

---

# ἀρχαί

AS ORIGENS DO PENSAMENTO OCIDENTAL  
THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN THOUGHT

---

ARTIGO | ARTICLE

## Socrates, Vlastos, Scanlon and the Principle of the Sovereignty of Virtue

Daniel Simão Nascimento <sup>i</sup>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5451-7417>

[danielsimaonascimento@gmail.com](mailto:danielsimaonascimento@gmail.com)

<sup>i</sup> Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro – Rio de Janeiro – RJ – Brasil

NASCIMENTO, D. S. (2020). Socrates, Vlastos, Scanlon and the Principle of the Sovereignty of Virtue. *Archai* 30, e03009.

**Abstract:** This article offers a new formulation of the Socratic principle known as the Principle of the Sovereignty of Virtue (PSV). It is divided in three sections. In the first section I criticize Vlastos' formulation of the PSV. In the second section I present the weighing model of practical deliberation, introduce the concepts of reason for action, simple reason, sufficient reason and conclusive reason that were offered by Thomas Scanlon in *Being realistic about reasons*

(2014), and then I adapt these concepts so as to render them apt to be used in the formulation I intend to offer. In the third section I present my formulation of the PSV using the concepts introduced in the second section and explain why I believe this formulation is better than the one offered by Vlastos.

**Keywords:** Plato, Socrates, Vlastos, Scanlon, Virtue, Normativity.

---

## 1. Socrates, Vlastos and the Principle of the Sovereignty of Virtue

In several of Plato's dialogues we see Socrates upholding a principle that Vlastos (1985a, p. 6) famously called the Principle of the Sovereignty of Virtue (PSV).<sup>1</sup> In his article, Vlastos quotes the three passages where this principle is most clearly formulated. Following his translation, we can read them as follows:

You don't speak well, my man, if you believe that a man worth anything at all would give countervailing weight (ὑπολογίζεσθαι) to danger of life or death, instead of considering only this when he acts: whether his action is just or unjust, the action of a good or of an evil man. (*Ap.* 28b5-9)

---

<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this paper was presented in the *Internal Seminars of the Philosophy Department (UFRJ)* and at the *1<sup>st</sup> Meeting on Ancient and Medieval Philosophy of the Polyphonia Laboratory (UNIRIO)*. I am grateful to professors Carolina de Melo Bomfim Araújo, Guilherme da Costa Assunção Cecílio, Maria Inês Anachoreta, Rodrigo Brito, Anna Flaksman, Marcus Reis Pinheiro, Irley Franco, Renato Matoso Brandão, Lethicia Ouro and Marieta Dantas for all the discussions we had on these and many other occasions. I am also most grateful to professor Maura Iglésias, with whom I began to study Plato's theory of virtue back in 2008. Maura introduced me and many of my colleagues, several of which have been mentioned here, to Plato's thought, guided us through our formative years and continues to be a source of profound inspiration for all of us. I do not hesitate to say that many of us, myself included, would not have made it this far without her.

This is the truth of the matter, men of Athens: Wherever a man posts himself on his own conviction that this is best or on orders from his commander, there, I do believe, he should remain, giving no countervailing weight (μηδὲν ὑπολογιζόμενον) to death or to anything else when the alternative is to act basely. (*Ap.* 28d6-10)

But for us, since the argument thus compels us the only thing we should consider is... whether we would be acting justly [...], or, in truth, unjustly [...]. And if it should become evident that this action is unjust, then the fact that by staying here I would die or suffer anything else whatever should be given no countervailing weight (μη οὐ δέη ὑπολογίζεσθαι) when the alternative is to act unjustly. (*Cri.* 48c6-d5)

According to Vlastos, the PSV should be formulated as follows:

- (a) Whenever we must choose between exclusive and exhaustive alternatives which we have come to perceive as, respectively, just and unjust or, more generally, as virtuous (*kala*) and vicious (*aiskhra*), (b) that very perception of them should decide our choice.
- (c) Further deliberation would be useless, for (d) none of the non-moral goods we might hope to gain, taken singly or in combination, could compensate us for the loss of a moral good. (Vlastos, 1985a, p. 6)

