The Profession of Ignorance, with constant reference to Socrates

‘Who ever will be cured of ignorance, let him confess it.’

Montaigne, Of Cripples.

‘It should be the chief aim of a university professor to exhibit himself in his own true character—that is, as an ignorant man thinking, actively utilising his small share of knowledge.’

Whitehead, The Aims of Education.

I want to suggest that philosophy is, in a real sense, the profession of ignorance. With the greatest of respect, a serious pun is intended. To the extent that we ignore ignorance (our own as much as ignorance itself), then such a saying bites hard. Philosophy is, and ought to be, the profession that knows the most about ignorance, its own before everyone else’s, and it ought to be the first to profess it, as forthrightly as any.\(^1\) It needs to profess it sincerely, and to recognise that this profession expresses an important recognition, even some serious, worthwhile knowledge, enough to generate a free and continuous inquiry, by thinking in the form of a dialogue with ourselves and others about our knowledge and ignorance.

This is one way of thinking about thinking, i.e. as a dialogue about or between our knowledge and our ignorance, thinking ‘about’, as it were, the axis of opinion. Plato’s Socrates, and his

\(^1\) Cf. Sartre, Truth and Existence, trans. van den Hoven (Chicago, 1992) 77: ‘Man is ignorance of self. He is ignorance of self because he makes what he is and he needs someone else to illuminate what he has been.’ I take it Sartre includes himself.
Eleatic Stranger, consider the process of thinking to be an internal dialogue of the soul or psyche with itself, 'nothing else but conversing, itself asking questions and answering, affirming and not affirming (καὶ φάσκουσα καὶ οὐ φάσκουσα),' and when it has come to something definite, whether slowly or with a sudden rush, and at last says the same and is not in two minds, we put this down as its opinion.' (Theaet. 189e8-190a4; Soph. 263e3-264b4). This description occurs on both occasions in discussions to do with explaining false opinions, something vital for Socrates, for it is these he claims to uncover, yet he fails to explain them to his satisfaction, while the Stranger considers he can. Both of them suggest that false opinions arise out of some sort of confusion or misidentification in the thinking process itself.

In thinking, according to this model, we are asking ourselves questions as someone not knowing the answer, and answering them as someone who does. In thinking, as in knowing, we are obliged to consider ourselves dual: as thinker and knower, we are both questioner and answerer, knower and not-knower. The possibilities for self-deception are thus rich and varied. When we think we are thinking, for instance, we might be more engaged in an elaborate charade, or at most asking ourselves rehearsed questions with prepared answers. An appropriate test might then be to ask questions we cannot answer immediately or at all, questions that require us to acknowledge our confusion or ignorance; i.e. our divided condition of knowing that we are

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2 The Stranger formulates this point slightly differently, 'affirmation and negation' (φάσιν τε καὶ ἀπόφασιν, Sophist 263e12), without Socrates' reference to questioning and answering, and in much less uncertain terms (see Theaet. 189e7), but the basic idea of thought as 'the dialogue of the soul with itself' (Soph. 264a9, 263e4) is essentially the same. For a detailed analysis of the differences between the Stranger and Socrates in the Sophist and Statesman, see Harvey Ronald Scodel, Diaeresis and Myth in Plato's Statesman (Göttingen, 1987) 20-73.

3 I am grateful to Ronna Burger's 'Belief, Knowledge, and Socratic Knowledge of Ignorance', Tulane Studies of Philosophy 30 (1981) 16, n.35, for suggesting this. Much depends, of course, on the status of the 'as'. Is it an Aristotelian qua (ἡ or ἢκ) or a Kantian 'as if'? Cf. Stanley Rosen The Ancients and Moderns (Yale, 1989) 49-54.
confused or ignorant. This condition of aporia is one Socrates regularly creates and exists in, referring to it as a situation where he cannot agree with himself (Hipp. Min. 376b7-8). He can divide himself up into two Socrates who are continually at loggerheads (Hipp. Maj. 286c-d; 287-293; 297e-300b; 303e-304e), one a violent questioner who seems to know and not know, the other a gentler creature who seems to be forever in perplexity, but who is prepared to endure this and the attendant abuse, in the belief that he might be benefited by it (304e). At times he appears not to know which of these two is the truer Socrates, though he will raise the possibility the latter might be more divinely gifted (Phaedr. 230a1-6).

