistakes, we shall — we should — know better next time’. But there is no next time; Socrates himself never gives the answer to his ‘What is X?’ question. To top it all we have, here and there, tones of irony by Socrates. So it does look as if we have despotic logic and a failure of the deeper kind of love.

Such an impression is understandable; indeed, many Athenians in the
Agora, the Athenian market place, may have felt something like this about Socrates. Still, the impression may not fit the facts. The impression overlooks one of Socrates’ central aims in these dialogues. What I believe Socrates was trying, in the main, to do in these dialogues was to produce self-knowledge in his fellows, whether such persons were Meno, Euthyphro or Thrasymachus.3 What do I mean by self-knowledge? I mean something like this: a truthful, critical, examining awareness of one’s values and opinions. ‘The unexamined life is not worth living by man’ said Socrates in the Apology (38a). By that statement of course Socrates did not mean that the unexamined life should end itself by suicide; he meant that the unexamined life was not as good as, or as worthy as, that life in which there was some examination. And the more of that examination, the better.

If Socrates was trying to bring about self-knowledge in the sense described above, then his actions as a teacher were very good and sound attempts at achieving results. He had to do a lot of critical analysis of people’s opinions; he had to probe and if necessary expose the false or dubious currency in people’s minds — whether the currency was in the form of an opinion, or in the form of a muddled piece of thinking about an opinion.

His ‘negative’ method of elenchos was educationally necessary. Why? People do not need an endorsement, loving or otherwise, of their opinions, or of their style of thinking — even though they may, sometimes, ask for an endorsement. People are already committed to their opinions; and in many cases committed to them because the opinions are theirs. It should also be noted that people often believe their opinions are their own little creations; but they are wrong in many cases. The opinions people hold are often reflections of conventional or otherwise fashionable views, whether these are political, scientific, ideological, or whatever. In the case of the Athenians, some of the opinions were prose renditions picked up somehow from the established ‘scriptures’ — by that I mean the memorable, magical sayings of the poets and tragedians.

Socrates did not want people to abandon their opinions at the drop of a hat; certainly not to drop them in the way that some sophists in Athens were succeeding, with their twisty arguments, in causing people to drop their opinions and swallow new and allegedly ‘better’ ones. We do not know whether Socrates thought that most people’s opinions were false; certainly he thought that many people’s opinions were groundless. He wanted to help people to

3. On re-reading Vlastos’ article I see that he makes what I believe is the same observation. Speaking of the Euthyphro, Vlastos says that Socrates was trying to help Euthyphro become ‘his own critic, his own teacher’. So it would certainly not be true that Vlastos overlooked this aspect of Socrates’ philosophical method. However, I shall be placing a much greater emphasis on this aspect than Vlastos does and, further, I shall argue that this aspect explains the appearance of a ‘failure of love’ in Socrates; but the appearance may well be a false one.
revise and improve their opinions so that they could stand up to challenge. That is one reason why Socrates questioned people in the way that he did.

Socrates was not out to endorse people’s opinions. Yet he did encourage people to voice them. In the early dialogues (the *Laches* is one example) Socrates often encourages people to voice their opinions; and in several places he also elaborates on a person’s behalf.

It is very hard to know whether Socrates succeeded in what he set out to do with his fellows in Athens. It is even harder to know whether love, with or without anguish, would really have done the job better — that is, would have helped people in Athens become more self-knowing. Many of us have had experiences of what we call love; but this is not to say that we know what love itself is. If many of us do not know what love itself is, then we are not in a position to say that when *A* loves *B* and wants to help *B* in every way, including the way to self-knowledge, that *A* will succeed in helping *B* in those ways. We believe that Jesus tried. He tried hard; let us take that for granted. Did Jesus succeed? It would be nice to know the answer to that one. (I don’t think I know the answer.) People are very hard to change and it is not easy to shift them, not even when you cry for them.

