

Socrates and the Socratic Dialogue

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Proclus on Socratic Ignorance, Knowledge, and Irony

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1 Introduction

Often overlooked in the history of commentary on images of Socrates in antiquity, the late Neoplatonic philosophers discussed and analyzed the contradictions and enigmas associated with the character of Socrates, and in doing so they offer a rich and complex portrait both useful and inspiring for scholars in Socratic studies.¹ Specifically, Neoplatonists like Proclus, despite being concerned only with Plato's Socrates,² advanced complex arguments on various "Socratic" subjects, including Socrates' infamous confessions of ignorance and their seeming contradiction with his avowals of knowledge. In this chapter we shall see how—unlike contemporary scholars, who happily associate Socrates with either skepticism or irony—such associations would have been unnerving to the Neoplatonist. In contrast, Proclus adamantly insisted that Socrates' avowals of ignorance need not be qualified by an appeal to Socratic irony insofar as he argued that Socrates' form (or "grade") of ignorance would not taint the philosopher's corresponding form of knowledge.³ Indeed, long before the work

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- 1 Neoplatonists are often criticized for neglecting the Socratic character both of philosophy in general and Platonism in particular. For this characteristic view see Zeller 1903, 496; Hathaway 1969, 19–26. For the contrasting view see Beierwaltes 1995, 97–116; Layne and Tarrant 2014; Griffin 2014; Smith 2004, 455–460; Rangos 2004, 464–480; Sedley 2002; Tarrant 2000, 25–26 and 108–111; Taki 2012. See Layne 2015b for a comprehensive bibliography of Socratic references in authors of late antiquity. The following chapter does not address all the criticisms of the Neoplatonic dismissal of the Socratic in Hathaway et al. but focuses instead on the valorization of a kind of ignorance easily associated with the Socratic, and Proclus' corresponding defense of the philosopher's use of irony. In highlighting these leitmotifs in Proclus one should recognize that the value of the "aporetic" is not lost on the authors of late antiquity.
 - 2 For more information on how the Neoplatonists responded to the distinction between the historical Socrates and Plato's Socrates in contradistinction to other Socratic authors see Procl. *in Ti.* 65.22–28, Syrianius *In metaph.* 105.1–5 and Anon. *Proleg.* 3.12. See also Layne and Tarrant 2014, 12–13; Layne 2015b.
 - 3 *In I Alc.* 23.15–18. All references and translations of the Proclus' *Commentary on the Alcibiades I* derive from Westerink (ed.)/O'Neill (tr.) 2011.

of Gregory Vlastos (1991, 1994), Proclus “saved” Socrates from charges of deceptive irony and skepticism by appealing to various modes/activities of intellection as well as grades of not-knowing or ignorance, letting Socrates avow both a *kind* of knowledge and a *kind* of ignorance without contradiction. As we shall soon see, when Socrates speaks of his ignorance and his corresponding knowledge, Proclus argues that the philosopher is 1) relying on a hierarchy between different acts of intellection (opining versus discursive reasoning and dialectic) that have distinct cognitive objects (sense versus intellectual) and 2) advancing the idea that there are certain forms of ignorance that do not unsettle one’s claims to knowledge but might rather be constitutive of it.

Ultimately, these differences between activities of intellection and kinds of ignorance allow Proclus to contend that there should be no “doubtful weight attached to Socratic knowledge” (*In Alc.*, 24.10–15). As such, Proclus defends Socrates from the charge of irony when it comes to his disavowals to knowledge. The Neoplatonist further contends that Socrates only uses irony in the appropriate pedagogical context and therein should not be regarded as deceptive. Irony is ultimately seen as a purgative technique wielded by the wise for the sake of transforming the lives of particular individuals in need of salvation. Despite ridiculing and teasing his interlocutors, Socrates speaks ironically for the good of their souls and therefore is motivated primarily by sincere concern. It will be due to this Socratic care, sincerity, and self-knowledge that Proclus will come to see Socrates as a divine lover and true hero, enticing all those he encounters to the examined life.

To see all this we shall first discuss Proclus’ understanding of a kind of excusable or recognized ignorance, and then turn to a detailed account of Proclus’ analysis of forms of knowing that can be held alongside this particular form of ignorance. Once it has been established that Socrates can claim both ignorance and knowledge without an appeal to irony, we shall close by discussing Proclus’ defense of Socrates’ use of pedagogical irony, irony used not for deception but for leading his interlocutors toward the care of themselves.

2 The Value of Recognized Ignorance

No less than today, skeptical interpretations of Socrates were prevalent in the fifth century CE, often employed by all wishing to argue against not only dogmatic readings of Plato but also portraits of Socrates that emphasized his sage-like wisdom. In this vein, Proclus’ *On Providence* attempts at length to dismantle the arguments of Theodore, an inquiring engineer, who doubts the possibility

of human knowledge. Appealing to an image of Socrates laughing “at those who claim to know everything,” Theodore hopes to undermine the Platonic contemplative project by appealing to the philosopher’s repeated claims that he knows nothing.⁴ Proclus responds to this epistemologically pessimistic portrait with several strategies that legitimate philosophical inquiry and the search for knowledge, not least of which is a considerably novel attempt to unpack Socrates’ infamous response to the oracle at Delphi:

