Problems in the *Charmides*

The *Charmides* is by common consent an early dialogue, one that Vlastos, for instance, straightforwardly accepts as a habitation for his Socrates.¹ In many ways, in fact, it fits the standard picture of the earliest group of dialogues perfectly—a dialogue with a lively setting and strong characterisation, and a Socrates who asks questions and does not pontificate; one that seeks a definition of a basic ethical concept, here σωφροσύνη, and ends in confusion and ἀπορία and so on.² Stylistic considerations tell the same story; and I have no intention of disputing it. But there are special difficulties about how exactly the *Charmides* fits into this group; and of course this dialogue, like any other, raises plenty of fascinating puzzles of other sorts. I shall focus on two, one from each stable. One, that is, is problematic because of the dialogue’s early date. The other difficulty is not rooted in chronology, or not in an obvious way; it would be a puzzle no matter when the *Charmides* was written. I shall try to show, nevertheless, that the two conundrums are at one level connected. Here they are, in reverse order.

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¹ G. Vlastos *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge 1991) 46. ‘Socrates’ is Vlastos’ abbreviation for ‘the Socrates of Plato’s early dialogues’.

² See for instance the Ten Theses enunciated by Vlastos, op. cit. 46-9. That they succeed in pinning down the ‘early Socrates’ with perfect accuracy would not be accepted by all scholars—perhaps not by any, in precisely the form in which they are set out. But most would agree that the philosophical attitudes and traits they delineate are closely related to widely shared conceptions of this elusive figure. Compare for instance the characterisation offered by R. Robinson in paragraph 3 of his article, ‘Plato’, in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford 1949), a work intended to be reliable rather than controversial.
First, this is a dialogue about σωφροσύνη—moderation, self-control, temperance: for present purposes we need not decide which English word best suits it. If Plato had been conducting a serious enquiry into the subject, he would have done well—one might suppose—to have represented Socrates as discussing it with people who at least seemed to express this virtue in their own characters, or whom we might reasonably expect to know something about it—just as he talks to a pair of military men about courage, to a self-styled religious expert about ὀσιότης, or to a pair of adolescent friends about friendship. But the names of Socrates' two interlocutors in the Charmides were remembered, by the time the dialogue was written, almost exclusively for their involvement in the infamous régime of the Thirty; and the acts of that junta were of course irretrievably linked in the public mind with immoderate, intemperate, arbitrary, bloodthirsty villainy. We are bound to wonder, then, about Plato's intentions in presenting such exemplars of moral ὑβρις as Critias and Charmides—who as we know were also his own close relatives—as Socrates' partners in a discussion of σωφροσύνη.

That's one puzzle. The other looks quite different. The early Socrates, Vlastos assures us, shows no interest in talking about anything but ethical issues. He never allows himself to be diverted from that focus into investigations in areas like epistemology or ontology, into which Plato's later Socrates so enthusiastically plunges. Yet at the heart of the Charmides is a long, difficult and exceedingly abstract discussion of something that looks very much like an epistemological problem. Can there be a reflexive sort of knowledge, a form of knowledge that has as its domain itself and the other branches of knowledge, conceived just as branches of knowledge? To identify this with the question: 'Could there be a

3 In the Laches, Euthyphro, and Lysis respectively.

4 The first of Vlastos' Ten Theses (n. 2 above) is 'Socrates is exclusively a moral philosopher' (47). The claim is taken to be so secure that Vlastos uses it frequently in the remainder of his book as a sharp criterion for distinguishing 'early Socratic' from other discussions (e.g. 66-7).
general epistemology?’ may be in some respects misleading; but it is not altogether wide of the mark. There is a puzzle about what exactly the discussion is for, why it is given such prominence, and why this Socrates pursues it at all. It does seem uncharacteristic of the Vlastosian Socrates, and in my view Vlastos’ brief treatment of the difficulty—though perhaps on the right lines—is far from adequate as it stands. I want to look at this second, more obviously ‘philosophical’ problem first, and to spend the bulk of my time on it. But I do hope also to show that a study of what goes on in this curious section may give some pointers towards an answer to the other question too.