If we take this model of thinking as seriously as Plato⁴ seems to, then we can understand something of why he chooses the dialogue form, and chooses to remain with the dialogue form. Each dialogue is then an example of continuous thinking while we read it, engaged in questioning and answering itself like one mind in two or more minds,⁵ shifting position through interchange, thinking or doggedly refusing to think when the interchange breaks down without any common ground of belief, or the claim to knowledge and ignorance is no longer mutually sustainable, with knowledge claiming too much for itself, or ignorance refusing to acknowledge its identity, and masquerading as the other. Often then the roles reverse, as one mimics the other, in the battle for true opinion and for the reputation (both doxa) for knowledge. With participants locked in friendly or violent combat, a just victory should go to the one who can resolve the difference, a knowledge that recognises its ignorance, for ignorance cannot even recognise itself adequately

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⁴ Plato too is dual, as text and author (or community of authors). Following the usual practice, I refer to both as ‘Plato’, except where an obvious distinction needs to be made.

⁵ This might explain why most of the dialogues are named after individuals, not only because they are individual themselves, but because we can engage with them as thinking individuals, and themselves with one another, as a community of inquiries and inquirers. Of the exceptions, the Symposium can be viewed as a party of individuals surveyed by Diotima’s synoptic vision, the Republic is itself described as the magnified image of one soul as a polis, and the Laws are personified in the Crito. Persons are not far from view.
without becoming a form of knowledge. Like Poros and Penia in
the Symposium, the weaker becomes stronger by recognising
the need to be stronger—poverty becomes resource by being
resourceful when resource is weak or incapacitated. Together they
produce the philosopher Eros, who is both, born on the same day
with Desire.\(^6\)

Plato the author must have thought long and hard about the
profession of ignorance, for he has placed it central to his portrait of
Socrates,\(^7\) and Socrates central to his portrait of the philosopher,
and philosophy in action. This centrality, I believe, is reflected in
the choice of the appropriate form to display a master of dialogue,
and to retain it even when Socrates is not central or silent. For
Socrates silent is still Socrates thinking, as in the field at Potidaea,
from dawn to dawn, ‘immersed in something...he stood in the same
spot considering it, and when he found no solution, he didn’t leave

\(^6\) Cf. Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript (Princeton, 1968) 85:
‘...when Plutarch reminds us that Hesiod has assumed Chaos, Earth,
Tartarus, and Love as cosmic principles, it is quite proper in this connection
to recall Plato. For love is here identical with existence, or that, by virtue of
which life is lived in its entirety, the life which is a synthesis of the infinite
and the finite. According to Plato, Wealth and Poverty conceived Eros,
whose nature partook of both. But what is existence? Existence is the child
that is born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and
therefore a constant striving. This was Socrates’ meaning. It is for this
reason that Love is constantly striving; or to say the same thing in other
words, the thinking subject is an existing individual. Cf. Chaucer, Man of
Laws’ Prologue 99-105. I am grateful to Rick Benitez for pointing out to me
this literary parallel and possible allusion to Eros the philosopher.

\(^7\) Contrast Plato’s Apology with Xenophon’s and with Aristophanes’
Socrates. But Aeschines the Socratic’s Socrates (Alcibiades 10c [Dittmar];
Aelius Aristides Oration 45.21 [W. Dindorf, II, 25]) and Aristotle’s (Soph.
Elench. 183b6-8) both profess ignorance; so perhaps also did the historical
Socrates. We do not know (and so ought to admit it from the start), but
Plato’s presence at the trial (and Xenophon’s absence) may be some
historical evidence for his Apology ‘s authenticity, while not conclusive. It
is there that Socrates reveals himself as a professor of ignorance, and no
other character in the dialogues is so forthcoming about it. What I want to
claim for the profession of ignorance as the mark of philosophy may help
to justify or explain the perspectives of Xenophon and Aristophanes, and
how they might have arrived at them. I would argue that Plato professes it
too, through his central character and most recurring figure, and through
his adherence to the dialogue form.
but stood there inquiring ...thinking about something...’ (Symp. 220c3-7). The form itself also reflects an implicit preference for the testing of ideas in active interchange between the human individuals who reflect or partially embody them, with all their evident incompleteness and frailty, their perennial failure to find what they are seeking. Might we not conclude that their author knew no better way to express what he wanted? We do not know, of course, and it is vital we admit it, before we try to go any further into understanding the purposes of Plato.8 Interpreting is also a dialogue between the claims of our knowledge and the recognition of our ignorance, and it is the latter, like Socrates, that provokes the most questions. If we are concerned, as I am, with this distinctive trait of Socrates in Plato, then we ought not to be afraid of asking the most embarrassing questions. The work of Plato is full of them, and so there is some justification for believing their author has first put them to himself: i.e. that Plato knew ignorance as Socrates did—very intimately, and professed it in his own way, in dialogue.9

8 The philosophical digression of the 7th Letter (342-344) supports the view that Plato considered he would be misunderstood if he wrote in treatise form, and it follows a passage (341) replete with claims about knowledge and ignorance: the writer’s claim that Dionysius is ignorant (341b1-4) and the writer himself ‘knows nothing’ (οίδα δὲ οὐδὲν 341 b5) about the subjects he is supposed to have taught Dionysius, who subsequently passed them off as his own in treatise form. The writer does ‘know’ others have written on these subjects, ‘but what manner of men they are not even themselves know’ (341b5-7). The digression itself is a great problem to interpret, for it attempts to do what the writer has just denied can be done or ought to be done—give direct verbal expression to the writer’s innermost thoughts (341c-e). Is this more irony? There is some stlynometric evidence that suggests it is a later insertion; see Levison, Morton, Winspear, ‘The Seventh Letter’, Mind 77 (1968) 309-325; Michaelson and Morton, Revue Internationale de Philosophie (1973).

