

**«AN UNEXAMINED LIFE IS NOT WORTH
LIVING FOR HUMAN BEINGS»
A POLITICAL INTERPRETATION
OF SOCRATES' WATCHWORD**

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*«Has there ever been anyone else,
slave or free man, whose deliverance
from illness had been due to
Socrates?»*

Socrates in the *Gorgias*, 504d

Abstract

According to a widely held view, the disappearance of the elenchus in the middle and late dialogues would indicate an important shift in Plato's thought. This shift would be so radical that the Socrates found in the Socratic dialogues would not be the same as the Socrates of the Republic. Whereas the first would be a faithful representation of the real –historical– Socrates, the second would be a false, «platonised» Socrates. I challenge this view by shedding light on the continuity between the Socratic dialogues and the Republic concerning the issue of the examination of the soul. Paying attention to this continuity enables us to perceive the unity of Plato's project (which is motivated by a concern for politics) and to reject the idea

of the two Socrates or worse, of a «schizophrenic Socrates,» as Vlastos once put it. My analysis rests on a political interpretation of Socrates' famous watchword: «An unexamined life is not worth living for human beings».

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According to a widely held view, which the works of Gregory Vlastos served to reinforce, the disappearance of the elenchus from the dialogues of maturity would signal an important shift in Plato's thought. This shift would be so radical that the Socrates found in the so-called Socratic dialogues would not be the same as the Socrates of the *Republic*. Whereas the first would be a faithful representation of the real Socrates, the second would be a false, «platonised» Socrates. This hermeneutic perspective merits discussion because of the presuppositions on which it depends. These presuppositions have considerable implications towards the status of the true opinion and the question of knowing to whom the Socratic exhortation to practice philosophy is addressed – to humanity as a whole or to a small number of people? In this article, I will attempt to shed light on the continuity that exists between the Socratic dialogues and the *Republic* by focusing on the issue of the examination of the soul. In my view, this continuity, which finds its source in a political concern, calls for the rejection of the hypothesis of a rupture in Plato's thought, of the two Socrates, or worse, of a «schizophrenic Socrates.»¹

«An unexamined life is not liveable for human beings»

I begin by citing a passage from Vlastos concerning the possible break between an authentic Socrates and a platonised Socrates, described as

¹ «I have been speaking of a 'Socrates' in Plato. There are two of them. In different segments of Plato's corpus two philosophers bear that name. The individual remains the same. But in different sets of dialogues he pursues philosophies so different that they could not have been depicted as cohabiting the same brain throughout unless it had been the brain of a schizophrenic. They are so diverse in content and method that they contrast as sharply with one another as with any third philosophy you care to mention, beginning with Aristotle's.» Vlastos 1991, 45-46.

«crypto-oligarchical.» This passage clearly highlights the philosophical, ethical, and political implications of such a rupture:

How profoundly democratic in the broader sense of the term *these* are [namely, «Socrates political sentiments and loyalties»] we can see by comparing him on this point with Plato in the *Republic*. To confine, as Plato does in Books IV to VII of that work, moral inquiry to a tiny elite, is to obliterate the Socratic vision which opens up the philosophic life to all. If «the unexamined life is not worth living by a human being» (*Ap.* 38a), Plato's restriction of the examined life to an elite would have been seen as making life not worth living for the mass of human beings [...] Socrates democratized moral philosophy: he brought it within the reach of the «many».²

The principal components of Vlastos' reasoning could be summarized as follows:

- 1) The Socratic dialogues present an accurate portrait of Socrates.
- 2) In these dialogues –especially the *Apology*, which is a dialogue that Plato wrote early in his career– Socrates emphasizes the value of moral inquiry for all.
- 3) Thus, the historical Socrates, who was *demophilic*, opened the access to moral inquiry and philosophical life *to all*.

Furthermore,

- 4) In the *Republic*, Socrates restricts philosophical examination to the intellectual elite. (Remind dialectics

² Vlastos 1991, 18.

is the last stage of the philosopher's education; this kind of examination is not opened to all.)