That the Socrates of Plato’s early dialogues is concerned exclusively with ethical issues had been asserted—in modern times, I mean—long before Vlastos. He himself traces the thesis to Maier in 1913; but one can find it, for instance, as far back as Schwegler in 1847, and Schwegler got it from Hegel. Though there are a number of different ways of formulating and interpreting it, I don’t think the general thesis is seriously in dispute. I, at any rate, don’t plan to quarrel with it, or at least not to challenge it head-on. The question, then, is how exactly the Charmides discussion of ‘knowledge of knowledge’ related to this very specific Socratic focus. Let’s begin by reminding ourselves of the overall run of the passage.

It takes off, after Critias’ first inept attempts at defining σωφροσύνη have run aground, from the new move he makes at 164d ff., where he seeks to link σωφροσύνη with the Delphic ‘Know yourself’, and to define it, in fact, precisely as conformity to that principle, τὸ γιγνώσκειν ἐαυτόν. Socrates sets out to examine the suggestion. First (165c ff.) he presses Critias on the question what beneficial product this kind of knowledge could have, τὶ καλὸν ἡμῶν ἔργον ἀπεργάζεται, as medical knowledge produces health

5 See A. Schwegler Handbook of the History of Philosophy tr. J.H. Stirling (Edinburgh 1868) 47-8: the first (German) edition was published in 1847. Schwegler’s book has long since disappeared, I imagine, from most libraries and reading-lists; but despite its date and its modest title, anyone wanting a judicious and critically engaged study of philosophy from the Greeks to Hegel could still go a long way without finding anything better.
and expertise in building produces houses. But Critias resists the move—Socrates, he says, isn’t enquiring properly, οὐκ ὅρθως ἔστεις. There are different kinds of ἐπιστήμης; and not all branches of knowledge have products in this sense at all—he instances λογιστική and γεωμετρική—and this kind of knowledge is in that respect like them. Socrates allows the objection (166a), and shifts tack slightly: even those kinds of knowledge, he says, though they do not have products apart from themselves, nevertheless do have objects, or domains of study, which are not identical with themselves—λογιστική is concerned with the odd and the even, στατική with the heavy and the light, and so on. What then is the object of this putatively reflexive kind of knowledge, ἑαυτοῦ ἐπιστήμης, knowledge of self? Now there are dialogues—the First Alcibiades is an obvious case in point—where a question of this sort would have led to a discussion of what constitutes the ‘self’, the ‘real person’ who is Socrates or Alcibiades, or whoever, and would have been steered towards the identification of that ‘self’ with the ψυχή or soul: but that is not at all what happens here. Instead, Critias again resists the implication of Socrates’ question. This kind of knowledge is unique, he says, in having no object except ‘itself and the other knowledges’: τῶν τε ἄλλων ἐπιστημῶν ἐπιστήμη ἐστι καὶ αὐτή ἑαυτης (166c). And he goes on to assert that Socrates knows all that perfectly well, and is only suggesting otherwise out of a desire to win the argument, while neglecting the real point of the discussion. ἐμὲ γὰρ ἐπιχειρεῖς ἐλέγχειν, ἔσας περὶ οὗ ὁ λόγος ἐστίν.

Thus the conversation’s direction shifts away from what seemed to be its originally intended focus on ‘knowledge of oneself’, to an explicit concern with ‘knowledge of itself’, the kind of knowledge whose domain of study is simply knowledge, as manifested both in itself and in other branches of knowledge. I shall ignore here the fallacy apparently involved in this transition, on which many commentators have turned their spotlights; and let us also temporarily pass over Socrates’ response (166c-d) to the accusation that he is just arguing for victory, though it will be important for my purposes, and we’ll come back to it. Critias’ account of σωφροσύνη, then, which began as τὸ ἑαυτῶν αὐτῶν γιγνώσκειν (‘knowing oneself’), has now become τῶν τε ἄλλων ἐπιστημῶν
Socrates now sets off, or so it appears, to show that no such knowledge is possible. He offers first (167c ff.) a string of alleged parallels, getting Critias to agree that sight cannot see itself, hearing cannot hear itself, love can’t love itself, fear can’t fear itself, and a whole lot more. From this, however, he draws only the weak conclusion that if there is a knowledge that has ‘itself and the other knowledges’ as its object, then that is a very peculiar fact, ἀτοπον. He doesn’t claim that he’s shown it to be impossible. Next (168b ff.) he offers an account of two strings of relations—first those of being greater than, double, heavier; then those in which sight, hearing and knowledge stand to their objects—discussing them in terms of the δύναμις, the ‘power’ that one element in the relation has with respect to the other. He concludes that in some of these cases it is impossible for anything to stand in the relevant relation to itself, whereas in the others it does seem unlikely, but as before it hasn’t been proved impossible. The whole issue, he says, seems hopelessly difficult and certainly beyond him, and he appeals (ironically or otherwise) for help: will Critias please sort it out for him, he asks, and show, if it is true, that there really can be an ἐπιστήμη ἐπιστήμης (to 169c).