Vlastos' formulation has been very well received.<sup>2</sup> As we can see, it can be divided in two parts: the first part – (a) and (b) – gives

---

<sup>2</sup> Even though White (1995, p. 238) questioned the compatibility of the PSV with the “Eudaimonistic Axiom” attributed by Vlastos to Socrates, Sparshott (1992, p. 421) accused Vlastos of underestimating the difficulty of articulating the proper meaning of this principle, and Moravcsik (1993, p. 208-209) highlighted that the division of good into moral and non-moral goods raised certain doubts that Vlastos' text did not completely address, none of these authors questioned the adequacy of the formulation of the PSV offered by Vlastos. Indeed, Sparshott (1992, p. 421) even went so far as to affirm that “[...] Vlastos admirably disentangles Socrates' meaning here [...]”. Vlastos' formulation is also explicitly retaken without any criticism in Irwin (1992, p. 253), and there are many reviews of Vlastos (1991), where Vlastos (1985a) is reprinted, in which several of the arguments defended by Vlastos are criticized without any criticism whatsoever being directed against his formulation of the PSV. A few examples are Kraut (1992), Taylor (1992) and Jaulin

us the formulation of the principle, and the second part – (c) and (d) – gives us a first clue about the way Plato’s Socrates tries to justify this principle. The reason I say the second part only offers us a first clue about the principle’s justification is because, although it does begin to tell us why Socrates thinks we should believe the PSV, it does not explain why we should believe that the justification offered is true.

Even though this clue itself is not contained in the three passages quoted above, by including it in his formulation Vlastos was merely following a consensus that is still alive and well among platonic scholars. For it does seem to be common ground among specialists that Socrates justifies his hypothesis about the value of virtuous actions by reference to the good, or goods, which it procures, and the evil, or evils, which it avoids.

Having said that, it is important to notice that, if we take Vlastos’ formulation literally, the PSV is a principle that states not only that (a) the fact that we are in a given situation is sufficient to determine which is the best course of action available to us, but also that (b) we should trust the perception we have of our situation when it comes to ascertain that fact. Indeed, when we say that the perception that one of the alternatives is vicious and the other is virtuous, and that they are exclusive and exhaustive in a given context, should, by itself, *determine* our choice, what seems to be implied here is that such a judgment should *always* determine our choice *immediately* and *no matter how we have come to perceive this*. However, there seems to be at least two strong reasons for us to believe that by affirming the PSV Socrates is only holding (a), and not (b).<sup>3</sup>

---

(1996). Finally, it is also worth noticing that Vlastos’ formulation has been hailed as “definitive” by Kahn (1992, p. 234).

<sup>3</sup> One might wonder whether Vlastos himself intended his formulation to be read in this way or if he intended to say only that, once it is clear what action is virtuous and which is vicious in a given situation, further deliberation about goods and evils included in the situation do not need to be investigated and weighed. However this may be, our point is not about his intentions but about his formulation and, if taken literally, it does make the claim that our perceptions about whether the actions open

The first reason is that there is no affirmation regarding the reliability of our perceptions in any of the three passages quoted above. The second reason is that in the *Crito* we see clearly that, as always, Socrates is very much open to reexamining his beliefs about his situation. Indeed, he makes a point of telling Crito that if he, Crito, can convince him, Socrates, that he is mistaken when he thinks that escaping from prison and avoiding the death sentence is in fact unjust, then he will accept the escape plan that is being offered by Crito. This happens when Socrates affirms twice that he and Crito ought to examine (σκεπτέον) if it would be just to execute Crito's plan (see 48b-c and 48c-d), even though he, Socrates, has already stated that he has a position on the matter (46b-c). This openness that Socrates displays to reviewing his beliefs suggests that he did not endorse (b).

In order to avoid this problem one could suggest a small correction in Vlastos' formulation so that it would state that whenever we must choose between exclusive and exhaustive alternatives which we have come to judge, *after investigation*, as virtuous and vicious, that very judgment of them should decide our choice.

