

works by giving students occasions of meeting other students whom they regard as already kin. They have immediate interests in common. They make what I have called a constituency. The contents of their courses are designed to minister to that interest and to keep the students together. If

pluralism has a more exacting meaning, I am afraid I have failed to understand it or to recognize it when I see it.

—*Denis Donoghue, a former Wilson Center Fellow, holds the Henry James Chair at New York University.*

OTHER TITLES

Arts & Letters

SOCRATES: Ironist and Moral Philosopher.
By Gregory Vlastos. Cornell. 334 pp. \$57.50

Can someone profess to be ignorant—to have “no wisdom, great or small”—and still be considered an important thinker, indeed one of the founders of Western culture? This is the paradox of Socrates (470?–399 B.C.), who, in fact, wrote nothing himself. Scholars studying Socrates must decipher the thought of someone they haven’t read but have only had second-hand glimpses of—in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, in Aristophanes’s satirical burlesque in *The Clouds*, and, of course, in Plato’s “reproduction” of his conversations in the *Dialogues*.

Socrates’s supposed ignorance provides the starting point of Vlastos’s study, a 40-year labor of love. (Vlastos, professor emeritus at Princeton, died last October, shortly after the publication of *Socrates*.) Socrates’s profession of igno-

rance, Vlastos says, must be taken ironically, suggesting only that all knowledge is questionable and must be justified by rational argument. Yet Socrates’s refusal to give his philosophy a “positive content,” to accept any human notion as a given, hardly gives an individual much to go on. Vlastos attempts to

locate in Socrates a solid philosophical foundation by examining two key concepts: virtue and happiness.

Most scholars have argued that Socrates saw happiness and virtue as one, suggesting that no real evil can come to the truly virtuous man. Such an identity hardly makes sense to Vlastos, who says that a virtuous “inmate of a Gulag” would then be “as happy as an equally virtuous inmate of a Cambridge college.”

Rather, Vlastos thinks that Socrates held that virtue, while not identical with happiness, was the *sufficient* cause of it (although other things—health, fortune, family—make “some tiny but appreciable contribution to the design”). Socrates manifested his own virtue in the *Dialogues* through a process of reasoning that was incorruptible and independent of all outside influences. In the *Phaedo* he treated his own imminent death—ordained by an unjust judicial sentence—as little more than the occasion for such a rational discussion. This aloof, calm Socrates has for 2,000 years set a model of the intellect as coolly thinking and judging, unmoved by such unworthy considerations as fear, affection, pity, or revenge. Recently, however, both the political commentator I. F. Stone (in *The Trial of Socrates*, 1988) and the psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz (in *On Dreams*, 1991) have objected that Socrates’s detached reasoning is irrelevant to much of what human beings do. Although Vlastos admired Socrates for more than half a century, here, in his final evaluation, he too concludes that a Socratic sufficiency within oneself is insufficient for living well—and compassionately.