Well, of course Critias can do no such thing, and Socrates allows a change of direction (169d). Let’s suppose that knowledge of knowledge is possible. But how does that show that it is possible to know what one knows and what one doesn’t? Critias, not surprisingly, can’t at first see any difference; so Socrates proceeds to explain. What in effect he argues, at considerable length, is that the putative knowledge of knowledge, if it did exist, would be able only to distinguish cases of knowledge from cases of ignorance as such. What it could not do is to identify the domain to which each bit of knowledge or ignorance is related; since to know whether a person has medical knowledge, for instance, or not, what one needs is evidently knowledge of medical matters; and equally evidently
that is not contained in mere ἐπιστήμη ἐπιστήμης. Of course, Socrates goes on (171d ff.), if there were an ἐπιστήμη which could distinguish experts from ignoramuses in all the branches of knowledge, that would be a marvellous thing; and society could be organized on a rock-solid, unerring basis, if someone with such ἐπιστήμη were in charge of it. But it seems impossible. The best that the kind of ἐπιστήμη ἐπιστήμης that is still theoretically in play could do, Socrates suggests, is to make other things easier to learn; but that seems too trivial a matter to be the whole work of so highly regarded a virtue as σωφροσύνη (172b-c).

Finally, Socrates allows it to be supposed, contrary to the preceding argument, that there could be a knowledge which distinguishes expertise from ignorance along with their domains, both in the knower himself and in others. But then haven’t we assumed too slickly, he asks, that this knowledge would actually be beneficial to us? Let’s imagine, he says, that we actually had the knowledge to ensure that no quack could pass himself off as a doctor, no military incompetent could rise to the position of general, and so on. Everything would then be done on the basis of genuine knowledge; but would it follow that we would ‘do well and be happy’, εὖ ἀν πράττοιμεν καὶ εὐδαιμονοῖμεν? Socrates seems to think not (173d).

Critias, again, is baffled. If you sneer at knowledge as the means to εὖ πράττειν, he says, you won’t easily find an alternative. But by now, of course, the Socratic compass is set on a familiar bearing. He strings Critias along until he’s forced to admit that the knowledge that will guarantee εὖ πράττειν can only be knowledge of the good and the bad, τὸ ἄγαθὸν καὶ τὸ κακὸν (174b); and clearly that isn’t the same as the putative σωφροσύνη, which was only ‘knowledge of knowledges and ignorances’ (174d). And from here it’s only a short step to the final ἀπορία, supplemented by Socrates’ deeply ironical, indeed sarcastic critique of the way they have conducted the whole enquiry.

I haven’t gone through this rather laboured summary merely to waste time. My main intention was to emphasize the fact that this is a major, weighty and intricate passage, not one to be shrugged off
as peripheral. Vlastos dismisses the bulk of it in a single short footnote; and it surely deserves much more. It occupies fully ten Stephanus pages (the whole dialogue only runs to twenty-three); and only the last three of them, with their familiar movement towards the importance of knowledge of good and bad, relate in an obvious way to Socrates' usual brand of ethical disputation.