This suggestion, however, is also problematic because it supposes that Socrates thinks that there is some sort of investigation that is enough to settle the matter, and that the cognitive state in which we arrive after such an investigation ought, by itself, to decide our choice. But if we observe the conclusions of the discussions about the PSV that we can find in the *Gorgias* (508e6-509b1) and the *Crito* (54d-e) we see that on both occasions Socrates invites his interlocutors to question his judgment ever again, not allowing, therefore, that the judgment that he already possesses, and which has been arrived at after investigation, should determine his choice before

---

to us are virtuous or vicious should decide our choice whenever we must choose between exclusive and exhaustive alternatives which we have come to perceive as, respectively, virtuous and vicious.

he listens to any argument that his interlocutor still might want to submit for his appreciation.<sup>4</sup>

This openness of Socrates to opposing arguments should be taken seriously. Even though Socrates seems to recognize the possibility of acquiring knowledge about the just and the unjust when he tells Crito that they should only consider the opinion of those who know (ἐπαίῳν) the just and the unjust (48a), we must recognize not only that throughout the platonic dialogues we see the character of Socrates claim knowledge and ignorance about these things in ways that are apparently contradictory, but also that there is still controversy among interpreters over whether he thought that one could ever acquire knowledge about these things.<sup>5</sup>

Given the current state of these controversies, it would be desirable to arrive at a formulation of the PSV that took no definite position about them, for only such a formulation could be accepted independently of the position one takes in these matters. In the next sections I will use the concept of reason for action in order to offer such a formulation. While I do not claim that this is the only possible way of formulating the PSV, I do claim that the formulation offered here maintains the scope and the strength of the Socratic principle, avoids the problem we found in Vlastos' formulation and can be accepted regardless of our position about Socrates' opinion on the limits of our knowledge.

## 2. The weighing model of practical deliberation

The best way for us to approach the concept of reason for action is to say that it presupposes what Berker (2007, p. 114) called the

---

<sup>4</sup> On this point, see Wolfsdorf (2004, p. 89).

<sup>5</sup> On Socrates avowals and disavowals of knowledge, see f. ex. Gulley (1968, p. 63-69), Kraut (1984, p. 274-279), Vlastos (1985b, p. 11-20), Leshner (1987), Reeve (1989, p. 14-62), Brickhouse & Smith (1994, p. 30-45), Irwin (1995, p. 29), Benson (2000, p. 238), Wolfsdorf (2004), Forster (2007) and Fine (2008). On the limits of knowledge according to Socrates, see f. ex. Fine (1978), Fine (1990), Gonzalez (1996), Gerson (2003, p. 50-98, p. 248-238), Butler (2007) and Fine (2016).

weighing model of practical deliberation. According to this model, the different actions we can perform possess a variety of aspects, or properties, that are facts about these actions. Some of these aspects generate reasons for us to do or not to do them, and some of these aspects generate no such reasons. When they do generate such reasons, each of these reasons has a given force, or weight, and the relative value of each action can be determined by the weighing of the different reasons for and against the performance of each given action. Last but not least, through this weighing we can discover which actions are better or worse and determine why they are better or worse. For the facts that generate these reasons are the same facts that aggregate or disaggregate value to a given action.

Can we find any textual evidence to support the claim that Plato's Socrates adopts such a weighing model of practical deliberation? Luckily for us, Vlastos himself has already noticed that this model seems to be implicit in a passage that is very important for our understanding of the way Socrates explains human actions, namely, in his analysis, developed in the *Protagoras*, of the phenomenon that would later come to be called *akrasia* by Aristotle.

In this passage, Socrates says the following about the way we should choose between pleasant and painful things:

[...] like someone who is good at weighing (ιστάνα) things, add up (συνθεις) all the pleasant things and all the painful, and put the element of nearness and distance in the scale as well, and then say which are the more. For if you weigh (ιστῆς) pleasant things against pleasant, you always have to take (ληπτέα) the larger and the more, and if you weigh painful things less and the smaller. And if you weigh pleasant things against painful, if the painful are outweighed (ὑπερβάλληται) by the pleasant, no matter which are nearer and which more distant, you have to do (πρακτέον) whatever brings the pleasant about, and if the pleasant are outweighed by the painful, you have to avoid doing it (οὐ πρακτέα). (*Prt.* 356a-c)