To be sure, Socrates is ready to say that he knows nothing, and the oracle of the Pythia proclaimed him for that reason to be “the wisest of all” as he himself explains the oracle. Yet you [sc. Theodore] should consider the depth of what both the god and Socrates said. For he did not say that merely the fact of knowing nothing is a special privilege, but rather when one does not know, to know that one does not know (ἀλλὰ τὸν μὴ εἰδότα καὶ τοῦτο εἰδέναι ὅτι οὐκ οἶδε). This ignorance seems to be of great utility (προὔργου) for those who intend to become wise; in reality, however, it tends to be the same as wisdom, and the person who knows himself to be really not knowing and who is not ignorant about what he does not know, is really wise ... When, then, someone has become wise, he will know himself both knowing that he knows and knowing that he does not know. So far then, my friend, is the appropriate interpretation of what Socrates and the oracle say about true wisdom.⁵

PROCL. *De prov.* § 51

4 *De prov.* § 48.1–10. Cf. *Pl. Ap.* 20e–23b and *Phd.* 66d–68a. For information on Theodore, his depiction of Socrates and Plato’s philosophy, and the debates about the possible skeptical aspects of Socrates or Plato, see Steel 2007, 1–4 and 20–22. It might be worth noting that Proclus appears to be framing Theodore in the light of Meno’s eristic paradox: Theodore’s pessimism makes it impossible for him to know that he does not know, particularly about the subject of his concern, whether we are free or determined. Proclus writes against Theodore’s belief that perhaps all of knowledge is merely a dream: “Yet you should have realized that if we cannot know the truth, we also cannot know whether what depends on us exists or not. For ignorance prevents us equally from taking a position for the one or the other alternative. How, then, can we use the fact that we do not know the truth to demonstrate the non-existence of what depends on us, when ignorance has the same power, or rather lack of power, to show both that this faculty exists and that it does not?” *De prov.* § 48.10–16.

5 See Steel 2007, 68. All translations of Proclus’ *On Providence* are from Steel (tr.) 2007 which follows H. Boese’s edition of the *Tria Opuscula* while following the Greek retroversion of William of Moerbeke’s original Latin translation.

First, it should be immediately noted that despite the fact that the *Apology* falls outside the bounds of the Neoplatonic curriculum (*Alcibiades*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, *Parmenides*), Proclus does not shy away from analyzing and defending the portrait of Socrates painted in this dialogue.⁶ Obviously, this curriculum, first instigated by Iamblichus, omits what many modern scholars would typically hail as representing the so-called Socratic dialogues and as such it is likely this neglect has led scholars to believe that the Neoplatonists were uninterested in the more aporetic depictions of the philosopher. It has been thought that the repeated admissions of ignorance characteristic of the so-called “Socratic” texts would compromise the tradition’s dogmatic epistemological interpretation of Plato and, as such, they were more inclined to dismiss the value of such dialogues.⁷ Certainly the Neoplatonists, who emphasized the importance and possibility of attaining knowledge, could avoid the embarrassing problems associated with Socrates’ repeated confessions of ignorance if they concentrated their attention only on those texts where Plato clearly advances a more dogmatic and didactic version of Socrates. Yet, in his response to Theodore, Proclus comments on an incontestably aporetic depiction of Socrates rather than simply invoking his more maieutic and knowledgeable personae in dialogues such as the *Philebus*, evidencing therein that he does not see a contradiction between the Socrates who avows ignorance in the *Apology* and the more epistemologically optimistic Socrates in the dialogues of the Iamblichean curriculum. In other words, if the Socrates of the *Apology* were contradictory to Proclus’ project, the Neoplatonist could have easily redirected Theodore to another dialogue. Instead he confronts the issue directly, challenging the prejudice that the Neoplatonists ignored or turned a blind eye to Socrates’ avowals of ignorance.

Furthermore, in this short analysis of Socrates’ response to the Delphic oracle, Proclus rejects Theodore’s belief that Socratic ignorance entails Socratic skepticism. For Proclus, Socrates’ recognized ignorance in the face of the Del-

6 For information on the development and order of the Neoplatonic canon instigated by Iamblichus see Jackson, Lycos, Tarrant (trr.) 1998, 14; Tarrant 2000, 90–94 and 2007, 48. Cf. Anon. *Proleg.* 26.12–16.

7 See Hathaway 1969, 19–20: the “decisive character of the Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato is its obliviousness to the genuine Socratic element in the dialogues.” For information on Proclus’ understanding of the historical accuracy of Plato’s depiction of Socrates over other *Sôkratikoî logoi* see in *Ti.* 65.22–28 and 62.8–20: Plato’s Socrates has captured the real likeness of the philosopher. See also in *Parm.* 1023.20–23, and in *Alc.* 18.13–19.10. Consider also Tarrant 2007, 156 n. 259 and Tarrant 2000, 56–57.

phic oracle reveals both epistemological optimism—Socrates, in contrast to skeptics like Arcesilaus, thinks that knowledge is possible—and epistemic success—at the very least, a wisdom has been obtained through the recognition of ignorance. In tune, then, with many contemporary commentators who praise the value of recognized ignorance, Proclus presciently suggests that recognized ignorance is both useful for the acquisition of wisdom and is a kind of wisdom itself insofar as it is a knowing of what one knows and what one does not know. Proclus emphasizes that this recognition of ignorance situates Socrates as an intermediary between sense perception and intellect or between that which “does not know the truth at all” and that which knows “immediately the very essence of a being and the truth itself, as it really is.”⁸ While entangled in his understanding of grades of knowledge (which we will discuss in the next section), we can already see that this defense of Socratic ignorance in *On Providence* relies upon the advancement of a basic hierarchy between kinds of individuals who know and who do not know, wherein Proclus clearly asserts that wisdom is not tarnished by an honest recognition of ignorance.