9 Cf. the tradition of Plato as ridiculed by the comic poets, in Diogenes Laertius 3.26-28:

Alexis: **Meropis** : ‘I am at my wit’s end (ἀποροῦμένη) and, walking up and down like Plato, discovered nothing wise, but only tired my legs.’

Ancylin: ‘You don’t know (οὐκ οἴοθα) what you are talking about: run about with Plato and you’ll know (γνώσε) soap and onions.’

Amphis: **Amphicrates** : ‘And as for the good, whatever that be, that you are likely to get on her account, I know no more about it than I do about the good of Plato.’
Philosophy can be understood as thinking become acutely self-conscious,\textsuperscript{10} alert to its capacity both for self-deception and self-destruction. Knowledge of ignorance needs to be acknowledged when achieved, like any other knowledge. This is why I think Socrates' profession of ignorance is worth serious study, much more than can be achieved here, for it pervades Plato like the dialogue form, and is central to the understanding of Socrates and Plato, if philosophy is very much the profession of ignorance. This shocking thesis needs more than a little defence, so I should say now that though I don't think philosophy is just this profession, yet I do think it is this at least, as a necessary condition.

Consider this: one modern response to the ancient claim that 'philosophy begins in wonder' (\textit{Theaet.} 155d2-4; \textit{Metaphysics} 982b10) is to see it as 'a stupid remark',\textsuperscript{11} and 'pseudo-wonder' a more likely beginning. It is a masquerade of wonder, born perhaps of some deep or shallow suspicion, anxiety, or terror, that gives rise to

\begin{quote}
\textit{Dexidemides :} ‘O Plato, you know nothing (οὐδὲν οἴσθα) but to frown with eyebrows lifted high like a snail.’
\textit{Cratinus:} \textit{Pseudupobolimaios :} — ‘Clearly you are a man and have a soul.’ — ‘In Plato's words, I don't know (οὐκ οἴδα) but suspect (ὑπονοῶ) I have.’
\textit{Alexis:} \textit{Parasitos :} ‘Or with Plato, to converse alone (ἀδολεσχεῖν κατὰ μόνα).’
\end{quote}

Whether they knew him well or not, their impression of him or his work would appear to be of a man highly cautious in judgement. Timon (D.L. 3.26) suggests his own perplexity about Plato, when he 'puns on (Plato's) name thus: As Plato placed strange platitudes' (ὡς ἀνέπλασσε Πλάτων < ὁ πεπλασμένα θαύματα εἰδώς), Loeb translation.

\textsuperscript{10} See Mary Margaret Mackenzie (McCabe), ‘The Virtues of Socratic Ignorance’, \textit{Classical Quarterly}, n.s. 38 no. 2 (1988) 333-337, on the psychological dimension of \textit{aporia} as self-consciousness, and 'self-conscious' describing 'both a cognitive and emotional state'. (334). We can add the ethical dimension of it, and of Socrates' willingness to suffer the shame of \textit{aporia}, a dimension surely implicit in her title. See also David Blank, ‘The Arousal of Emotion in Plato's Dialogues’, \textit{Classical Quarterly}, n.s. 43 no. 2 (1993) 428-439, on the emotion and shame in \textit{aporia}.

\textsuperscript{11} See David Stove, \textit{The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies} (Oxford, 1991) 69. For \textit{thauma} as trickery see \textit{Soph.} 233a9; as puppetry \textit{Laws} 644d7; as acrobatics Xenophon's \textit{Symp.} 2.1, 7.3; as mechanical devices the Aristotelian \textit{Mechanica} 848a11.
philosophy, a claim for which modern thought from Descartes provides much supporting material. However, the justification given by the maker of this ‘remark’ about ‘pseudo-wonder’ is that the profession of philosophy, of which he was a member when writing, is notorious for its insincerity, and philosophers are often ‘the most incurious of men’. Wonder (or astonishment, or surprise—thauma) is so much a part of Socratic beginnings it would be hard to ignore or deny it with respect to him, or consider him incurious, even if many, then and now, consider him insincere. It is some surprise that not only is wonder now equated with curiosity, but also has become like anxiety and terror, something we would seem to want to avoid or to deny importance to. We have grown suspicious of wonder and wondering. According to this modern cynical or bitter view, the sophist or pseudo-philosopher in us never professes wonder, and so some ignorance, sincerely, but prefers to don pseudo-wonder as a mask, or some comparable form of Humpty-Dumpty-like ‘impenetrability’. But whether it begins in wonder or pseudo-wonder, it surely begins in some perplexity,