We could perhaps put it this way: Socrates wanted people to become more self-knowing, more self-examining; to get that result, Socrates may have believed that the experience of being corrected (*in public* — out in the Market Place) was a necessary experience. (I do not think that that belief was unreasonable.) Why? Because people need to realise that making a mistake is not a personal or an intellectual calamity; nor is it a humiliation, or a crime, or a sin for which the healing effect of love is necessary. Socrates with his elenchic probings exposes the mistake or the confused piece of thinking: this is necessary if the learner is to make any progress in self-knowledge. For it is only when the learner sees the mistake or the confusion displayed before his eyes that he will or, hopefully, may realise that all is not well with his habitual thinking — and thereafter develop an examining attitude towards his own opinions.

I said above that I do not know what love itself is. I do not know what the nature of love is — even though I have experienced what I believe is love. The knowing may come one day — perhaps when I grow older. Still, I believe that things like affection, holding hands, teasing in a friendly way, winking in a smiley way, are not unrelated to love, whatever the nature of love itself is. If that belief is true, then Plato, in the early dialogues and in the *Theaetetus*, gives us quite a variety of that kind of behaviour in Socrates. Socrates does hold hands with some of his boys, and winks at some of the prettier ones. But he doesn’t seem to do that when business is on: when, that is, he is onto something and wants his student to follow the thing through. It is not that Socrates is over-serious on those occasions: it is just that Socrates wants his
student to concentrate on what is going on. And he does not want to dilute that concentration by being affectionate at the same time.

Before I proceed to the next point it might be objected that Vlastos does take account of Socrates’ affectionate behaviour towards his fellows. He does, after all, describe Socrates as a ‘great erotic’. But at the same time he says quite emphatically that there was a failure of love in Socrates. Therefore, for Vlastos, being a great erotic must be one thing; loving people must be quite definitely another thing. I do not think the difference is as absolute as that. Some kinds of erotic behaviour may well be expressions of love; others may not — witness perhaps Alcibiades’ vain erotic solicitations towards Socrates in the Symposium (219-cd).

To imply, as Vlastos seems to imply, that all of Socrates’ warm gestures towards his fellows were implicit or otherwise manifestations of eroticism and that therefore they had nothing to do with love would be a mistake.

It may be said that people in Athens did not just proclaim their opinions, or their values, to Socrates. For example, Meno asks Socrates the question ‘Can virtue be taught?’ and that really is a worrying question, especially if you have children. Laches asks the question ‘How can I teach my boy to be courageous?’ and that is a good question — in more senses than one. Sometimes people came to Socrates with genuine uncertainties. Yet Socrates does not deal directly with these questions and uncertainties. What does he do? He examines his questioners’ views on all sorts of related matters and appears to get them to see that their views are confused. During these proceedings, Socrates asks his typical central question like ‘What is virtue in and by itself?’ At the end of these proceedings, Socrates says things of this sort ‘Now that we see we don’t know, whereas before we thought we knew, now that we are puzzled (in a state of ἀπόρια) — we shall be better able to enquire into the truth of things’. Socrates seems to believe that his fellows will think better about this, that and the other, having had a dose of the experience of puzzlement out there in the sun, in the Market Place. I do not know whether Socrates’ belief is true. But why did Socrates believe that sheer puzzlement was a good dose of medicine for a person’s thinking? One answer, I think, is this: puzzlement gets people to look into certain presuppositions or assumptions which are implied or entailed by their thinking or opining; the presuppositions or assumptions are buried under, as it were: it takes some shivery puzzlement to dig these up — especially if the digging has to be done by a person on his own thinking or opining. Again, this was not, I think, an unreasonable view to hang onto. G. E. Moore did, I believe, hold a view which was not so different from Socrates’ view. He tried rather hard to dig out some of the assumptions and presuppositions lying under such tricky questions as ‘Could a person act otherwise than in the way he did?’ or ‘Do we perceive an external world?’.