In his *Commentary on the Alcibiades I* Proclus explicitly appeals to this hierarchy and the value of recognized ignorance when he delineates three types of individuals: the wise, the simply ignorant, and the doubly ignorant.

Either we do know or we don't and if we don't know, either we think we do or we don't. If we do know we possess knowledge; if we neither know nor think we do, simple ignorance; but if we don't and think we do, we are doubly ignorant.⁹

PROCL. in *Alc.* 201.5–8

Broadly construed, double ignorance is the heinous condition of the soul manifest in those who hold a pretense or conceit to knowledge. This is the condition of the politicians, poets, and craftsmen in the *Apology* who believe they know the just, the true, or the virtuous but do not. One need only think of Socrates' infamous back-peddlers, including Euthyphro and Meletus, to form a concrete picture of such a condition. Throughout this commentary, Proclus relates this form of ignorance to the refusal to heed the Delphic oracle, viewing it as a kind of epistemic and moral blindness that prevents people from caring

⁸ *De prov.* § 51.

⁹ All inset passages from this work are tr. O'Neill. Cf. in *Alc.* 189.10–190.8; 200.15–201.5; 236.14–19. See also in *Crat.* 13.1; Anon. *Proleg.* 16.17–30.

for their soul (cf. Layne 2015a). Quoting Diotima from the *Symposium*, Proclus laments that the doubly ignorant are “neither honorable nor good nor wise” but think they are and therefore fail to do the work constitutive of virtue and the good life.¹⁰

In contrast to the disreputable state of conceit, individuals in a state of simple ignorance know that they do not know and as such seek after knowledge. The recognition of ignorance is useful, as Proclus wrote in *On Providence*, for it fosters and promotes the activities of inquiry: “inquiry is a seeking after knowledge in matters of which we think ourselves ignorant” (*in Alc.* 236.20–23; cf. 242.25, 188.15–20). While contrasting this state of simple ignorance with both double ignorance and full wisdom, Proclus writes, “To seek wisdom is characteristic neither of the wise nor of the person who suffers from twofold ignorance, but evidently of the man who is in the state of simple ignorance” (189.15–25). According to Proclus, only persons of simple ignorance inquire; unlike the wise, who already possess full knowledge, and the doubly ignorant who fail to see that they lack knowledge, the simply ignorant know themselves and, accordingly, recognize their lack.¹¹ However, this lack does not imply epistemic failure. Rather, for Proclus, the discovery of lack is the beginning of the philosophical life. While discussing the necessity of reversion to the self for self-understanding, Proclus outlines the differences between what persons of knowledge, the doubly ignorant, and the simply ignorant observe:

Of these three one [the doubly ignorant] is totally devoid of reversion to himself: another [the knowledgeable] both reverts and having reverted finds within himself virtues and sciences like radiant images of the gods; and the third [the simply ignorant] does revert, but sees within himself lack of learning and knowledge and so is reduced to the first beginnings of both learning and discovery, either by investigating himself and his own riches, which he possesses but is unaware of, or by approaching instructors and being guided thereby.¹²

in Alc. 190.8–15

10 *In Alc.* 189.2–3. Cf. *Pl. Symp.* 204a, *Sph.* 229c1–10, *Leg.* 863b–d, *Alc.* 118b, *Lysis* 217e–222a, *Plt.* 302b for Platonic references or allusions to the concept of double ignorance; cf. Layne 2009a, 82.

11 See *In Alc.* 176.26–30; 187.10–189.3; 242.10. Cf. *Pl. Symp.* 204a.

12 For the importance of reversion for self-constitution see *ET* § 42–43.

For Proclus the movement to the state of simple ignorance and the life of learning and inquiry is of the utmost importance. He often describes this transition from conceit to the admission of ignorance as a form of purification, cleansing individuals of self-deceit, outward-tending activities, and dependence upon material goods. He further argues that Socrates' practice of exhortation and refutation "delivers [individuals] from twofold ignorance" and brings recipients, like Alcibiades, to a state of contradiction, disagreement, and anxiety for the express purpose of helping them see the folly of conceit.¹³ This process of purification from pretense reveals at least one possible reason why Socrates, in Proclus' estimation, never advanced any positive teachings in dialogues like the *Alcibiades*: Socrates' primary intent in these contexts was not to teach but to "remove the opinions that prevent the soul from grasping the truth" (*in Alc.* 174.1–5; see also 85.10; Layne 2009b).