- 5) Since the real Socrates was himself a *demophile* who encouraged everyone to philosophize, it becomes apparent that the philosophically elitist Plato lurks behind the Socrates of the *Republic*.

The conclusion seems evident. However, it rests on a false implicit premise. This premise is that, *examination* (here *exetasis*) on the one hand, and *moral inquiry* and *philosophical life* on the other, would be, without qualification, perfect synonyms. But what exactly are we to make of Socrates' assertion, in the *Apology*, that an unexamined life is not worth living, or even liveable?³ Does he mean that each person should devote their life to the philosophical investigation of the nature of the virtues and the Good? That people cannot live well, or even live at all, without an active and personal engagement in such «moral inquiry»? And furthermore, is dialectics, as described in the central Books of the *Republic*, really what comes to replace Socratic examination?

Context of the statement

Vlastos bases himself on the famous statement in the *Apology*, ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ (38a5-6), to argue that Socrates «opens up the philosophic life to all». It is worth looking into the meaning of that short sentence, probably the most famous of Plato's corpus. In the *Apology*, Socrates states that he spends his life philosophizing; by this, he refers to the task of submitting to examination, *exetazein*, that the god (indirectly) gave him.⁴ From a methodological

³ βιωτός is traditionally translated as «worth living». However, adjectives ending with *-tos* simply express possibility. Saying that life is «not liveable» is much stronger than to say that it is «not worth living», but I suspect that this is what Plato's Socrates had in mind.

⁴ In the sentence «You shall no longer engage in this search nor philosophize» (*Ap.* 29c), «nor» is «epexegetic» according to Vlastos, since «for Socrates, to philosophize is to examine», Vlastos 1994, 4. Brisson's translation of 28e expresses the same idea: «[...] vivre en philosophe, c'est-à-dire en soumettant moi-même et les autres à l'examen.»

standpoint, the examination consists in a questioning in search of definitions based on refutation; but what is its aim? The verb *exetazein* is not very frequent in the Platonic corpus. It is interesting to note that the terms relating to *exetasis* have a military meaning, as they indicate the inspecting of troops, the passing in review of soldiers to ensure that each one of them is rightly equipped and in his exact place.⁵ Also, in 28e-29a, Socrates appeals to the same picture, when he compares his mission to a kind of military duty and evokes the «post» (*taxis*) where the god has placed him.⁶ Taking this military meaning seriously should lead us to believe that the examination, whose importance for all is highlighted by Socrates, does not have as its objective a kind of philosophical questioning on the morals that everyone should engage in (a type of Kantian invitation –before its time– to use one’s own understanding). It would rather be a kind of verification, of inspection to which a person must agree to be *submitted*; a sort of inspection in which individuals may face admonishment for their behaviour, their orientation, and their value, or for the role they are expected to have in the whole of which they are a part.⁷ Further, this submission to examination, as Plato presents it in the

⁵ After the general meaning («examine well or closely scrutinize, review»), it is the second meaning listed in the LSJ: «of troops, inspect, pass in review». For the literal meaning, see Xenophon, *Anabasis* 5, 3, 3; Thucydides 4, 74, 3; 6, 42, 1; 6, 45, 1; 6, 96, 3; 6, 97, 3; 7, 33, 6 etc.; for the figurative sense, see Demosthenes, *On the Crown*, 320.

⁶ Socrates claims that his *exetasis* mission was not freely chosen. Rather, it was linked to a *taxis* that was ascribed to him: «This is the truth of the matter, men of Athens: wherever a man has taken a position (οὗ ἄν τις ἑαυτον τάξει) that he believes to be the best, or has been placed by his commander, there he must, I think, remain and face danger, without a thought for death or anything else, rather than disgrace. It would have been a dreadful way to behave, men of Athens, if, at Potidaea, Amphipolis and Delium, I had at the risk of death, like anyone else, remained at my post where those you had elected to command had ordered me (εἰ ὅτε μὲν με οἱ ἄρχοντες ἔταπτον), and then, when the god ordered me (τοῦ δὲ θεοῦ τάπτοντος), as I thought and believed, to live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others (φιλοσοφοῦντά με δεῖν ζῆν καὶ ἐξετάζοντα ἑμαυτὸν καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους), I had abandoned my post (λίπομι τὴν τάξιν) for fear of death or anything else.» 28d-29a.