G. E. Moore did not answer such questions very directly, not even when the
questioner was his own dear wife. There was a slow moving strategy of patient but exact analysis involved in G. E. Moore's way of answering questions which some people, including professional philosophers, have found difficult to follow in places. Does that make G. E. Moore a shade or two despotic?

Take another example: Ludwig Wittgenstein. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein certainly agonised over a hundred and one different questions, some of which were really hard. Like Socrates, Wittgenstein didn’t answer some questions very directly because he believed that questions had things buried under them (especially when they were asked by professional philosophers), and Wittgenstein wanted to get at those things. Wittgenstein has been called arrogant. I take it that there isn’t much conceptual difference between the predicates 'arrogant' and 'despotic' — if there is, it might be a rather thinnish difference. Should one call Ludwig arrogant? The man may have had certain stiff ways about him; but it is a fact that very often people are stiffish because they are shy — or because of other reasons which have nothing to do with arrogance. Perhaps Wittgenstein has been called arrogant because of the way he writes philosophy: in the *Investigations*, for example, many entries sound like commands. But this is to misunderstand what Wittgenstein is doing: he is not commanding — he is *calling*, he is directly *addressing* the reader (who in most cases would be a professional philosopher) and he is trying to liberate the reader from certain prevailing philosophical prejudices and he is trying to direct his attention to a *new* way of looking at things. Such an approach or style of writing is not necessarily the product of arrogance. It may be the product of philosophical passion.

To return to Socrates and the early dialogues by Plato. There is a further reason which, I believe, arrests Socrates' temptation to answer people's questions directly, namely this: Greece produced philosophers before Socrates — what the books describe as the 'pre-Socratic' philosophers. These pre-Socratic philosophers had a habit of putting things in neat, 'laconic', well-rounded ways. Now there was something *magnetic* about utterances like that: what I mean by this is that a good many people in Greece believe that these utterances seized, in one good go, the nature of reality — including the nature of the believers. Well, Socrates believed that such magnetic utterances did not do the seizing in question; he believed that such utterances *misled* people's thinking in all sorts of ways. So what does he do? He avoids giving such quick, laconic answers to his questioners — even though some of the old utterances, which people were hankering after, sounded wise and might have sounded true, too, to some of the people. Instead Socrates answers questions by examining various presuppositions and assumptions. Does this indicate a despotic attitude in the man? It is indeed very doubtful that it does.

Vlastos suggested a contrast between Socrates on the one hand, and Jesus on the other. Vlastos referred to the fact that Jesus wept for Jerusalem. But
Jesus did other things as well. In his incredible and brilliant career as a preacher Jesus came out with an astonishing number of commands (‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’, ‘Beware of Satan’ etc.) We do not know how these commands were issued — whether they were voiced gently or whether they were said in a peremptory way. But whatever their perlocutionary flavour may have been they are still, both in their content and their form, unqualified commands — Jesus tells people what they should do in their lives because Jesus knows what people should do in their lives. It would not be outrageous to suggest that Jesus was at least incipiently despotic, for the habit of coming out with commands is a pretty reliable (though not a necessary) sign of a despot. Socrates, on the other hand, never comes out with commands though he does challenge people to think hard and to get to the bottom of things. But challenging people in this way is by no means a sufficient reason for calling Socrates’ logic (or reasoning) ‘despotic’ — not unless one confuses the robust, incisive and demanding activity of a highly original and creative intelligence with ‘despotism’.