By distinguishing double ignorance from simple ignorance, Proclus suggests that interpretations of Socratic philosophy are not burdened by the disgracefulness of ignorance *in toto*. Rather, ignorance is the source of error and evil only when one fails to recognize it, therein obstructing the path of learning and inquiry.¹⁴

3 Socratic Knowledge

We have seen that for Proclus there are three different types of individuals: those in a disreputable state of double ignorance, the simply ignorant on the path of learning and inquiry, and, finally, the knowledgeable who, in Proclus' eyes, are perfect not only in their thinking but in all their affairs, who "find within [themselves] virtues and sciences like radiant images of the gods."¹⁵ So, where does Socrates fit into this schema? As our initial passage from *On Providence* seemed to indicate, Socrates appears to be the perfect paradigm of the form of ignorance that constitutes a kind of wisdom insofar as it reflects self-knowledge and leads one to the life of learning and inquiry. Indeed, this char-

13 See *In Alc.* 17.1–5, 115.21–116.1, 174.1–10, and 278.15–279.1.

14 See also *In Alc.* 177.27–178.4, where he writes, "Everyone who has inquired after any subject or consulted teachers about anything can name a time in which he once considered that he did not possess this knowledge; and the reason is that men both hasten to make inquiry when they advert to their own ignorance and frequent the doors of teachers when they are not confident of being sufficient unto themselves for the removal of ignorance" (tr. O'Neill).

15 *In Alc.* 190.10; cf. *in Crat.* 25.3–5.

acterization of Socratic knowledge and ignorance would square nicely with the Platonic dialogues themselves, wherein Socrates insists that he is only a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, and so he does not live the life of wisdom but a life of ceaseless inquiry. Indeed, our primary passage seems to suggest this reading but, notwithstanding this intuitive solution, Proclus wants to make a stronger claim: despite his avowals of ignorance, Socrates is in the third category of individuals. In other words, Socrates is not a man of simple ignorance. Rather, for Proclus, he is a man of wisdom and perfect knowledge.¹⁶ Emphasizing this identification, Proclus describes Socratic knowledge by narrating Alcibiades' first conversation with Socrates, describing the encounter as raising the youth to the "vantage point of Socratic knowledge".¹⁷ In the Neoplatonist's estimation, the beauty of Socrates' wisdom exposes the youth's own deficiency, eventually inspiring Alcibiades to turn (at least in the context of this dialogue) from the life of external goods to the inward care of the soul.

The discussion leads Alcibiades round from the life that tends outward to the investigation of himself, and on the other hand calls him up from the consideration of himself to the love of Socratic knowledge. For to long to learn the reasons for Socrates' behavior is to become a lover of the knowledge pre-existent in him.

in Alc. 21.1–10

In short, Socratic knowledge is what inspires the erotic turn of Alcibiades' soul, awakening the youth to the longing for true beauty residing "pre-existent" in the contents of Socrates' soul. To clarify what Proclus means by pre-existent knowledge in Socrates and how its content would inspire the youth, we should take a moment to unpack the various forms of knowledge that the Neoplatonist ascribes to human souls. This brief exegesis not only will explain what this "pre-existent knowledge" is that inspires Alcibiades but will also prove essential for understanding how Proclus' Socrates can be a divine person of knowledge while still admitting ignorance.

To begin, Proclus distinguishes three orders of soul corresponding to five activities of intellection. The orders of souls are irrational, rational, and intellectual while the corresponding activities of intellection are (1) opinion/*doxa*, (2) knowledge that proceeds from necessary principles/*dianoia*, (3) dialectics,

16 See *in Alc.* 79.20–24; 119.10–120.5; 123.27–30; 126.18; 130.1–2; 132.25; 145.27; 237.28. Cf. *in Crat.* 8.17–20.

17 See *in Alc.* 19.15–30.

(4) intuition, and (5) divine unity.¹⁸ On the lowest rung of this epistemic ladder, (1), Proclus places the activities of (1a) sense-perception, imagination, and emotion, each of which fixates on and belongs exclusively to the realm of matter and the corporeal. These activities are particular to the *irrational soul*, the soul that is inseparable from or dependent upon the body.¹⁹ Such activities without reason's interception lead nowhere, stymie the soul, and cause it to abide in ignorance. Nevertheless, these are not the only activities particular to this lowest level. We might distinguish these aforementioned activities of the soul from the (1b) activity of opining, which is characteristic of the first real cognitive activity of the *rational soul*. This activity of making judgments constitutes the lowest level of intellection, properly considered, for the human being. It is defined as the level of cognition that "only grasps the truth of the fact without its cause" and Proclus associates it with purification, reminding us therein of the state of the simply ignorant insofar as this form of cognition is described as the entry point to the education of the soul helping individuals "shake off the whole scenery of the passion" (*de prov.* § 27). With opinion the rational soul passes judgment on sense perception, correcting "illusions" while also learning to moderate the emotions "drawing [the heart] back from its impulses" (*de prov.* § 17; cf. *Pl. Tht.* 187a5–6). At this level of the rational soul, one's primary cognitive achievement is discovering that "we neither hear nor see anything accurate" in the realm of becoming and thus recognizing that knowledge must rather come from within (*de prov.* § 17; cf. *Phd.* 65b3–4, d). The next act of the rational soul, (2) *dianoia*, begins once one spurns the senses completely and turns inward in the self-reflective act of "discovery" and views what Proclus calls the "essential reasoning principles" (οὐσιώδεις λόγοι) residing in and constituting the soul.²⁰ By turning toward itself and discovering these principles, the rational soul extricates itself from the corporeal and ascends the rungs on the ladder of knowledge as it learns, with perfect clarity, that the sensible physical world of time, movement, and flux cannot be known—the physical world cannot by its nature be an object of knowledge (*de prov.* § 17; see also *in Alc.* 248.5–20; 108.20). For Proclus this act of the rational soul (2) is higher than the rational act of opining (1b), for it contemplates determinate reality, the reasoning principles or images of the Forms abiding in the soul,

18 *De prov.* § 16–20 and § 27–32. See also Steel 2007, 77 n. 68 and 28–30.