⁷ In the *Apology*, Socrates makes many references to the fact that he regularly blamed his fellow citizens of Athens in that regard. Brisson describes Socrates’ mission as «une pratique de la philosophie entendue comme refutation révélant la valeur d’un être humain.» Brisson 2001, 94.

short dialogues, appears as a rebuttal of the pretension to knowledge in the search for definitions. However, as the statement in 38a shows well, that testing does not relate, in the end, to the intellectual ability of each citizen to find the definition of moral concepts, but rather to his life. The warnings given by Socrates after his condemnation show it clearly: life, *bios*, is the *object* of the examination.

You did this [namely, sentenced Socrates to death] in the belief that you would avoid giving an account of your life (οἰόμενοι μὲν ἀπαλλάξεσθαι τοῦ διδόναι ἔλεγχον τοῦ βίου), but I maintain that quite the opposite will happen to you. There will be more people to test you (πλείους ἔσονται ὑμᾶς οἱ ἐλέγοντες), whom I now held back, but you did not notice it. [...]. You are wrong if you believe that by killing people you will prevent anyone from reproaching you for not living in the right way. To escape such tests is neither possible nor good [...].

Apology, 39c

Therefore, in order to understand what Socrates really means when he says, ὁ δὲ ἀνεξετάστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ, one must resist the temptation to artificially separate this famous sentence from the dramatic context of the *Apology*. Indeed, we must keep in mind that during his trial, Socrates wants to convince the judges of the tremendous utility of the very unpleasant tests he imposed on his fellow citizens. So, when Socrates affirms that «an unexamined life is not liveable», perhaps we should not interpret it as «Philosophize! Dedicate your life, as I do, to an inquiry about the nature of the virtues, otherwise, you will not live well,» but rather as: «Let me examine you! Because life will not be worth living, it will not be liveable, if you condemn me in order to escape the unpleasant inspection prescribed by the god.» «You need someone like me to appraise your life, to make you realize that you don't live as you should, that you don't possess the knowledge you claim to possess, and

that this has a negative impact on your personal *bios*, as well as on our collective *bios*.»

Indeed, the reason Socrates was accused and faced capital punishment is not because he invited his fellow citizens to dedicate themselves to a free investigation into the nature of moral concepts. Rather, it is because he publicly submitted respected and influential Athenians to a humiliating test. His «inspection» revealed the inadequacy of their supposed virtue, of their supposed knowledge, and made clear, consequently, that they were usurping a «post» (*taxis*) which they did not deserve in the «life», the *bios*, of the *polis*. This is the kind of ignorance which, should it not be brought to light and denounced, risks making life, collective life in particular, not *biotós*, not liveable.⁸ The examination to which everyone must be *submitted* essentially has, then, for its objective to reveal the real state of the soul—its ignorance, *amathia*—and the need for care, that is to say, the need for education. Now, if this is the aim of Socrates' mission of examination, such a test still exists in the *Republic*. And this test, contrary to what Vlastos claims, far from being reserved to the intellectual and political elite, still applies to the whole of citizens. This is what I now want to demonstrate.

Continuity and transformation of the examination of souls as testing mode

If this continuity escaped Vlastos' attention, and if he thought it necessary to postulate the existence of two Socrates, it could simply be because he was not looking in the right place. For what takes the place of the testing and refutation to which Socrates personally submitted his interlocutors in the early dialogues is not dialectics, as Vlastos implicitly suggests. Rather, I would argue that it is the testing designed to verify which souls contain «gold», «silver», or «bronze». It is this testing which serves to distinguish the type of nature each citizen possesses, in order to

⁸ Collective life risks not being «liveable» in a very literal way if this type of usurpation leads to tyranny, for example.