As we can see, Socrates himself employs a vocabulary that suggests he does indeed accept the weighing model of practical

deliberation. The verb ἴσθημι, which appears several times in this passage, means precisely “to weigh”. The verb συντίθημι, on the other hand, is used here in the sense of “to add up”, which is what, according to Socrates, one is supposed to do with both the pleasant things and the painful things before one makes a choice. Last but not least, the verb ὑπερβάλλω is used in the sense of “exceeding”, “surpassing” or “prevailing”, and can very well be translated as “outweighing” precisely because of the occurrences of ἴσθημι and συντίθημι that precede it. Last but not least, the words ληπτέα, πρακτέον and πρακτέα indicate that Socrates is giving us an account of how one can choose correctly between these things.<sup>6</sup>

As Vlastos (1969, p. 73-74, n. 12) has noted, “the Socratic procedure in this passage invites comparison with the Bayesian model of deliberation in present-day decision theory”. Since to understand this comparison we must understand how Vlastos himself understood this model, it will be prudent to quote here a small passage of the first chapter Jeffrey’s book titled “The logic of decision” (1983), which is the only reference mentioned by him when he mentions the Bayesian model of deliberation. According to what is said there,

[...] the agent’s notions of the probabilities of the relevant circumstances and the desirabilities of the possible consequences are represented by sets of numbers combined to compute an expected desirability for each of the acts under consideration. The Bayesian principle for deliberation is then to perform an act which has maximum expected desirability. (Jeffrey, 1983, p. 1)

This model clearly resembles the one we are arguing that Socrates’ is committed to, even though Socrates’ model does seem to be a lot cruder because it does not seem to take account of the probability factor in our choices. Once we forget this factor, all it seems necessary to concede so we can move from the Bayesian model as delineated by Jeffrey to the model we are proposing to

---

<sup>6</sup> On this point, see Taylor (2002, p. 189-190).



attribute to Socrates are the ideas that a desirable feature of an action counts as a reason for doing it, an undesirable feature of an action counts as a reason against doing it and that, when weighing our options, we should choose our actions based on the balance of the desirable and undesirable features of the actions that are open to us, i.e. of the reasons for acting which we have in a given circumstance. This, I believe, is pretty much what Vlastos' himself had in mind when he aptly described Socrates' position in the *Protagoras* as follows:

When Socrates says that the man who knows "good" will never be "overpowered" so as to choose "evil" instead, he is speaking of the goodness or badness of courses of action, particularized in concrete situations as viable alternatives between which the agent has to choose. These are good or bad on the whole or all things considered, since they are generally (invariably, in the examples in this passage) mixed bags of "goods" and "evils" of another sort: they are complexes of components to which first-order value assignments have already been made. Saying that an action is good or bad is a second-order value-judgment which is, in principle, a computation: we are supposed to (a) itemize the goods we would gain and the evils we would suffer both now and in the future by choosing a given action, (b) assign numbers to the values in each of the two categories, and (c) pronounce the action "good" or "evil" depending on which of the two aggregates is the larger. (Vlastos, 1969, p. 73)

Although Vlastos' reading of this passage of the *Protagoras* as a whole has failed to convince many specialists,<sup>7</sup> no one has raised any doubts about this characterization of the procedure of practical deliberation that is being proposed by Socrates. Once we attribute

---

<sup>7</sup> In Vlastos (1969, p. 74), the author held that Socrates' argument does not need to rely on a hedonist premise, i.e. a premise according to which the pleasant and the good are identical. Dissenting interpretations can be found in Hackforth (1928, p. 42), Sullivan (1961, p. 19), Sesonske (1963, p. 79), Gosling and Taylor (1982, p. 50), Annas (1999, p. 167-171), Weiss (2006, p. 20-24) and Irwin (2007, p. 34). Amongst those who side with Vlastos' on this point are Frede (1992, p. xxv-xxviii), Migliori (2004, p. 529), and Taylor (2002, p. 164-165).

such thoughts to Socrates we're already very close to attributing to him the weighing model of practical deliberation. All we need to make that further step is to say that, according to Socrates, the goods we would gain by doing an action are reasons for doing it, and the evils we would suffer for doing an action are reasons not to do it.