19 *De prov.* § 17. See also *in Crat.* 29.3. Cf. *ET* § 197.

20 See also *in Parm.* 982, 28; *ET* § 194–195. For the definitive article on Proclus' conception of the innate reasoning principles see Steel 1997. See further Helmig 2012 and Chulp 2012 for important complexities in Proclus' epistemological program.

rather than indeterminate and unknowable matter. In this form of cognition, such individuals see the beauty residing within.

It is the movement by which the soul reflects upon itself and sees its own essence, the powers in itself, the harmonic proportions of which it consists and the many lives of which it is the plenitude; and it discovers that it is itself a rational world, the image of the beings before it, of which it “leapt out.”

de Prov. § 18 (cf. *Enn.* VI 4 [22] 16, 28–30)

Overall, the science that emerges from such self-reflection is the one beginning “from principles taken as suppositions and which knows causes and draws necessary conclusions in all cases” (*de prov.* § 28). Here it is important to note that like the level of opining in which there is a need to discover a lack of knowing the sensible before ascending to the next act of cognition, this act of reasoning must also become aware of its limits. Discursive reasoning that argues and concludes from necessary premises may be higher than opinion but insofar as it does not know or understand the origins of the principles themselves, such a science, like geometry, “falls short of the most perfect knowledge” (*de prov.* § 28).

The third activity of cognition is (3) dialectic, the “supreme science,” uniting “the many and divided principles with the one principle of all things” (*de prov.* § 29). Dialectic ultimately investigates *the causes* of the reasoning principles in our souls, the Forms themselves (*de prov.* § 28–29; cf. *Pl. Resp.* 510–511d). Proclus describes this as the science that “‘makes the one multiple’ and ‘the multiple one.’” Again, however, this science has a limit insofar as the subject of thinking is still separate from the object of thinking, therein requiring the activities of synthesis, division, and demonstration. This leads to the fourth form of knowledge, (4) the act of supreme intellection, which transcends methods like division or demonstration, contemplating being by “simple intuitions” or “immediate vision” (*de prov.* § 30; see also *in Alc.* 246.25–247.15). This form of knowledge leads the soul to move from the level of rational soul to intellectual soul as its form of thinking imitates the Neoplatonic hypostasis of the Intellect (as much as is possible) in its isomorphic relation to the subject of thinking, the object of thinking, and the act of thinking. A soul at this level of knowing “thinks what they [Forms] are and at the same time thinks that it is thinking, knowing also what it is itself” (*de prov.* § 30). Finally, Proclus advances one more form of knowing, one that surpasses even the hypostasis of the Intellect, revealing therein the limits of intellectual activity itself. Insofar as the principle of all things is not an intellectual object, one must ascend by transcending the

limits of all thinking both rational and intellectual, activating what Proclus calls the “one of the soul,” insofar as it soars toward union with the divine hypostasis of the One/Good. This form of “knowledge” is better described as (5) a kind of touching or unification with the divine (*de prov.* § 31).

To make use of our excursus into the hierarchy of knowledge in Proclus (which, one should note, includes at each level a kind of recognition of ignorance prior to ascent), we can now ask at what level of the soul (irrational, rational, intellectual) Socrates is and which activity of intellection, among (1) through (5), he employs. Furthermore, we can ask how such a classification would help Proclus make sense of Socratic ignorance in light of Socrates’ claims to knowledge. For Proclus, Socratic knowledge, at the very least, corresponds to the first act of the rational soul (1b) that has turned toward itself and has thus come to self-knowledge, recognizing that the locus of knowledge is within and not without. In so doing Socrates has ascended to the level of knowing that he cannot know the world of sense; Socrates *opines* (1b) in such a way as to purify himself from the external world of deceitful sense perception and has come to moderate his emotions. Assuredly we may assume that for Proclus many of Socrates’ interlocutors remain at the level of the irrational soul that opines outwardly (1a) toward the objects of sense while Socrates has already discovered that the world of sense is not the proper object of knowledge. Leaning on this characteristic of Socratic knowledge, Proclus argues that this recognition would explain why Socrates can use conjectural statements like “I think” without tarnishing his wisdom with “indeterminacy, mixture with ignorance, or uncertainty” (*in Alc.* 23.1–4). In his remarks about sensible reality, he is merely making conjectures, since a person at the level of opining *knows* that sensible things cannot be known in themselves. Sensible objects can be *judged* only in relation to what *can* be known, the reasoning principles residing in the soul. As Proclus writes in the *Alcibiades* commentary:

If, then, the knowledge of what is ever the same and of the contingent differs, if their accounts involve very great variation and their appropriate names differ, is there any cause for wonder if Socrates, here speaking of something unstable and liable to change, has employed the phrase “I think” indicating the easily changing nature of the object of knowledge, but not convicting Socrates’ knowledge of indeterminacy, mixture with ignorance or uncertainty. For it is necessary, as we said above, in matters of opinion and conjecture to express one’s notions as conjectural, but in matters intelligible and scientific to employ irrefutable formulae, as knowing the truth.

in Alc. 22.15–23.8 (cf. 22.10)