Once again let us return to the early dialogues. Socrates does not answer people’s questions directly. He engages the student’s mind by posing further questions, following consequences of various replies, drawing attention to circularities in people’s reasoning, or to contradictions, and sometimes indeed to logical paradoxes — in short, by engaging the student’s mind on a dialectical journey. Now it is true that after a certain point of this dialectical journey one feels that the student, say Meno or Euthyphro, or Laches, is no longer in tune with Socrates’ abstract level of discussion; but this alone does not make Socrates into a despotic logician, as Nietzsche claimed in his Birth of Tragedy. Even if Socrates’ ‘logic’ was, as Vlastos claims, ‘impossible to be borne’ by many of his fellows, this is not entirely surprising. Socrates was, after all, introducing a new method and a new conceptual key (involving among other things the idea of invisible, purely abstract, essences) into philosophy and this was at odds with many of the prevailing Athenian notions as to what philosophy was about. Indeed, if the criterion of despotism in a man is the relative lack of understanding to be found in his audience, then Christ himself could well be described as a despotic moralist. For Jesus Christ delivered many commands embodying a moral point, a vision and an insight which a great many of his fellows in Israel failed consistently to understand, let alone put into practice. (The parables are not allegorical bed-time stories in which the challenge of the new moral vision is watered down. I believe that Jesus never watered down the demands of his new morality. The parables are stories in which the moral point is illustrated in a telling way — but this is not to say that the point itself is made softer, for ordinary human consumption.)

I come now to Socrates’ irony. Paradoxically enough, I shall be claiming that Socrates’ irony embodied his philosophical approach possibly at its best
and that his irony was, or at least could be, one way in which he showed concern for the souls of his students — where the concern was not necessarily limited and conditional, as Vlastos claimed. There are different ways in which people can be ironic. Here are two: (1) someone is ironic because he wants to ridicule or sting somebody. A frontal attack is too risky. So the attack is couched in indirect, ironic talk. (2) Someone is ironic because he wants to assert his superiority over somebody else. To do so explicitly is to sound vain. So one proceeds sideways by investing one’s talk with tones of irony.

Socrates’ irony is quite a different species of thing from the cases described above. His irony never stings (Plato’s does, sometimes, e.g., when he talks of democracy in the Republic cf. 557 c–e) nor does it express any attitude of malice or superiority. On the contrary, his irony is gentle, humorous, and sometimes it is expressed in vivid metaphors. What is the nature of Socrates’ irony? One characteristic form which his irony takes is this: let ‘p’ stand for a proposition stating a person’s, say Euthyphro’s, opinion on something. In the course of his dialectical talk, Socrates asserts ‘p’ ironically; that is, he makes out to Euthyphro that ‘p’ holds, or might conceivably hold. (For example, Socrates says, in response to Euthyphro’s opinion (7a) that piety is that which is dear to the gods, and impiety that which is not dear to them, ‘Very good Euthyphro, you have now given me the sort of answer which I wanted. But whether what you say is true or not I cannot as yet tell, although I make no doubt that you will go on to prove the truth of your words.’)

Socrates then proceeds to bring out certain difficulties, and later certain absurdities entailed by ‘p’. At the end he says in effect ‘So we were wrong, Euthyphro, to say that “p”’. (In the dialogue, Socrates says (10e) ‘Then, that which is dear to the gods, Euthyphro, is not holy, nor is that which is holy dear to the gods: but they are two different things.’ Euthyphro is a bit puzzled, so Socrates goes on to say: ‘I mean to say that the holy has been acknowledged by us to be loved because it is holy, not to be holy because it is loved.’)

What has Socrates achieved by this form of irony? The following: he has got Euthyphro himself to realise that ‘p’ at most is doubtful. That is to say, the mistake, or the muddled thinking, involved in asserting ‘p’ has homed in on Euthyphro’s own mind. (That is assuming that Euthyphro is a willing learner.) Perhaps what I am driving at is not very clear. Let me try to put it this way: when Socrates himself states ‘p’ with his quiet, gentle irony, Euthyphro is for a while taken in. He feels something like this: “p”, my opinion, seems to be all right; after all, Socrates is asserting it, and amplifying it too on my behalf. Then, of course, Socrates brings out the difficulties and absurdities. What happens now? Euthyphro sees his very own opinion, which has been co-asserted by Socrates, come to grief before his eyes: in this way, the mistake or the muddle homes in.