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12 Stove (1991) 68-69: ‘But affectation and insincerity, especially in the form of pretending not to know the answers to questions when in fact one does know the answers to them perfectly well, is a failing even more characteristic of our profession. This, indeed, unlike our propensity to insanity, is notorious. In fact insincerity of this sort is often used by the public as a test, and really quite a good test, of whether a given person is a philosopher or not. That philosophy begins in wonder is a stupid remark which has been repeated for 2500 years, although anyone might easily have observed at any time that philosophers are often the most incurious of men. No, philosophy typically begins in pseudo—wonder, expressed by asking questions which are really no questions at all.’

13 Cf. Alcib. 103a1(line 1), 104d4. Theaet. 142a3, b9, c4; 144a3, b6, d3; Apol. 17a5, d1; Crito 43a5, b5; Meno 70a6; Phaedo 58a3, 62a2,5; Charm. 154c1, c5; Lysis 204d6; Laches 180c1; Parm. 129b1, c3, c4, d5; Hippias Maj. 282c6, 283c2; Tim. 19d3; Phil. 14c8, c9, d5; Euthyd. 271c5; Critias 108b4; Cleitophon 407e4. Cf. Xen. Mem. 1.1.line 1, second word; 1.20. first word; 1.2. first word.

14 ‘I meant “impenetrability” that we’ve had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you’d mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don’t intend to stop here all the rest of your life.’ Lewis Carroll, Alice Through The Looking Glass, ch. 6: ‘Humpty Dumpty’ (Folio Society, 1992) 75.
some knot of knowledge and ignorance that needs to be unravelled, if it is to begin at all.

Knowledge of ignorance could be understood as the essential paradox at the heart of any paradox, and at the heart of any perplexity, wonder, anxiety, or suspicion. Aristotle seems to recognise this when he says perplexity and wonder arise from thinking ourselves ignorant (οἰεται ἀγνοεῖν: *Metaphysics* 982b18)\(^{15}\) (and so 'even the myth-lover is in a sense a philosopher, for myths are composed from wonders'), and 'to escape ignorance (διὰ τὸ φεύγειν τὴν ἀγνοιαν) they philosophised, clearly pursuing science (διὰ τὸ ἐπίστασθαι) for the sake of knowing (διὰ τὸ εἰδέναι), and not for the sake of utility'. (982b16-23) He must have some kind of difference in mind between ἐπίστασθαι and εἰδέναι (cf. 982a30-31) and it may be γιγνώσκειν recognition or comprehension.\(^{16}\) For he has just told us that the wise are those who can recognise or comprehend or come to know (γνῶναι) 'difficult things' (τὰ χαλεπά), those not easy for humans to comprehend or recognise (γιγνώσκειν 982a10-11). It is these difficult things that generate perplexity and wonder and admiration (θαυμάζεσθαι 981b15) for those that can solve them, such as the wise who know everything (982a7-10, 20-25). The rest of us have to make do with knowing only some things, and with wonder, itself a certain kind of ignorance,\(^{17}\) about the rest of things—we have to make do with wondering and wonders, and the myths that are composed from them.

\(^{15}\) Cf. Lesher, ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987) 283, n. 36, on PI as ‘not thinking’. If we don’t already know (or recognise) the difference between knowledge and thinking or opining, how can we even think we know or we don’t know? Cf. Rosen ‘Wonder, Anxiety and Eros’, *Giornale di Metafisica* 6 (1957) 647.


Myths, like wonders, are themselves a mixture of knowledge, conjecture and ignorance; and philosophy, as we know it, begins with the myth of Socrates as paradigm philosopher, the wise man who denies his wisdom, who calls himself stupid and foolish, yet who would seem to be most lacking that 'will to stupidity' required by strong characters, and the writer and expounder of theses. He appears to invite counter-arguments, and to prefer to be refuted than refute, considering it a greater benefit (Gorg. 458a; cf. 470c, 480c-d; 482c; 486d-488b). When he looks for a paradigm philosopher, it doesn’t look much like him, except as an inverted parody, an otherworldly creature more knowledgeable and ignorant than himself (Theaet. 173b-175). Most of them are useless and vicious, he agrees with Adeimantus (Rep. 489d), and even the leaders, the ‘tip-top’ philosophers (κορυφαίοι: Theaet. 173c7) are ignorant, even more ignorant than Socrates. From their youth they do not know the way to the marketplace, the courtroom, the senatehouse, or any other public place of assembly. They neither see nor hear laws or decrees, never think of indulging in politics, parties, revelries, never pay attention to anyone’s birth or social standing—all of these ‘they don’t even know that they don’t know’ (ούδ’ ὤτι οὐκ οἶδεν, οἶδεν 173e1). They fly ‘deep under the earth and above the heavens’, never lowering themselves to concern themselves with their neighbours’ doings or with whether they are human at all. They fall into pits and all kinds of perplexities (174c4-5), and their perplexity makes them seem ridiculous, for they know no evil of anyone, never having cared for or abused anyone. So they must expect to be derided for seeming contemptuous, and being ignorant of things at their feet (ἐν ποσίν ἁγνοῶν) and always in perplexity about all in particular (ἐν ἐκάστοις ἀπορῶν 175b6-7).