Later in this same passage Proclus further explicates how Socrates' own tentative remarks are appropriate for the youth's education: they reveal to the eager boy that one should "speak with restraint rather than insistence" in regard to one's notions and corresponding judgments of sense phenomena.²¹

Beyond mere opining (1b) Socratic knowledge is also characterized by the higher activities of the rational soul or *dianoia* (2), the intellectual act that contemplates not merely the reasoning principles in relation to the sensible world but the internal reasoning principles in themselves and in relation to their causes, the Forms.²² For Proclus this explains Socrates' penchant for asking his infamous "What is x?" question. While emphasizing the discovery of the reasoning principles within us alongside contemplating their causes, the principles constitutive of there being knowledge in the soul, Proclus writes:

It is by reason of this that Socrates in his conversation always leads each discussion towards the question "What is x?" since he is anxious to study the reason-principles in the soul in his search for the Form of Beauty, in virtue of which all beautiful phenomena are beautiful, that is, the reason-principle of beautiful things preexisting in the soul, and Knowledge itself, which is truly existent in souls.

in Parm. 987.8–16 (tr. MORROW and DILLON)

For Proclus, Socratic knowledge arises, on one level, from looking to the reasoning-principles in themselves, the essential Beauty in souls, and has thus ascended from conjecture (1b) to *dianoia* (2). At another level, by asking "What is x?" Socrates contemplates the cause of his reasoning principles, Form, and therein begins to practice the rational activity of dialectic (3) where one examines the causes themselves, thereby making "the one multiple" and the "multiple one." Appealing to the *Republic* (6.511b6, 534c1) as well as the *Phaedrus* (265d–266b), Proclus clearly associates this activity with Socrates' valorization of dialectic throughout the dialogues.

Ascending to the cognitive activity of intellectual inspiration (4), Proclus further identifies Socrates as one who surpasses discursive reasoning or mere dialectic, particularly since "on such occasions as he is seeking intelligible Beauty, he proceeds by inspiration rather than by midwifery or testing." Appeal-

21 *In Alc.* 24.10. See another similar example of Proclus' exegesis of Socrates' conjectural statements at *in Alc.* 93.7–8, 95.25–97.3.

22 See *ET* §186. Cf. *in Crat.* 6.1; *in Alc.* 100.29.

ing to Socrates' claims to divine inspiration in the *Phaedrus*, Proclus believes he is not simply contemplating the Form of Beauty as cause of the essential reasoning principle in the soul and therein as a distinct object separate from the subject of thinking. Rather, Socrates' activity is "intellectual" insofar as his discourse thinks Form in itself, wherein the subject of thinking is in an isomorphic relationship with the object of thinking, causing him to be "enthused." Ultimately, this distinction between intellectual activity and rational activity allows Proclus to explain differences in Socratic method that separate dialogues like the *Hippias Major* from the *Phaedrus*. In one text Socrates is a paradigm for the rational soul and in the other for the intellectual soul. As he writes: "For this reason it is not astonishing that whereas both the *Hippias [Major]* and the *Phaedrus* concern the subject of Beauty, the former seeks the essential Beauty in souls, the latter seeks intellectual Beauty, from which all things derive their beauty" (*in Parm.* 987.16–24).

Consequently, Proclus seems to be pushing Socratic knowledge to the highest rungs on his epistemological ladder, often describing Socrates as analogous to and participating in the activities of the intellectual soul. He confirms this identification in his commentary on the *Alcibiades*:

Socrates, as being an inspired lover and elevated to intelligible beauty itself, has established himself as corresponding to the intellect of the soul, for what else is it that is united to the intelligible than intellect and all that possesses intelligent life?

in Alc. 43.7–10

Here, Proclus clearly identifies Socrates not merely with a rational soul but with an intellectual soul and, again, in his commentary on the *Cratylus* Proclus puts Socrates at the level of the intellectual soul when he explicitly claims that in contrast to Hermogenes' irrational use of opinion and Callias' attachment to material imagination Socrates is analogous to the Intellect (*in Crat.* 29.1; cf. Griffin 2014). Further evidence of this identification can be seen in his commentary on the *Parmenides*, when Proclus writes that "Socrates could be compared to the particular intellect, or absolutely to Intellect," since the philosopher is "portrayed as especially confident of the theory of ideas, and what other role is more fitting for the particular intellect than to see the divine Forms and declare them to others?" (*in Parm.* 628; see also *in Tim.* 9.17–24, 58.1–5, 62.10; *in Alc.* 140.22).

In short, Proclus contends that Socrates has reached one of the highest levels of human knowledge despite his claims to ignorance because, in his epistemological worldview, what Socrates is ignorant about differs from what he knows