assign them their particular requisite post, their *taxis*.⁹ Two principal reasons surely explain the failure to recognize this basic continuity between the Socratic examination of the early dialogues and the various methods of testing mentioned in the *Republic*, the *Politics*, and the *Laws*. First, there is the fact that interpreters typically concentrate their attention on questions of method rather than on intended purpose or aim (in this case, the elenchus that occurs in the context of a definitional inquiry).¹⁰ And second, there is the fact that, following Vlastos, research became increasingly focused on the term *elenchos*. However, *elenchos* is but one of the numerous expressions used to designate the testing to which Socrates submits his interlocutors. In order to provide a significant picture of the continuities and ruptures between the early dialogues and the great political works concerning this issue, we must first rid ourselves of this blinding fixation on the term ἔλεγχος to examine terms like οκέψις, ἐξέτασις, πεῖρα and βάσανος.¹¹

This being said, the differences between the modes of examination of the soul in the Socratic dialogues and the *Republic* seem, at first glance, so profound that it may be excessive to see a significant continuity between them. First obvious change: while Socrates submitted a particular soul to an examination taking the form of a discursive exchange in the Socratic dialogues, in the *Republic* the philosopher-kings surreptitiously submit the soul of the citizens as a collective to a series of tests, such that those whose natures are under examination are unaware of being subjected to such scrutiny. The leaders are to observe the behaviour of children while

⁹ See *Rep.* IV, 415b-c for example.

¹⁰ See Smith 1998, 152.

¹¹ R. Robinson, who wrote before Vlastos' work focused the attention of interpreters on the term *elenchos*, could still appreciate that terminological diversity. See Robinson [1941] 1984, 7: «[...] such is the Socratic elenchus,» he writes, «often referred to also as *exetasis* or scrutiny and *basanismus* or assay.» In fact, the word *basanismos*, which means «torture» according to the *LSJ*, does not appear in Plato's dialogues. We do find, however, many occurrences of the term *basanos* (16 occurrences) and *basanizein* (30 occurrences) in the platonic corpus.

they play,¹² and that of the youth in the context of their physical or intellectual training.¹³ And, in particular, leaders are to place guardian apprentices into certain destabilizing situations to observe their reactions. Each step of the guardians' education is described as a form of testing.¹⁴ The citizens of Socrates' imagined city are thus constantly submitted to an examination aiming to reveal the true nature of their souls, and to determinate the role which they shall be called upon to assume in the *polis*.

The second change is even more radical. In fact, in the earlier dialogues, the testing by Socrates essentially aimed to purge souls of their false opinions – and particularly from the belief that one knows when one does not (*amathia*). In contrast, in the *Republic*, the test aims to select

¹²*Rep.* 537a-b. In the *Statesman*, the art of statesmanship will weave the polis's fabric using only citizens who possess a good nature and will identify them by observing children's behaviour in play: «it will first put them to the test in play (παιδιᾶ πρῶτον βασανιεῖ), and after the test (μετὰ δὲ τὴν βιάσανον) it will in turn hand them over to those with the capacity to educate them and serve it towards this particular end.» (308d4). See also *Laws* 735a4, 736c2.

¹³ The way young people react to studies constitutes, as such, a test that reveals which citizens are meant to become guardians, *Rep.* 503e1. See also *Letter VII*, 340d-341a: «Those who are really not philosophers but have only a coating of opinions, like men whose bodies are tanned by the sun, when they see how much learning is required, and how great the labor, and how orderly their daily lives must be to suit the subject they are pursuing, conclude that the task is too difficult for their powers; and rightly so, for they are not equipped for this pursuit. But some of them persuade themselves that they have already sufficiently heard the whole of it and need make no further effort. Now this is a clear and infallible test to apply to those who love ease and are incapable of strenuous labour [...].»