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19 Cf. Apol.18b6-8 and Aristophanes’ Socrates: Clouds 225-234; Birds 1553-5.
Socrates, ironically no doubt, considers himself a special case, not sickly like Theages, but a 'daimonic' case 'not worth mentioning' (Rep. 496c3-4), a freak among 'this little company'\(^{20}\) of outcasts and misfits (496b-c) sheltering from the storm of life (496d7-8). But it is a divine or daimonic irony, from a new mythic hero self-consciously aware of his own 'mythic' state—i.e. himself as a mixture of knowledge, opinion and ignorance, and still questioning it, for the hero (\(\nu\rho\omicron\sigma\omicron\nu\), for Socrates, is, like Achilles (Apol. 28c-d), a lover (\(\epsilon\rho\omicron\omega\sigma\varsigma\): Crat. 398c7-d4) and a stubborn asker of questions (\(\epsilon\rho\omicron\omega\tau\alpha\nu\): 398d7; Apol. 33b1). And 'every good man, living or dead, is daimonic, and rightly called a daimon' (Crat. 398c1-4). We know what he thinks is 'the greatest human good'—doing what he has been doing: 'to talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me in dialogue and examining myself and others'. (Apol. 38a1-5) We may disagree, but as philosophers, we'd need to engage in it, examine it to refute it. We can't ignore it; we need to recognise we are liable to error, fallible even in our fallibilism. If we don't, we become parodies of philosophers, sophists, professors ignorant of ignorance and of ourselves.\(^{21}\)

In his interesting collection of essays, *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies*, David Stove raises a crucial point about modern writing directly relevant to the issue of knowledge of ignorance. Describing the adverse reaction of modern readers to Victorian writers, he identifies three things that oppress us about them: their Christianity, their superficiality, and 'their almost unvarying tone of Whiggery. History is over; the long reign of ignorance and superstition is at an end; the writer, in short, knows everything'.\(^{22}\) Nevertheless, he says, 'their errors are on the right side'.

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\(^{20}\) Cf. Rep. 496c5 and Clouds 107. *Theages* itself is presently an outcast from 'Plato'.

Much of what the ‘modern nervous’ reader finds abrasive, in nineteenth century writers, is no more than a masculine and admirable directness. And, when you come right down to it, there simply is no non-Whiggish way of writing, about science or any subject. It is entirely pointless for an author to indulge in general acknowledgements of his liability to error and ignorance; while he cannot, on obvious logical grounds, point out to us specifically where he errs or is ignorant. He could, of course, conciliate modern nervousness by putting ‘It seems to me that...’ in front of everything he wishes to say. But that is a proceeding equally pointless and vexatious, as well as generating a regress (‘It seems to me that it seems to me that...’) which will prevent him from ever saying anything at all. (23-24)

It seems to me Stove has got a point here—and a very sharp one for me. I want to put forward the thesis, with, I think, some ‘masculine and admirable directness’, that we must acknowledge an inevitable element of ignorance, even stupidity, in any thesis put forward, and that we remain ignorant, despite evidence of knowledge, even in or on large areas of any special expertise. To avoid what Stove calls ‘the Ishmael effect’, a form of self-refutation by self-accusation, I would need to do as he forbids (not in order to conciliate ‘modern nervousness’ but to be honest and direct) and put before my remarks the saving qualifier ‘I don’t know but it

22 Stove (1991) 22. All ignorance is ‘vincible’ or wilful, and none is ‘invincible’, it seems.

23 See Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, 107, quoted at the end of this paper.

24 Ibid. 61: ‘But suppose a man told us that he had been one of those on board a certain ship, and that, in an encounter with a whale, everyone on board the ship had perished. Then his statement would suffer from a severe defect, of a peculiar kind, which I call (by a slight licence) the Ishmael effect: for if the statement were true, he could not have made it. It would be somewhat as if a man were to say to us in a bellow, ‘I can’t speak above a whisper’; or as if someone were to say, ‘I don’t know any words at all’. Stove must have noticed that this is what Ishmael (Melville) does initially: ‘then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago’. 
seems to me that...’ To avoid being ‘vexatious’ I could stipulate that it be always understood to be (hidden) there, but I couldn’t honestly avoid or ignore it, given the acknowledgement of something like a will to stupidity and some invincible ignorance. Thus it would not be ‘entirely pointless’ for me ‘to indulge in general acknowledgements’ of my liability to error and ignorance, and precisely to the point to attempt, despite the logical problems, to point out specifically to myself and you where I am ignorant, even if it meant risking descent into the maelstrom of an infinite regress.