So what is going on? I shall try to answer that in two bits, first from the perspective of Socrates himself, then with the spotlight turned on Critias. Let's go back first to 167a, at the point where σωφροσύνη as ἐπιστήμη ἑαυτοῦ, self-knowledge, has first been transformed into knowledge of knowledge and ignorance, one's own and those of others too. This is the account which is primarily under scrutiny in the sequel, and turns to dust and ashes. Now Socrates, of course, is not offering the definition at 167a in his own person: he is summarising the view adopted by Critias. But imagine, for a moment, how we would construe the paragraph if circumstances were rather different. Suppose that all the other early dialogues had come down to us complete, particularly the Apology, but that the Charmides had disappeared, apart from this one little bit. Suppose also that this bit survived as a fragment attributed to the character Socrates, but shorn of its dramatic and dialectical context. We would be strongly inclined, I suggest, to interpret it as a genuine slice of Socratic doctrine. The person with σωφροσύνη knows himself; he has the capacity to examine himself and identify his own areas of knowledge and ignorance; and he has the skill also to examine others and discover which of the things they think they know they actually do know. Much the same might be said of the long paragraph at 171d ff., where Socrates waxes eloquent about the benefits that would flow from this capacity to identify cases of knowledge and of ignorance unerringly—though in fact, in the immediate sequel, he pulls the rug out from under this eulogy with a good deal of vigour and relish. In the Apology, after all, Socrates' one claim to special expertise lies precisely in the fact that he knows where he is ignorant; and his claim to be of benefit to the city lies precisely in his unique capacity to uncover false pretensions to knowledge wherever he finds them, even though the areas in which his victims claim knowledge are ones in which Socrates does not. Isn't this just what the capacities described in 167a add up
to? We might perhaps be a little hesitant, admittedly, about Plato’s and Socrates’ seriousness in identifying this knowledge precisely as σωφροσύνη but that is much less important than the fact that such capacities, whatever they are called, seem very clearly to be ones that Socrates himself valued highly. And in any case we might usefully remember that in the dramatic sequence at the opening of the Charmides, it is Socrates—the man distinguished from all others in the Apology by this sort of knowledge and by nothing else—who is plainly presented to us as a model of just this virtue, σωφροσύνη incarnate.

It begins to look as if the relation of this discussion to Socrates’ usual kinds of ethical enquiry is a good deal closer than we might initially have thought. It is, in fact, plumb centre: it amounts to a radical critique of the whole basis of the Socratic quest. Can Socrates really have the one kind of knowledge which he claims? Could he really have grounds for claiming to know when others are ignorant, more particularly in areas of which he disclaims knowledge himself? Even if he had the knowledge, the virtue, which 167a describes, and used it to identify knowledge and expose ignorance among his fellow-citizens, in his role as the civic gad-fly of the Apology, could this activity be beneficial? Perhaps there are reasons why the specifically Socratic varieties of knowledge and ignorance escape the difficulties he propounds in the Charmides; but the questions I have sketched deserve, at least, some serious consideration. On the face of it they are ones that the passage I have reviewed quite plainly and insistently raises, and which it evidently does not answer.

In raising these issues I do not think I am straying into territory which Plato did not intend his readers to examine. On the contrary, the text itself seems positively to invite us to interpret it with these questions in mind. One such invitation is extended by the sheer obviousness, as it seems to me, of the way in which 167a and its sequel reflect the capacities that Socrates attributes to himself elsewhere. How could Plato have failed to pick up the connection, or have failed to expect his readers to do the same? But we also have a fascinating short passage just before that, at 166b-d. Here, as I mentioned earlier, Critias takes Socrates to task for ignoring what
PROBLEMS IN THE CHARMIDES

the λόγος is really about, in his out-and-out efforts to refute him. Socrates' response comes at 166c-d. The nub of it is his assertion that his primary motive for pursuing the enquiry has nothing to do with Critias at all: it comes from his fear that he might slip, without noticing, into thinking he knows something when he doesn't. That's why he must check out the credentials of these ideas, no matter how plausible they seem at first glance.

Now Vlastos notices this exchange, rather briefly, in a footnote on p. 113, and again on pp. 134-5; and he does point out its implication that Socrates, through his conversations with others, is trying to improve his own understanding. We might put it by saying that these conversations constitute Socrates' attempts at self-education. But that reflects Vlastos' instinct, when faced with a passage in which Socrates seems to speak for himself, to generalise the thrust of it and to use it to cast light on what Socrates is up to elsewhere. He acutely remarks, in the same footnote, that if Socrates wants to examine his own views elenctically, he has to put them first into someone else's mouth. But having said that, he does nothing at all to unravel this particular remark's relevance in this particular context for this particular dialogue, or even to suggest that it has any. In fact he treats the argument into which this paragraph leads as an unimportant side-issue.

Yet Socrates' form of expression really should alert us to the quite special pertinence of this enquiry in particular, an enquiry into the topic now on the table, to his own most urgent concerns. It is because he fears that he may slip unawares into thinking he knows something which he doesn't, that he is compelled to follow up precisely this enquiry, into whether knowledge of one's own knowledge and ignorance is possible. If it isn't, then Socrates' fears are well justified: nothing he could do could immunize him against the risk of thinking he knows when really he does not. It's hard to imagine anything more threatening to the Socratic project than a demonstration that one never could know the fact of one's own ignorance. In that case, Plato is deliberately, and pretty overtly, setting out to examine something utterly fundamental to the Socratic philosophical persona—perhaps rather in the same spirit, though this is a good deal more muted and tentative, as that in
which he later puts his own metaphysical theories under the critical microscope in the first part of the *Parmenides*.