¹⁴ Socrates explains that once they reach the age of thirty, the best ones will be selected: «[...] then, you'll have to look out for the ones who most of all have this ability in them and who also remain steadfast in their studies, in war, and in the other activities laid down by law. And after they have reached their thirtieth year, you'll select them in turn from among those chosen earlier and assign them yet greater honours. Then you'll have to test them by means of the power of dialectic (τῇ τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δυνάμει βασανίζοντα), to discover which of them can relinquish his eyes and other senses, going on with the help of truth to that which by itself is. And this is a task that requires great care.» *Rep.* 537d. Once the guardians in training go down into the cave again and occupy offices, Socrates explains that «in these too, they must be tested (καὶ ἔτι καὶ ἐν τούτοις βασανιστέοι) to see whether they'll remain steadfast when they're pulled this way and that or shift their ground.» *Rep.* 540a1.

the souls which have the best *ability to maintain* certain beliefs. The goal of the examination is no longer to *detach* the soul from some of its opinions; it rather aims to test the soul's ability to stay firmly attached to the true belief transmitted to it. Concerning the future guardians, Socrates explains that

we must choose from among our guardians those men who, upon examination, seem most of all to believe throughout their lives that they must eagerly pursue what is advantageous to the city and be wholly unwilling to do the opposite. [...] we must observe them at all ages to see whether they are guardians of this conviction and make sure that neither compulsion nor magic spells will get them to discard or forget their belief that they must do what is best for the city.

Rep. 412d-e

Modes of testing will be developed for each of the three possible alternatives to lose a true belief, namely: 1) By «theft», that is to say, through forgetting or through dissuasion by argument; 2) by «violence» or «compulsion», when one abandons the true belief because of suffering; 3) by «magic spells», when one is seduced by pleasure or when one is shaken by fear. The souls will thus be examined (here, the verbs used are βασανίζεῖν and σκοπεῖν) by being placed in certain critical situations corresponding to these three possibilities of losing a true belief through the pressure of circumstances.¹⁵

At first sight, the differences seem enormous between the examination to which Socrates submits his interlocutors in the early dialogues, and the modes of testing presented in the *Republic* (as well as in the *Politics* and the *Laws*). Thus, can we really speak of continuity between these two testing practices?

¹⁵ These are beliefs that will make the citizens care first and foremost for the well-being of the *polis*.

From a corrective horizon to a preventive horizon

First, despite the difference in method, in both groups of texts the task remains the same –to uncover the soul, to reveal its nature, its state. But more importantly, these divergent methods and approaches can be explained by a difference in the *political context*.¹⁶ Indeed, in the early dialogues, Socrates is faced with individuals whose souls have been corrupted by a hastily constituted society– a sick *politeia* in the terms of the *Republic*, a sick collective way of life or *bios*. In view of these conditions, his task is essentially *corrective*. It consists in an attempt to repair –if at all possible– the damage caused by a deficient education and defective political institutions. To do this, he must inculcate his fellow citizens with an awareness of the necessity of taking care of their souls, and of having recourse to the competence of the expert who is apt to proffer such care, the τεχνικὸς περὶ ψυχῆς θεραπείαν.¹⁷ But in the great political works, the point of view is radically different: Socrates takes the liberty of imagining how one could prevent the emergence of evil. His task is no longer to provide corrective individual care. Rather, it is to imagine what political conditions could render life liveable from psychological and civic points of view. The move away from the elenchus would thus not signify that Socrates –or Plato– abandoned the idea of a direct participation by all in philosophical life (that he ever subscribed to such an idea is doubtful). Rather, it reflects the fact that, from the perspective of imagining a form of preventive political care, the negative therapeutic process of purging false beliefs becomes less pertinent. Indeed, in a preventive context, it is the transmission of true beliefs assuring the «health» of the soul which takes precedence over everything else. Such a difference in orientation can moreover clearly be discerned in the choice

¹⁶ See Larivée 2003, 98-102.