The qualifier ‘I don’t know but...’ is for me the equivalent of Queequeg’s coffin. But for his friend’s foreknowledge, Ishmael would not have escaped alone to tell us. And but for our knowing our ignorance, in the sense of our being quite sure of something beneath and above us, we would sink beneath our qualifications to an uncertain death. If thinking requires knowing there is a difference between knowledge and ignorance, we can demonstrate it to ourselves by posing the difference as a dialogue within ourselves between what we know or claim to know and what we do not know or claim to know, with parts of ourselves taking on parts and questioning and answering. Some parts of us are so close to us we can only see them when reflected on by others. Our ignorance is so close we prefer to ignore it. Our knowledge is too busy trying to expand to look to its limits. The dialogue form avoids the logical problem of specifying one’s own ignorance by dramatising the encounter of ourselves with ourselves as if we were two persons, one ignorant, one knowing. But the psychological problem remains: how do we gain self-mastery or self-knowledge? I do not know exactly, but it happens, if it does, I think, because we know ignorance close up enough to handle it. All hands, even Ahab’s, can be saved by enough coffins, though it might not look so good on paper. We tend to prefer the hidden marks hidden from consciousness before they get to paper. We prefer confident assertion, to diffident, halting reflections.

Yet this preference may not be so much a concern for ‘admirable directness’ as, like being ‘Whiggish’, the sign of another Anglo-Saxon attitude. Montaigne, expressing his own preference,
has an answer to Stove as much, if not more, to the point at issue here:

Many of the delusions of the world, or to speak more boldly, all the delusions in the world, are begotten of our being taught to be afraid of professing our ignorance, and thinking ourselves bound to accept everything we cannot refute. We speak of all things in an authoritative and dogmatic style. It was distinctive of the Roman style that even that which a witness deposed to having seen with his own eyes, and what a judge decided of his most certain knowledge, was drawn up in this form of speech: 'It seems to me'. It makes me hate accepting things that are probable when they are held before me as infallibly true. I prefer these words which tone down and modify the hastiness of our propositions: 'Perhaps, In some sort, Some, They say, I think', and the like. And if I had had to train children I should have so accustomed them to adopt this inquiring, doubting mode of reply: 'What does that mean? I do not understand; It might be so; Is that true?' that they would rather have kept up the appearance of learners at the age of sixty than put on the airs of a learned doctor at ten, as they do. (Of Cripples, 502)

Preferred styles of expression change, but if it is indeed true that 'all the delusions of the world are begotten of our being taught to be afraid of professing our ignorance', then I am bound to oppose any teaching and avoid any mode of presentation that encourages us in 'thinking ourselves bound to accept everything we cannot refute', and rather encourage any that tends to free us from so thinking. The dialogue form seems well designed to reflect 'this inquiring, doubting mode of reply'. And if I should want to inquire into Montaigne's 'boldly' expressed belief about the cause of 'all the

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25 Montaigne, Essays trans. E.J. Trechmann (Oxford, 1927). Cf. Ibid.: 'Iris is the daughter of Thaumas. Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy; research, the progress; ignorance, the end. There is, by heavens, a strong and generous kind of ignorance that yields nothing, for honour and courage, to knowledge: an ignorance to conceive which needs no less knowledge than to conceive knowledge.'
delusions in the world', with which, as you can see, I am in some agreement, I am able to do so, without contradicting the spirit of his concern never 'to be afraid of professing our ignorance'.

This is one good reason for writing or thinking in the dialogue form. It allows us to check on our own self-deception and self-knowledge by the device of a projection onto two or more others. 'When two go together, one sees before the other' is one of Socrates' favourite quotations from Homer. We can explore our own dogmatism and scepticism within and beyond the limits that each part of us sets on the other, and each can reflect on the other. It allows us to raise more objections and counter-arguments to any thesis, should we wish to, when such regularly shifting perspectives would make straight discourse too complex or too qualified and counter-qualified to untangle intelligibly. It may also bring us closer to why Plato saw the need for it, for perhaps he did not know how else to achieve his aim. I certainly do not know all the reasons why he did, but I think it likely his recognition of ignorance (his own as well as in general) had something to do with it.