Having recognized that, one might still grant that Socrates indeed adopted such a model in the discussion of the *Protagoras* and doubt whether such a model is presupposed in any of the other platonic dialogues, whether we take them to be Socratic – and whatever that may mean to each of us – or not. But to even begin dispelling such doubts one would have to go through other platonic dialogues, and constraints of space make it impossible to do that here.

For now, all I can do is point out that some contemporary scholars who have dedicated themselves to studying the concept of reason for action have already held that the idea that human beings act based on reasons which explain and justify their behavior can already be found in the works of Plato,<sup>8</sup> that some leading scholars throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century have used this concept to explain the thoughts of Plato's Socrates without bothering to give any definition of it,<sup>9</sup> and that we find no criticism of these attempts of explanation in the secondary bibliography which is aimed specifically against the use of this concept in any dialogue whatsoever.

If what is said above is correct, since the concept of a reason for action presupposes the weighing model of practical deliberation, then all these scholars have been using such a model, either implicitly or explicitly, to explain the thoughts of Plato's Socrates. In the absence of any argument to the effect that we should not do so, I take it that

---

<sup>8</sup> F. ex. Alvarez, 2016, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> F. ex. Rudebusch (1999, p. 33), Dimas (2002, p. 25), Carone (2003, p. 289), Miller Jr. (2005, p. 71), Barney (2006, p. 46), Shields (2006, p. 63-66), Rowe (2007, p. 99), Evans (2008, p. 121), Butler (2008, p. 235), Brickhouse & Smith (2010, p. 81, 84-85, 125), Brown (2012, p. 47) and Benson (2015, p. 40).

such a use has become acceptable, even if not universally adopted, in contemporary scholarship.

Nevertheless, one could also object that, although this use has indeed become a sort of commonplace, these uses of the weighing model of practical deliberation and the concept of reason for action left something to be desired precisely because they were not accompanied by a clear formulation of these concepts. Although we already began to give such a formulation for the weighing model of practical deliberation, the reader is still entitled to ask what exactly are these “reasons” we are talking about.

I believe we can begin to answer this question by resorting to the work of Thomas Scanlon. Taking the weighing model of practical deliberation for granted, Scanlon offers the following general characterization of a reason for action:

Whether a certain fact is a reason, and what it is a reason for, depends on an agent’s circumstances. The fact that this piece of metal is sharp is a reason for me not to press my hand against it, but under different circumstances it might be a reason to press my hand against it, and under still different circumstances a reason to do something else, such as to put it into the picnic basket if I will later have reason to want to cut cheese. This suggests that “is a reason for” is a four-place relation,  $R(p, x, c, a)$ , holding between a fact  $p$ , an agent  $x$ , a set of conditions  $c$ , and an action or attitude  $a$ . This is the relation that holds just in case  $p$  is a reason for a person  $x$  in situation  $c$  to do or hold  $a$ . (Scanlon, 2014, p. 30-31)

Although I believe this characterization is a good place for us to start, I cannot use it for my purpose without first making a few observations about its content.

The first observation concerns the affirmation according to which if a certain fact is a reason, and what this reason recommends, depends on the circumstances in which the agent is involved. At first, this affirmation may suggest that there are no facts which give an agent a reason for acting in a given way in every circumstance. Since there seems to be good reasons for us to believe that Plato’s Socrates

never held this, this aspect of Scanlon's definition calls for adaptation.

Indeed, in his pioneering analysis of the phenomenon of *akrasia* in the *Protagoras* we see Plato's Socrates argue as if the pleasure that is experienced in the performance of an action *always* counts in favor of its performance. Although whether or not this thesis about the normative force of pleasure is compatible with what Socrates' say elsewhere in Plato's dialogues about both pleasure and goods, or the good, is still a matter of controversy,<sup>10</sup> it seems clear that Socrates does believe at least that the fact that an action is virtuous always gives us a reason to perform it.

Bearing in mind these two examples, and the fact that at this moment it does not seem possible or desirable to hold that according to Plato's Socrates whenever a fact gives us a reason to act in a given way it gives us a reason to act in this way in any circumstance whatsoever, it seems the most prudent way of moving forward is to hold that according to the philosopher some facts may give us reason to act in a way in some circumstances, not give us any reason to act in a way or another in other circumstances and give us a reason to act in a different way in yet other circumstances, but that there are facts that always give us reason to act in a given way in every circumstance.