¹⁷ *Laches* 185e4-6. On the political scope of the *elenchos*, see Balaudé 1996, 36.

of vocabulary. Since terms related to *basanos* are predominant, we see that the refutation of falsity gives way to a form of positive affirmation of value.¹⁸

Furthermore, although I will not demonstrate it here, the value attributed to true belief in the *Republic* does not denote a fundamental change in Plato's philosophical orientation. In the *Meno*, we find the statement that true belief has the same worth as knowledge about how to conduct one's life. Recall that according to Vlastos, it is with this text that Socrates' fundamental conviction—that an unexamined life is not worth living—would completely collapse:

When this conclusion is reached [namely that «for governing action aright true belief is as good as knowledge»] a whole row of Socratic dominos will have to fall, including the fundamental conviction that «The unexamined life is not worth living by a man». For if true opinion without knowledge does suffice to guide action aright, then the great mass of men and women may be spared the pain and hazards of the «examined» life: they may be brought under the protective custody of a ruling elite who will feed them true beliefs to guide their conduct aright, without allowing them to inquire why those beliefs are true. Access to the critical examination of questions of good and evil, right and wrong, may then be reasonably withheld from all but the elite, and even from them until they have finished the mathematical studies which will prepare them for enlightenment. So in the *Meno* we see Plato well started

¹⁸ While, in most cases, «to refute» (*elenchein*, *exelenchein*) involves an attempt to reveal the falsity of someone's claim (especially in the judicial context), *basanizein*, *basanon lambanein*, rather means that one attempts to attest the value of a claim. Originally, the *basanos* is the touchstone that confirms that a metal is, indeed, gold (and not merely a fraudulent alloy). In the context of a trial, the *basanos* to which a slave is submitted aims at attesting the *veracity* of his master's claims. The citizen who was accused was invited to give his slaves over to his accuser so that they could be submitted to torture in order to prove the veracity of his own declarations. See Dorion 1990, 320 *sq* and 324 *sq*.

on a course that will take him to the other extreme from convictions he had shared with Socrates in the Elenctic Dialogues: the doctrine of the philosopher-king looms ahead.¹⁹

The falseness of this reasoning becomes apparent once the purpose of the examination advocated by Socrates in the *Apology* is understood. But, in addition, one must draw attention to the constant insistence, in the early dialogues, on the necessity of having recourse to certain experts on the care of the soul, as one would have recourse to the advice of a doctor or a physical trainer. This insistence rests on the implicit valorisation of true belief, for the individual who requires and follows the expert's advice does not himself possess knowledge.²⁰ Furthermore, the idea that knowledge should not be accessible to all in every occasion and in any conditions is already being held by Socrates in the prologue of the *Protagoras*. There, he explains to the young Hippocrates that the nourishment of the soul should be «ingested» only while abiding by the advice of an expert on the matter. In short, the epistemological elitism of the *Republic* is already well at work in the so-called Socratic dialogues. We thus must resist the anachronistic temptation to construe the Socratic plea for care of the soul as an invitation to self-therapy.²¹

Surely, from a historical point of view, it is not implausible that by moving from a corrective therapeutic perspective based on individual testing to a preventative approach of a collective and political nature, it was Plato's aim to implicitly critique the method of his master. That the corrective method based on refutation and admonition proved to be fairly

¹⁹ Vlastos 1991, 125.

²⁰ Socrates makes a paradigmatic use of the figures of the physician and of the master gymnast in the *Crito* (47a-b), the *Protagoras* (313d-314a), the *Laches* (184e-185e), and the *First Alcibiades* (128c).

²¹ I defended that thesis in my PhD dissertation, *L'Asclépios politique. Étude sur le soin de l'âme dans les dialogues de Platon*.

ineffective is witnessed implicitly by the destinies of certain of Socrates' disciples represented in the early dialogues, such as Alcibiades or Charmides. It was known to Plato's contemporaries that these disciples had, in the end, turned out to be failures.²² However, from a strictly *dramatic* point of view, the coexistence of these two styles of testing –corrective and preventive– in no way threatens the coherence of Socrates' persona. He can challenge the reigning corruption by way of the *elenchos* in certain dialogues, while believing in the pertinence of a collective, educational, and political solution in others. Plato's dialogues thus only present a single Socrates. And even if he occasionally hears voices, nothing indicates that he is schizophrenic.

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²² In his Book, Scott devotes a lot of attention to Socrates' failure. See Scott 2000.

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