If we adopt a hypothesis like that of Vlastos, marking a fairly sharp distinction between an early, quasi-historical Socrates, and a middle-period Socrates who represents more nearly the ideas of Plato himself, and if, unlike Vlastos, we also take this stretch of the *Charmides* seriously, I think we are bound to see it as an awkward intrusion of alien elements—that is, of newly developing ‘Platonic’ interests—into the historical picture. That is, of course, a possible way of looking at it. But it seems to me that an alternative frame of reference might produce a more interesting and persuasive reading.6 Suppose we think of Plato, even at this early stage of his career, as using the enigmatic and multi-faceted persona of Socrates as a focus around which to build his conceptions of what ‘doing philosophy’ involves, and as continuing to stretch that image of the true philosopher until (eventually) it bursts. Then, I suggest, we might see this tentatively epistemologizing Socrates as a rather natural growth from the original stock. The investigation which Socrates conducts here is inconsistent with the activities of the so-called ‘early Socrates’ only if we see that figure as fixed in a well-defined mould whose shape is simply ‘given’, and to that extent is not under the author’s control.7 It becomes perfectly consistent

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6 The approach I take here was substantially influenced by suggestions in Anthony Long’s paper at the Otago conference, summarised in this issue of Prudentia. It was my good fortune that his paper was the first and mine the last to be delivered at the conference, giving me time to rethink some points in the light of his ideas. But my remarks must not be construed as an attempt to expound his views, since (a) they are no such thing, and (b) if they were so regarded they could responsibly be treated only as a parody.

7 It might be given or at least very closely limited by the facts of the real Socrates’ life (that was Vlastos’ view, for instance: op. cit. 49); but this is not the only possibility. Wholly fictional characters too become fixed in ways that their authors are not entirely free to change. Once Sherlock Holmes had been established as a super-intelligent master of reasoning and disguise, addicted in varying degrees to narcotics, melancholy and the violin, it was not open to Conan Doyle to represent him as a bumbling trumpeter with rooted moral objections to tobacco smoke. He could of course have devised some way of developing Holmes’s character through episodes in fictional time, or perhaps have reinterpreted the ‘original
with it if we are prepared to treat it, instead, as a rational extension of what is, after all, an authentically ‘early Socratic’ trait, that of persistent criticism, including critical self-examination. The extension will have been made not because Plato came to perceive that it had after all been there in the real Socrates, or in the figure he himself had created when he first presented the character in writing, but as a response to developments in the notion of the ‘true philosopher’ which the Socrates of the dialogues personifies. We might envisage Plato asking himself questions like these. Into what realms would an ideal Socrates have to press his enquiries if he were to examine—as a philosopher should—the intelligibility of his own most characteristic posture, that of knowing that he is ignorant, and of his own familiar claim that he possesses the ability to expose ignorance in others? Where would it lead him? Isn’t the Socrates-figure (not as a putatively historical person or as a fictional character fully continuous with himself through a series of episodes, but in his role as the embodiment of philosophy) rationally compelled to extend his reflections into these strange regions? In this more flexible frame of reference, as it seems to me, the passage we are puzzling over immediately falls into place, and its concerns make excellent sense.

A brief consideration of the end of the present paragraph will point us in a similar direction. Vlastos, rather curiously, stops his quotation of it at the last colon, omitting the remaining seventeen words (167d4-6). It seems worth pointing out that if we take these suppressed words seriously, they will put a good deal of pressure on the picture of Socrates as a philosopher who sees only ethical enquiry as worth his while. ‘Don’t you think that it’s a common good for pretty well everyone, that the nature of each of the things that there are should become clear?’ This sounds like an invitation to agree that all enquiry is worthwhile and all knowledge to be