about. What Socrates knows, he knows by virtue of activating his rational activities as well as his higher intellectual activities; his confessions to ignorance express his recognition of his inability to know what cannot be known, the objects of sense as well as expressions of the limits of each level of knowing. Socratic wisdom is thus perfectly compatible with Socratic ignorance: his ignorance refers to the sensible or the limits of particular cognitive activities that aid (rather than hinder) the ascent toward different forms of knowing. As such the admittance of ignorance does not prevent the philosopher from being a man of knowledge. Keep in mind that Proclus is taking great care not to exaggerate Socratic wisdom or, for that matter, the wisdom any one soul can possess. In the *Parmenides* commentary, Proclus emphasizes that despite his wisdom, Socrates does not have a fully unified vision of the Intellect as Intellect itself, instead grasping this vision only partially or particularly, that is to say, temporally, given that he is soul. As soul (whether rational or intellectual), Socrates will never completely know, or be unified with, the hypostasis Intellect, and so he, to maintain his honesty, must admit ignorance once again. He does not have such divine or complete knowledge. Yet, to be sure, through his love of the Forms, Socrates sits, as Proclus describes it, at the vantage point of the divine (*de prov.* §30; see also *ET* §211; *in Alc.* 146.1–5). In other words, Socrates at the level of the intellectual soul possesses a form of wisdom that surpasses discursive and dialectical thinking but ultimately Socrates remains, as Diotima thought of *erôs*, between the intellectual and the corporeal (see also *in Crat.* 28.20–26). For Proclus, Socrates is not between knowing in a full sense and not knowing at all, and therein only opining. He is not between certainty and complete ignorance. Rather, as Vlastos (1994, 62) may have liked, he is between certain (divine) knowledge, the unified and always existent level of the divine Intellect that thinks itself, and human knowledge, the individual rational/intellectual soul in time using methods of knowledge-acquisition such as the *elenchus* and dialectic. In his intermediary level he partakes of both knowledge and ignorance, wherein he absolutely does know (rather than merely opines) and he absolutely is ignorant as otherwise he would not know, would not ascend to different forms of knowing. Indeed, in contrast to Vlastos, who argues that Plato's Socrates changes from the early to the late dialogues, Proclus' Socrates is, throughout Plato's entire corpus, at the level of the intellectual soul contemplating the Forms, both knowing and not-knowing them. Furthermore, insofar as Proclus thinks that Socrates possesses knowledge of the Forms, he has definitive or intelligible knowledge of the causes of sensible phenomena but, to recall earlier arguments, he is also ignorant of sensible objects in themselves. Thus in a strange way Socratic knowledge sits between various forms of recognized ignorance, ignorance of the world of sense in itself

and ignorance of the Intellect in itself, but he still knows at the highest level possible for the human being, recognizing all the while its limitations.

4 Socratic Irony

Proclus' understanding of ignorance and knowledge obviously helps the Neoplatonist defend the sincerity of Socrates' confessions of ignorance while concomitantly safeguarding his avowals to knowledge. What Socrates knows, he knows as a result of his form of intellection. What Socrates does not know results both from (1) his inability to know particulars or sensible objects in themselves without reference to their causes, (2) his recognition of the limits of each level of knowing, and (3) his understanding that he is not Intellect itself but only a particular intellect at the level of soul. Yet, Proclus also champions the view that Socrates is wholly sincere in *all* that he says and does. This, of course, will seem impossible for the modern-day reader comfortable with associating Socrates with irony. Are there not an overwhelming number of instances in Plato's corpus that either suggest or blatantly demand recognition of Socrates' use of irony? Uneasy with the ascription of irony to Socrates, given that it would or could imply that he uses deceit, Proclus often arranges highly complex arguments or interprets passages allegorically, striving to defend Socrates from the charge of irony. These arguments are sometimes insufficient, as even Proclus admits, and so he concedes that in some instances Socrates is indeed ironic. Nevertheless, for Proclus this irony does not impugn Socrates' sincerity. Socrates' use of irony is for pedagogical, not nefarious, purposes; his form of irony is not deceptive but is oriented toward the good and, as such, Socrates remains wholly sincere in the sense of authentic and concerned.

For example, in his commentary on the *Timaeus*, Proclus advances an allegorical interpretation to dismiss Socrates' disavowal of military expertise and his so-called inability to praise the ideal city adequately. To justify his dismissal of irony in this passage while concomitantly admitting its possible use in other dialogues, Proclus explains that Socrates could use irony of a certain kind if he so wished but only with certain interlocutors. He explains that when Socrates talks to the wise, for example Timaeus, such a device would be inappropriate, but when he converses with the young or with haughty sophists, such expedients as irony are entirely acceptable and possibly necessary (see *in Tim.* 1.62.21–25; Tarrant 2000, 35). As Proclus writes:

Others claim that it is irony that he asserts that he is unable to praise this city adequately—just as he professes not to know various other things too.

However, this irony of Socrates was directed towards sophists and young men, not towards gentlemen of such wisdom and knowledge.

in Tim. 1.62.21–25 (tr. TARRANT)

Here we see that Proclus seems to believe that Socrates possesses a kind of *phronêsis* insofar as he has the ability to discern what methods and behaviors are appropriate in given circumstances. In fact, as we shall see in the next passage, for Proclus it is due to Socrates' form of intellection that the philosopher has the ability to see unity, definition and reason, that is, the Good, in even the most multifarious individuals: thus he can easily discern his interlocutors' needs. Because Socrates can recognize the wise as well as the ignorant, he can tailor his methods to his audience and "distinguish the right moments, characters and subject-matter, and to assign to all the appropriate kinds of discourse" (*in Alc.* 310.08–19). Socrates, as a man of knowledge, is aware of the disposition and tendencies of all those he encounters and as such can accommodate his methods to them. In other words, like the good dialectician of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates knows how to diagnose the ills of his interlocutors and to advance the speeches that are appropriate for them. For some he may use the *elenchus*, for others dialectical inquiry, while still others are compelled to the good life through the narration of myths and analogies intended to stimulate the recollection of divine realities. For Proclus this skill in discerning the right method for the peculiar person arises from Socrates' particular activity of intellection, the "intellectual" activity, which embraces all the forms of wisdom.