Some things are indeed so close to us, are so much parts of us, we have yet to perceive them directly. We need reflections and the observations of others to acquaint us with them, to describe them to us in any detail. One such thing, perhaps the most painful to confront, and perhaps because it is at the heart of our difficulty regarding the rest, is our ignorance. Faced with the prospect of its revelation we are likely to reject the evidence, and, depending on its magnitude, will often attempt to deny it to those obliging persons who offer their astute observations. In effect we raise the spectre of their ignorance and so retaliate in kind. It is hard to imagine

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26 Cf. Montaigne (1927), 'On the Art of Conversing', 383-408, 384: 'In my opinion the most profitable and natural exercise of the mind is conversation. To me it is a more agreeable occupation than any other in life.' It may have been, in part, his hatred of dissembling (see 'Of Presumption', 97-98) that led him to the confessional form of 'essaying'. Cf. notes 78, 79.

27 Iliad 10.224. See Prot. 348d1, d3-4; Symp.174d2; Alcibiades II 140a1.
anyone welcoming such a prospect, yet that is how Plato presents Socrates to us, as someone who claims to be glad to be proved wrong, considering it a greater benefit to himself to be refuted than to refute others (Gorg. 458a; cf. 470c, 486d-488b). He sees the benefit of refutation in being delivered of false opinion, if, in the process, one's ignorance of this falsity will be demonstrated, and so some knowledge gained, and any loss of self-esteem is for him a small price to pay in pursuit of the truth. Indeed it is a positive benefit itself, relieving us of what is for him the greatest evil to do with issues of importance, which is thinking we know them when we do not (cf. Apol. 29b).

No-one, except Socrates apparently, takes kindly to this unmasking of their pretensions to knowledge. Why do most of us respond so negatively, and act as if we can see no benefit in it? We may rather not confront our ignorance because we have so often chosen to ignore it. It is not simply all we have never been aware of, but also all the many 'ignoring', thoughts and experiences regularly rejected but of which we remain dimly but unpleasantly aware, sinking beneath the waves of consciousness, but easily stirred upwards again. They are the refuse of consciousness, those items deemed useless or inappropriate. He seems to be inviting us, in the pursuit of knowledge, to dredge much of this unsavoury material and recycle it as reverse-garbage, to turn it to useful mulch. We can learn from our pretensions, he seems to be saying, our self-deceptions regarding claims to expertise, particularly on important issues, like the right way to live. On this, we all think we are experts, all too sure of what is 'vincible' and 'invincible' in our  

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28 Cavell (1987) 206: 'The failure of knowledge is a failure of acknowledgement, which means, whatever else it means, that the result of the failure is not an ignorance but an ignoring, not an opposable doubt but an unappeasable denial, a willful uncertainty that constitutes an annihilation.' Was that a 'wilful' mispelling? I don't know how we can know if the failure is the result of denial or the denial that of the failure? In acknowledging ignorance I see failure rather than refusal, ignorance before any original sin, not knowing if this is a 'wilful uncertainty' or not. I believe it is not, but how could we know? We suspect, and believe according to the evidence and experience, being wilfully or unwilfully uncertain.
ignorance—generally all and nothing respectively. But then we act otherwise.

Are we to assume then that he has no such pretensions to knowledge? He certainly at times makes some strong claims to knowledge, but equally he claims to be always prepared to test and examine his beliefs, to subject them to possible refutation. He certainly desires and values knowledge, but remains convinced he lacks knowledge of the most important things. Yet he knows how to refute, and that is obvious. Why does he not consider such an ability important knowledge? He describes his maieutic art as a tekhnē like his erotic art, but as insignificant (βραχε'ω?) knowledge, a slight exception to his general state of 'knowing nothing' (οὐδὲν ἐπίσταμαι: Theaet. 161b; cf. μηδὲν εἰδέναι: Rep. 354b9-c1), of perhaps even 'being nothing' (οὐδὲν ὤν: Symp. 219a) or at least unknown to himself (Phaedr. 229e-230a; 235d). We can interpret this, like Aristotle, as 'mock-modesty' (Nic. Ethics 4, 13, 1127b22), but given the seriousness of the situations in which he says this, it might be more accurately seen as a species of hyperbole, a genuine expression of his perceived state. He feels unable to offer any positive solution to inquiry, and at most only able to offer the purification of elenchus, which may be no more than recognition of confusion and inconsistency of beliefs, and not clear proof of the falsity of any particular one. Yet is it not a major achievement to recognise one’s ignorance, and so the difficulties of one’s position? Is not this katharsis a positive effect, a positive necessity like a regular bath? And is it not conducted in the light and according to the principles of something good—the requirement that our beliefs and claims to knowledge be intelligible and accountable, especially if they bear on other persons and their beliefs?