Socrates’ procedure here is like a reductio ad absurdum argument. Only in-
stead of conditionally asserting ‘p’ for one of the premises, Socrates’ says ‘p’ ironically. Socrates’ ‘p’s are not explicitly conditional; they are silently and implicitly conditional through his clever use of irony. For that very reason I claim that his arguments are philosophically more effective: by his use of irony, Socrates is helping his fellows to see their mistakes or their muddled thinking ‘from within’ (*Theaetetus* 150d). The art of the midwife is such that, when necessary, points are pressed with strokes of sweet irony.

On the lighter and more mischievous side, Socrates’ irony can be nice fun when it is directed at himself. W. K. C. Guthrie, in his recent book on Socrates, brings together several instances (drawn from Plato and other sources) of this self-directed humorous irony (cf. pp.66-68). On p.67 Guthrie translates a section of Xenophon’s *Symposium*, in which Socrates tries to prove that he, of all Athenians, is more beautiful than Critobulus, who was evidently a very good-looking young man. We all know, thanks to Aristotle and others, that Socrates had a snub nose; but that kind of nose was, according to Socrates, a beautiful organ to have and use. At one stage, Critobulus asks rather impatiently: ‘All right, but which of our noses is the more beautiful?’ Socrates replies: ‘Mine, I should say, if the Gods gave us noses to smell with, for your nostrils point to the earth, but mine are spread out widely to receive odours from every quarter.’ Critobulus then asks desperately: ‘But how can a snub nose be more beautiful than a straight one?’ ‘Because’, Socrates concludes, ‘it does not get in the way, but allows the eyes to see what they will, whereas a high bridge walls them off as if to spite them.’

A man who addresses his occasional irony not only to others, in order to teach them something, but also to himself, in order to entertain others, is not, *prima facie* at least, a man whose soul is shrunk or dampened deep inside with a zone of frigidity. Vlastos’ proposal should be reconsidered. An ironical and humorous self-exposure does not I think correlate with a concealed region of ice in the soul; if it correlates with anything, it does, I would suggest, correlate with a concealed glowing warmth — like charcoal burning under the ashes in the grate.

Socrates must have influenced Plato in a number of ways, for Plato was deeply fond of Socrates. I believe that Plato learned something from Socrates’ use of irony — especially when it was self-directed. I would like to say something brief about this.

There are several places in the dialogues where Plato writes about his theory of Forms in a quiet, ironic way. In the *Phaedo* (100b) he refers to the theory of Forms as that ‘much-trumpeted’ theory (τά πολυθρύλητα). A stream of gentle, wise irony runs through the *Parmenides*, especially Part I. Shots of irony can be detected in sections of the *Sophist*. There is even irony involved in the introduction to the Simile of the Sun in the *Republic* (508-9), about which

a great amount of exegetical ink has been spilled.

It might be said that this kind of self-directed irony is a rather perverse phenomenon. What is Plato doing? On the one hand, he will give reasons in support of his theory of Forms; on the other, and in a different context, he will report and handle his central metaphysical theory with undertones of irony. What is going on? Is Plato serious about his theory of Forms or not? Is he merely entertaining his audience? Is he trying, in an indirect way, to endear himself to his audience? Or is Plato being diabolically superior about his central theory, and treating his audience in the Academy as a collection of second-rate thinkers? Given Plato’s range of intelligence and talents, anything is possible.