Holmes’ for us as a mere disguise, deliberately adopted by the fictional character himself; but within accepted literary conventions he could not have merely overlaid the one version of his detective with another in an alien mould. Similarly, Plato might have been constrained in his early depictions of Socrates less by external, historical facts than by limitations of his own making, implicit in the portrait which the first of his Socratic writings had established.
valued, no matter whether it’s about virtue or geometry or eclipses of the moon or the chemical constitution of peanut butter. And if it isn’t that, what is it? We may note that from the fact, if it were one, that Socrates, or Plato’s early Socrates, found value in enquiries of all sorts, it would not of course follow that he engaged in enquiries other than ethical ones himself—enquiries which time, or Plato, or some other rogue factors in history have somehow concealed from our view. But it might again suggest the thought that the figure of Socrates, as the ideal philosopher, is here being broadened to accommodate concerns which Plato had previously seen no reason to include. No doubt the central question for the true philosopher is still ‘How should we lead our lives?’ But plainly he cannot afford to neglect any sphere of investigation which might hold clues to that question’s solution; and Plato now sees the possibility that such clues might be gleaned from truths discoverable in any sphere of investigation whatever. Socrates, in consequence, must be ‘stretched’ to accommodate this new perception; in due course ideas growing from this seed will transform him almost beyond recognition.

If an epistemologically inquisitive ‘early Socrates’ strikes us as an anomaly, so too, as I suggested at the start, does Plato’s decision to give the reviled leader of the thirty tyrants and his off-sider Charmides starring roles in a discussion of σωφροσύνη. The usual answer to the problem, I think, is that Plato has chosen this way of displaying their lack of σωφροσύνη; that he exposes, in particular, Critias’ argumentative slipperiness and sophistic dishonesty; that he shows Socrates doing his best to redirect Critias’ understanding, but failing to do so, and that in this way he shows Socrates to be innocent of the charge that it was his teaching that had led Critias into his wicked ways. I can only say that I find no trace of this in the dialogue at all. So far as I can see, a solution along these lines can be no more than a projection of presuppositions in the minds of the commentators, who have simply assumed in advance that this must be what’s going on.

Critics have indeed found one or two passages in the text to give substance to this kind of diagnosis. They have fastened, for instance, on Critias’ willingness, at 164c-d, to abandon his earlier
position and try another one—suggesting that this is a sign of the slithery, sophistically tainted disputer who doesn’t care what position he takes so long as he wins. But the passage can be read—and I believe it should—in exactly the opposite sense. Socrates has shown that Critias’ previous view is untenable. Critias faces the fact head on and doesn’t try to shuffle out of it; ούκ ἂν αἰσχυνθεὶν μὴ οὐχὶ ὅρθως φάναι εἰρηκέναι. He shows, moreover, an admirable willingness to try again. I see no earthly reason why he should be called ‘sophistic’ because he admits he was wrong; and as for his now moving on to another suggestion, no one criticizes Meno for having another shot, and then another, when Socrates has exposed the inadequacy of what he had said before: so why pick on Critias?

He has been criticized also for making captious objections to Socrates’ manoeuvres at 165e and 166b. Again, I think that’s wrong, or only half-right. Both objections are to specimens of so-called Socratic induction; and the first time, at least, Critias’ objection is surely fair. From the fact that some kinds of knowledge have ‘products’, like ships or houses, it should’t be taken to follow that all do, and in fact plenty can be found which do not. As has often been remarked by modern commentators, the problems that haunt attempts to draw general conclusions from a review of cases really do seem, sometimes, to undermine the line of argument that Socrates takes; and Critias shows more philosophical aptitude in spotting the difficulty than do most of Socrates’ interlocutors. Then when Socrates immediately goes on to institute another induction of exactly the same sort, it’s hardly surprising that Critias protests again. This time, it’s true, he may be over-reaching himself, since he’s forced to say that the kind of knowledge under discussion is unique in having no domain separate from itself; and its alleged uniqueness, the complete absence of parallel cases, presumably casts some doubt on its reality. On the other hand, it’s well worth noting that Critias, and therefore Plato, is sufficiently clear about the nature of the weakness in Socrates’ analogical or inductive procedure as to see that it is a weakness in principle, a ‘logical’

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8 His first attempt at answering the question Socrates propounds to him is at Meno 72a: new ones are offered at 73c-d, 77b, 78c.
weakness, if you like, and that this form of criticism remains open even when no compelling counter-examples to those on Socrates’ list can in practice be found. And at the level of the dialogue’s drama, I see no sign of objectionable sophistry in Critias’ move, only an understandable instinct to use for a second time a critical insight that had previously served him well.