The elenchus itself would then be an alternative account of what is required. Socrates can imagine a secure argument based on certain knowledge, yet since he cannot provide one to his satisfaction, he considers he remains ignorant even when he alone stands unrefuted (Gorg. 509a5; cf. 506a). What knowledge he has he thinks is of ‘small thing’ (Euthyd. 293b8): he knows it is wrong to do evil, and it is wrong to disobey one’s superior (Apol. 29b6-7), but everyone might easily know this, once the terms are understood. It
is a trivial truth if still one does not know who is one's superior, what is evil, and when one is obeying superior directions, and this kind of wisdom he is forever concerned to discover. He knows there is a difference between knowledge and true opinion (*Meno* 98b1-5), but as to what precisely that difference is he is not exactly sure, not at least as sure as a wise man would be, he thinks. He says he knew long ago that good men are just (*Euthyd*. 297a1), but what is justice he has yet to confirm as part of his wisdom. His wisdom is just that he knows he lacks this divine wisdom that would always be right. But how he knows this is the question. He says he thinks this is what the god thinks when its oracle pronounces him wise. He thinks the god thinks he knows or recognises his wisdom to be worth little or nothing. And if the god who is wise thinks he knows, he must think he knows, if he thinks the god does not lie. It is of course possible he is still misunderstanding the oracle, but rather than think the god wrong, he is surely convinced that the god thinks he knows something, and has some wisdom, a wisdom that could hardly be more qualified without being no wisdom at all. So he agrees because he must. The god thinks he is wise, but his experience has been that he is not wise in anything, great or small. To reconcile these propositions he must conceive a special kind of wisdom, human wisdom, admired by the gods, and recognizable by humans.

It is this knowledge and wisdom we are invited to consider as we listen to a dialogue and contemplate entering it as we listen. For it is in the daimonic space between knowledge and ignorance that our minds work and come to understand something, and here the love of wisdom becomes conceivable and possible. It can also be destroyed by eristic duelling, or a sophistic double act like the two brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. Plato saw the danger of that dialogue degenerating into 'antilogia' producing 'misologia', but he chose to supervise it not with monologue, but with another dialogue reflecting on the first. This is risky, and history and philosophy have chosen differently. We prefer a form of monologue reflecting on itself in written work governed by a strict narrative frame and with a clear authorial voice. It perhaps for us represents a collected, magisterial utterance, one wrung from out of a composed, respectful silence, and now sealed in a single delivery,
safe from the fearful contingencies of immediate personal interchange.

It could well be we have a natural resistance to asking too many questions without easy solutions. However, the sight of others attempting them and persevering, even when seeming to fail, may encourage us to overcome this resistance. It might do—it might not. Perhaps, I think, it seems to me, we ought, in some way, to remember Socrates concludes a conversation between himself, his alter ego and another massive ego, with the reflection that, despite having to face abusive questioning, he felt it had done him good, for, he said, 'whatever the proverb means by “fine things are difficult” (χαλέπα τα καλά) I think I know'. (Hipp. Maj. 304e6-9). Learning how to become good, useful or ‘beneficial’ (χρηστόν ἄνθρωπος) may be ‘altogether difficult’ (παγχάλεπον), but when recognised as such, it might then become some kind of light or sun to guide us in dealing with lesser difficulties. Think of the hard saying ‘There is nothing certain but uncertainty, and nothing more miserable and arrogant than man’. How does it stand in relation to itself and its author (Pliny)? And we in relation to it? Should we carve it upon our ceiling, like a light or sun to view, and to view us? I would prefer to bring it down to earth as another part of us, to be brought out and together in the dialogue form of thought thinking...

29 This proverb is used by Glaucon (Rep. 435c8) and Socrates (Rep. 497d10; Crat. 384b1).
30 Epinomis 979c2; cf. 979c1, 992a5.
32 ‘...one of the sentences inscribed on the ceiling of Montaigne’s library.’ Montaigne (1927) 60, n.3: from the essay ‘How Our Mind Stands In Its Own Way’.
33 Cf. note 25 above, and Montaigne (1927), ‘Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions’, 326: ‘We are all made of bits, and so shapelessly and diversely put together, that every piece, at every moment, plays its own game. And
'Once the decision is taken, to close the ear even to the best counter-argument: sign of a strong character. Occasionally, then, a will to stupidity'.

Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*.

'‘It may be said, with some appearance of the truth, that there is an ABC ignorance that preceded knowledge, and another, a doctoral ignorance that comes after it: an ignorance that knowledge creates and engenders, just as it uncreates and destroys the former’.

Montaigne, *Of Vain Subtleties*.

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there is as much difference between us and ourselves, as between us and others. *Be sure that it is very difficult to be always the same man* (Seneca)*.'