I do not want to beg psychological-cum-historical questions too readily. I suggest, however, the following explanation of self-directed irony in Plato. The self-directed irony signifies that Plato was detached about his theory of Forms; that is, he was not intellectually magnetised by his own theory, even though he put years of work into its construction and elaboration. This is not the place to discuss the very difficult question whether Plato abandoned his theory of Forms after his far-reaching criticisms of the theory in Parmenides, Part I, or to account for the re-appearance of the theory in its full regalia in the Timaeus and in the 7th Epistle, both of which are thought to be later writings by nearly all commentators (except Owen and Ryle). All I am pointing out is that there is evidence, going back to the Phaedo, that Plato had an attitude of intellectual detachment about his theory of Forms. The detachment, which was indicated by talking in an ironic way, does not mean that Plato had serious doubts about his theory of Forms; or at least it leaves that question open as far as Plato’s old age is concerned. Let me conclude this section by giving an example which shows that it is possible for a person to have an attitude of intellectual detachment about one of his creations, without having any doubts about that creation and without necessarily implying any criticism of it.

Imagine Rembrandt doing a portrait of his wife. In the portrait, the wife is sitting in an old chair, knitting. A week later, when the portrait is finished, Rembrandt goes to his studio to look at the portrait. Yes, the portrait is right, just right. But Rembrandt moves a bit further back and has another look. This time he raises his thick eyebrows; after a while one notes an imponderable smile of irony in Rembrandt’s looking. It is as if he is saying to himself, or thinking to himself: ‘So you think this is it? Do you now? But her hands, the way she folds the tablecloth . . . ’ Rembrandt is not finding fault with the portrait as it is — he is not criticizing it. The style, and the execution of it in the portrait, are right: that’s the way to paint the wife while she knits. But there is more to the wife than what appears in the portrait: there is, for example, something about the way she folds the tablecloth that is not brought out in this portrait, even though there is nothing wrong with this portrait as it stands.
In this example, Rembrandt is resolved not to be captivated by his style of painting in this portrait, even though he finds no fault with that style. He expresses that resolution by smiling ironically at his present style or technique. Likewise, Plato, by referring to his theory of Forms with undertones of irony, indicates his resolve not to be intellectually captivated by his theory, no matter what the metaphysical and epistemological attractions in the theory. Such detachment, which was made evident through his use of irony, was a remarkable intellectual achievement; and this was partly at any rate due to the influence of Socrates' rich and versatile use of irony.

This paper started with a long quotation from Vlastos, in which Socrates and Jesus were compared. Vlastos claimed that there was a failure of love in Socrates. It was alleged that Socrates, because of his cold idiosyncrasy or intellectual despotism, was not sufficiently in touch with people. Let us now give more body to this point: when people do philosophy they experience all sorts of difficulties, intellectual, psychological, etc. It might be said that Socrates does not seem to care sufficiently about this common, everyday fact about people. If he cared more, he would have shown greater concern for his students. So, if Socrates cared more, he would have been or would have become more aware of real people and all the difficulties, the intellectual and psychological pains which they experience; and he would have done something about that: he would have diluted his high ('despotic') intellectual or logical standards, or at least applied them less frequently; he would have comforted the people he was dealing with or tried at least to heal them by whatever means were at his disposal. Does Socrates ever do that? The answer is no. So why go on?

Yet, I wonder — and not merely speculatively, either. I think this is a false observation of Socrates' behaviour. Consider Phaedo 88c–91c. The context of the passage is this: Socrates and his fellows have been trying out a number of arguments on the immortality of the soul; the arguments have collapsed. Socrates as always exhorts his fellows not to give up (a point which Vlastos, of course, notes). Then Socrates says (89d):

'But first let us take care that we avoid a danger.'
'Of what nature?' Phaedo asks.
'Let us become misologists', he replied: 'No worse thing can befall a man than this. For as there are misanthropists or haters of mankind, there are also misologists or haters of argument, and both spring from the same cause, which is ignorance of the world.'

Now that shows concern. What Socrates is talking about are certain intellectual dangers which may befall those who try, and keep on trying, to solve a problem but who are not making much progress. He is saying this: beware of misology — beware of the temptation to hate the art of reasoning — madden-
ingly difficult though it is.