I suggest that we should drop that line of thought. Let us ask, instead, why it is Critias, in particular, who engages Socrates not just in a discussion of σωφροσύνη, but precisely in this discussion of knowledge of knowledge. The problems raised by the subject have a critical bearing on the ways in which Plato has chosen to depict his ‘Socrates’, as we have seen. I want now to ask first whether they also stand in any special relation to what Plato must have assumed his readers knew about the historical Critias, and secondly whether their relevance to one of these figures is in any significant way related to their relevance to the other.

Critias, as the leader of the Thirty, is identified in every reader’s mind with the principles of dictatorial oligarchy. What are those principles? In brief, they must amount to the claim that a few well-bred, well-heeled and well-educated aristocrats can order the city’s affairs much better than the mob of the people. What gives them these credentials? Or rather, perhaps, what claim to authoritative credentials might Plato think worth serious consideration and discussion? If we put the question that way, the answer is likely to lie in the realm of their superior knowledge of how the city’s affairs should be conducted. So what knowledge, exactly, is that? Not, evidently, an expert, specialised knowledge of all the skills and crafts needed to keep the city in business. The vision offered by Critias, which Socrates helps him to develop here, is of something like that of a ‘managerial’ élite, who without special knowledge of the domains in which their underlings are experts, nevertheless know who to deploy in what role and when, and what their capacities and weaknesses are. Many modern bureaucracies are built on a similar notion; and it seems not unreasonable to guess that it was among the ideas that inspired the Thirty—those of them, at least, who like Critias had pretensions to intellectual attainment. In arguing that the knowledge on which their schemes were
premissed is most likely impossible, and certainly useless without the quite different knowledge of what is good and bad, Socrates shows that their claims to authority were baseless. (This too, perhaps, is a comment not wholly without force against managerial régimes with which we ourselves are familiar.)

Should we reckon it an indication of Plato’s dramatic and dialectical subtlety that he contrives simultaneously to destabilize the foundations of Critian oligarchy, and to call in question, in ways that I indicated earlier, the utterly different philosophical posture of Socrates himself? Perhaps he is challenging us to work out the difference between them. Or has Plato stumbled, and shown, maybe quite unintentionally, that a close look at Critias’ position will expose the hollowness of Socrates’ too? The thought is heretical, no doubt; but it calls for an answer. Without attempting to pursue the issues further here, I suggest that we might come closer to a solution if we agreed to interpret the figure of Socrates in something like the way which I sketched above. That would allow us a more flexible picture of the ‘early Socrates’ than Vlastos would admit, grounded at all times in the development of Plato’s notions of the ideal philosopher, rather than being set firmly, from the start, in

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9 That there are significant differences to be found is strongly hinted in the closing exchanges of the dialogue. The work’s setting is in the mellow autumn of the golden age of Periclean democracy; and apart from a few shadows at the beginning, Plato allows no trace of the evil times ahead to taint its sunny atmosphere. Charmides is handsome and clever and properly self-deprecating; Critias is intellectually sharp and keen, a little too self-assured, perhaps, but with none of Protagoras’ pomposity or Callicles’ bullying. The discussion, once well under way, is pursued throughout in a serious, cooperative and friendly spirit. But in the dialogue’s final lines (176c-d) the imagery of plotting, deceit, violence and contempt for legal process is too insistent to be missed, and can hardly be accidental. By this dramatic device Plato brings back to our awareness the subsequent infamy of Critias and Charmides, from which he had diverted us before; but he leaves us, for the time being, to draw our own conclusions about the basis of the contrast between them and Socrates. Every reader would be reminded of its existence as soon as the ominous hints in 176c-d had invited them to recall the events of 404 BC. (More general matters aside, the episode related in Apology 32c and the Seventh Letter (324d-e) seems to have been widely known: for references see W.K.C. Guthrie A History of Greek Philosophy III (Cambridge 1969) 60 n. 4.)
historical or conceptual concrete. In the *Charmides*, on that view, Plato would be putting down a marker for further enquiry, and offering his readers, and himself, a choice between two possibilities. Either the ideal philosopher must abandon the pretensions to ‘knowledge of ignorance’, and the high estimate of its value, which ‘Socrates’ had hitherto professed; or else, if these parts of the picture are to be retained, their credentials must be established through investigations much more far-reaching than any which Plato had so far attempted. In either case the direct challenge thrown down to ‘Socratic’ philosophical attitudes by Plato’s incipient epistemological ruminations must be treated with the utmost seriousness.

Andrew Barker
University of Otago