For everywhere Socrates pronounces the discourses in a manner suited to the characters in question; and as in the godhead all goods preexist in the form of the One, but different individuals enjoy different goods according to the natural capacity of each, so also Socrates embraces all the forms of knowledge within himself, but uses now one now another, adjusting his own activity to the requirements of the recipients.

in Alc. 28.10–29.5 (cf. 27.20–29.5, 152.1–3; tr. O'NEILL)

Noting that all of Socrates' activities are meant to lead souls from a life tending toward externals to the life of reason and the intellect, Proclus believes that Socrates' highly confrontational methods, including both the *elenchus* and his use of irony, have pedagogical intent. The *elenchus* in particular "induces contradiction, exposes disagreement of opinions and delivers us from twofold ignorance" (*in Alc.* 174.18) and thus Socrates wields it as a cathartic device (*in Parm.* 656.8–14; cf. 654.2–15, 655.1–10, 989.15–18). Socrates may use irony and even ridicule his interlocutor while employing refutation because, ultimately,

he has a praiseworthy aim, turning individuals to the care of their soul. Socrates shows himself as dramatically counter to his adversaries, the sophists, who aim “at deceit and appearances and recoil from the Truth and the One” while Socrates’ irony aims at self-knowledge and self-discovery (*in Alc.* 253.17; *in Crat.* 9.10–15).

Proclus also discusses why most individuals, including Alcibiades, confuse Socratic sincerity with irony. Proclus believes this happens because his interlocutors recognize implicitly that Socrates is wise, that he knows many things despite his admissions of ignorance, but due to their level of intellection they cannot reconcile this with his claims to ignorance, thoughtlessly accusing him of irony, ignoring the possibility that at his level of thinking Socrates can both know and not know. Focusing on Alcibiades’ inability to believe Socrates’ claim that he needs a teacher, Proclus compares Socrates to the divine, which is often misunderstood by those at a lower level of reality.

The closing phrase of the young man, “you are joking Socrates,” indicates the frame of mind of one who is already conscious of Socrates’ power and knowledge. He thinks that Socrates, though requiring nothing and possessed of knowledge, pretends to be in need of a teacher, in order to show up his poverty and want of resource on the question of what is just and unjust. And this accords with reality: as god creates all things without division, but matter receives them into itself in a divided manner, as god acts in eternity, but we participate in time, so also while Socrates says everything beneficently (ἀγαθοειδῶς) and truthfully (ἀληθευτικῶς), the young man takes his words in a different sense and thinks he is joking and casting reproaches because of his being at a loss (ἀπορίας), when Socrates is not really speaking for this reason.

in Alc. 231.3–20 (cf. 313.2–6, 132.20–24; tr. O’NEILL)

In sum, for Proclus, one should always regard Socrates as someone who acts in earnest because it is this dedication to honesty that arouses wonder in Socrates’ companions, a wonder that in turn stimulates the path to inquiry and questioning (*in Alc.* 62.10; see also 127.3). Ultimately, for Proclus, Socrates is a rare and remarkable character akin to the gods by virtue of his wisdom and as such dons the threads of a Platonic hero; for heroes, in Proclus’ eyes, are those who have been “allotted this name because they are able to raise and extend souls toward the gods” (*in Crat.* 75.25–76.3; see also 71.8–13). In short, Proclus views all of Socrates’ activities with esteem and identifies him as a person who has reached the summit of virtue, knowledge, and the good but who also does not fail to return to the cave and assist others. As Proclus writes:

But because Socrates “ventures to declare his own mind,” he descends to an activity inferior to that which abides within him; since for divine lovers, to turn towards the inferior is at any rate venturesome; but nevertheless Socrates does descend, in order that like Hercules he may lead up his beloved from Hades, and persuade him to withdraw from the life of appearance and revert to the life that is intelligent and divine, from which he will come to know both himself and the divine which transcends all beings and is their pre-existent cause.

in Alc. 133.8–13 (tr. O’NEILL)

As this explicit comparison to Hercules suggests, Socrates is not merely an exemplary soul ascending, through his own efforts, the Neoplatonic ladder of knowledge. Rather, he willingly chooses to descend in order to benefit, elevate, and order weaker individuals, purifying them from double ignorance and stimulating their reversion to the contents of their souls (cf. Layne 2017). In this, his irony is far from being a tool of deception but allows his interlocutors to finally care for the divine reasoning principles within.

Overall, in attempting to safeguard Socrates’ complete sincerity and his corresponding mission to care for the souls of all those he encounters, Proclus offers an interesting solution to a complex problem in Socratic studies. He shows that Socrates’ claims to ignorance contradict neither his specific claims to knowledge nor his general association with a kind of sage-like wisdom. Consequently, one need not appeal to irony to make sense of his avowals of ignorance. Furthermore, given Socrates’ knowledge and his sincere care for the souls of his interlocutors, any use of irony is to be taken as directive and illuminating insofar as Socrates’ attempts to lead the “less than perfect soul” (whether they be haughty youths like Alcibiades or eristic and deceptive sophists like Callicles) toward self-care.

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