But what about the difficulties actually experienced on the way? Socrates does not seem to be sufficiently aware of them. He says nothing (or precious little) about them. His silence shows that he is not sufficiently concerned. — Does it? Consider a familiar example — the example of a scout master. (Scout masters invariably produce a laugh. Well, let us laugh. But let us not allow the laughter to conceal a point about their way of life — if there is one.) The scout master has a task on his hands; he believes that there is educational value in the achievement of the task; the task is to lead the boys through some rough terrain in the bush; the target is to get to the top of the hill. Now there are some real difficulties, physical and psychological, involved in the climb. The boys are on the way, and they are all experiencing some of the difficulties — getting tired, being bothered by the heat or the rain, sliding, etc. The scout master, who is also climbing, keeps an eye on the boys, and notes the difficulties. But he never says a word about the difficulties. He might crack a joke about the weather, or talk about the camping next week — but, somehow, one senses that the scout master won't talk about the difficulties. (Even though he may be experiencing a good many of them himself: he may be in his fifties and suffering from arthritis in one of his legs.) One of the boys trips and hurts his knee: but no comfort, no healing behaviour from the scout master, and certainly no talk about not climbing to the top of the hill. The only pertinent talk from the scout master is about the dangers involved in climbing the steep hill (just as Socrates' only pertinent talk is about the dangers of misology). Does this show that the scout master is not concerned about the boys? May it not show the very opposite?

Scout masters, it might be said, are hanging on to 'old-fashioned' theories of education. In that case, let us talk about Jesus. Let us ask: what was his theory of education? What was Christ's view of 'salvation' as the theologians would put it? Christ was concerned about his fellows; he experienced real depths of anguish for them. How does he proceed? I think one answer to our question is: Christ does things, he acts. He washes people's feet, he talks to prostitutes, he even loves Judas. But does Christ ever talk about the difficulties? And, there are difficulties: there's a beast next door, mean and calculating, and Christ tells me to love the beast. (He doesn't just 'tell' me; he commands me to love, as we noted before). Was Christ unaware of the difficulties? Did Christ think that people were potential angels? Was Christ out of touch with people? I really do not think so. Christ knew what the difficulties were like; though perhaps he didn't realise that, in some cases, the difficulties were, to borrow Vlastos' phrase 'impossible to be borne' by the people. But he didn't talk about them — nor did he comfort people just because they experienced the difficulties. Precisely because he cared so deeply for them. I mean he cared for them so much that he wanted them to get up (no matter
what the difficulties) and do things, like returning smiles to calculating beasts.

There is, then, a similarity between the methods of Christ, Socrates and the scout master. In each case there is no talk about the difficulties of doing the right thing. The right thing, be it loving, or thinking dialectically, or climbing hills, has to be done no matter what the difficulties. And in each case, the concern for one’s fellows is shown by warning one’s fellows of certain dangers — in the case of Socrates, the dangers are intellectual, in the case of Christ they are moral, and in the case of the scout master they are physical. This expression of concern is not necessarily limited and conditional just because it is not pronounced often enough; further, if concern for one’s fellows is to be more than skin-deep and merely endearing it is, sometimes, much more to the point to talk, commandingly if necessary, about the dangers, than to talk, gently and soothingly about the difficulties.

I am not picturing Jesus and Socrates as quasi-military commanders launching forth on their campaigns and driving the people to do certain things they believe in, no matter what the cost. The picture is rather this: they each believe in certain things: in their different ways, they call upon the people to follow. They do not talk or fuss about the difficulties involved in the religious-cum-moral and the intellectual climbs. They certainly care about the people; this means, among other things, that when people experience real difficulties, which they cannot endure, such people are not by-passed or left to writhe in their own pains. To concentrate on Socrates in particular: there are several places in the dialogues in which a person says he cannot understand what Socrates is saying. Socrates does not ignore that. He goes on, in his own way, to explain what he means. Sometimes his explanations are understood, or seem to be understood; sometimes they are not. This happens with philosophy all the time. Unless we are prepared to argue that all professional philosophers are despots in disguise, it does not seem reasonable to single out Socrates and claim that in his case there was a special and concealed streak of despotism.

Yet, after all this, it may be said that I have missed the boat. It may be claimed that Gregory Vlastos is right. It might be granted that Socrates believed in a certain theory about the acquisition of knowledge (the midwife theory), that he believed in the value of self-knowledge, that his irony was both humane and educationally effective, and that he did his best to help his fellow Athenians. But, in the end, so many of them chose not to listen: they let themselves down and thus went down the road to perdition — some of them voting for his death penalty in the Assembly. But Socrates’ heart, it would seem, did not reach out to the people, those lovely but muddled and, in some cases, stupid people. If it did, he would have felt and expressed pity for them, and would have shed some tears for them. This, Socrates, great as he was, never did — and this is what Vlastos meant when he said that there was, deep inside Socrates, a failure of love.
Perhaps. — Still, consider this: Socrates, right until the end of his life, never found the way. And by ‘way’ I mean a clear understanding and knowledge of the nature of reality, and the pattern of human life which would fit, or cohere with, that reality. (As with all Greeks, the two had to go together.) Socrates is famous for his remark ‘There is one thing that I know: that is, that I know nothing’ (έν οίδα δτι ούδεν οϊδα). I believe that no irony was intended in that remark. For by ‘knowledge’ here Socrates meant a rational insight into the ultimate nature of reality — the kind of knowledge which metaphysicians like Parmenides and Heracleitus professed to have. Socrates never achieved that kind of rational insight, never attained that kind of knowledge. (Jesus, on the other hand, claimed to have an absolute insight and an absolute knowledge.)

Given this deep awareness of his own ignorance, Socrates does not pity his fellows, or shed tears for them. For I think that in that case, the pity and the tears would have been addressed, almost inevitably, to himself, too. But Socrates had too much strength to let that happen to himself. Further, pity and tears for others binds, or at least engages, other people’s souls: but Socrates wanted the souls of his fellows to be free, even though some of them chose to destroy themselves. (The turning — the ‘salvation’ — of the soul should be an autonomous process, as Plato says in the Republic.)

Jesus wept for people because he experienced something like a tragic ecstasy. Part of the ecstasy was a realization that people failed time and again to live in accordance with God’s loving will — for people, apparently, know not what they are doing. Such a tragic ecstasy would not, I think, have been possible without the greatest of certainty in God’s existence and without the greatest of certainty in God’s vision of human life. Socrates never attained such a kind of certainty and was therefore not in a position to experience a tragic ecstasy about human beings. He cannot be blamed for that — especially since we know that he tried very hard to find a rational, as distinct from a revelatory, certainty about the human condition.

Let us recall the final scene in the Phaedo (117b ff). Socrates is about to drink the hemlock; people are weeping all round him. He exhorts them to stop that. He looks at the gaoler with that droll glance of his (as Jowett translates ‘διαβλέψας ταυρηδόν’) and says ‘What do you say to using the drink for a libation to the gods? Or is that not allowed?’ And the gaoler replies — comedy and pathos of macabre administration — ‘We only mix what we judge to be the right dose, Socrates.’ Cheer, fine shades of irony and, above all, courage. Is that, all that, a failure of love for his fellow human beings or, in Socrates’ situation, a most telling manifestation of it?

Socrates was a tough man. So was Jesus. But they were tough in different ways. Their destinies, too, were different. Socrates’ destiny was such that, ironically enough, the love he may have felt for his fellow Athenians may have had to be demonstrated in a controlled and, on the face of it, a rather paradox-
ical way. There is more than one way of loving people — just as there is of hating them. Let us not be held too captive by the magnificence of Christ’s expression of love for the people and conclude from this that other ways of expressing love which do not match the Jerusalem model are relative failures both in the very experience of love and its expression.