The second observation concerns the possibility that an affirmation about a fact that gives us reason to act in a certain way is made without adequate specification of the circumstances in which this fact gives us this reason. As Scanlon (2014, p. 32) himself already noticed, our affirmations about our reasons for acting are often vague in this respect, and it would be a mistake to hold that just because they are vague in this way they are not actually claims about

---

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see f. ex Hackforth (1945, p. 106), Taylor (1956, p. 80), Gosling & Taylor (1982, p. 152-154), Ferejohn (1984, p. 109-115), Vlastos (1985a, p. 13-14), Reeve (1989, p. 130-136), Annas (1993, p. 57), Brickhouse & Smith (1994, p. 106, n. 8), Irwin (1995, p. 55-56), Carone (2000, p. 265), Reshotko (2001), Evans (2008, p. 125, n. 10), Carpenter (2011), Rider (2012a, p. 2, 13), Rider (2012b, p. 208, 222-226), Aufderheide (2013), Adams (2014) and Fletcher (2014, p. 115).

reasons for acting. This is an important point for the argument developed here because, as we shall see shortly, Plato's Socrates does not clarify what are the circumstances in which the PSV holds.

The third observation is that a few pages ahead Scanlon will remark that, since reasons can have different normative force, it would be more appropriate to say that the basic normative relation is a relation that should be formulated using five terms, and not four, and that this should be done as follows: the fact that  $p$ , is a reason of strength  $s$  for an agent  $x$ , in circumstances  $c$ , to do  $a$  (Scanlon, 2014, p. 109).

According to Scanlon (2014, p. 105-108), we ought to recognize three "kinds" of reason. But even though Scanlon's formulations of these three kinds of reasons has intrinsic interest, they also cannot be used to clarify the PSV without adaptation. Therefore, I propose the following reformulation of these concepts in order to use them in my formulation of the PSV.

An agent ( $a$ ) has a *simple reason* to perform an action ( $f$ ) in a given circumstance ( $c$ ) when there is a fact ( $p$ ) that counts in favor of the performance of  $f$  in  $c$  such a way that, when  $p$  is the case and all else is equal, it will be better that  $a$  performs  $f$  – all else being equal in any scenario where there are no opposing reasons that speak in favor of an alternative and incompatible course of action.

An agent ( $a$ ) has a *sufficient reason* to perform an action ( $f$ ) in a given circumstance ( $c$ ) when there is a fact ( $p$ ) that creates a reason in  $c$  whose normative force prevails over, or outweighs, all other reasons created by all other facts that are the case in  $c$ . Every sufficient reason is a simple reason, but not every simple reason is a sufficient reason. In order to determine which simple reasons are sufficient reasons, we need to clarify what is meant when we say that some reasons prevail over, or outweigh, others.

I shall say that, in a scenario where  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  are mutually exclusive actions, a fact ( $p_1$ ) that gives an agent ( $a$ ) a reason ( $r_1$ ) that recommends  $f_1$  prevails over, or outweighs, a fact ( $p_2$ ) that gives the same agent ( $a$ ) a reason ( $r_2$ ) that recommends  $f_2$  when it is the case

that, given circumstances that are identical in all other pertinent aspects,  $p_2$  is sufficient to make it better that  $a$  performs  $f_2$  when  $p_1$  is not the case, but  $p_1$  is sufficient to make it better that  $a$  performs  $f_1$  whether  $p_2$  is or is not the case.

Last but not least, an agent ( $a$ ) has a *conclusive reason* to perform an action ( $f$ ) in a given circumstance ( $c$ ) when there is a fact ( $p$ ) that creates a reason in  $c$  of such normative weight that it is better that  $a$  performs  $f$  no matter what else may be the case in  $c$ . The fact that generates a *conclusive reason* renders any further deliberation and investigation about an agent's normative situation unnecessary. Every conclusive reason is a sufficient reason and, therefore, a simple reason, but not every sufficient reason is a conclusive reason. A fact that is a sufficient reason is only conclusive in a given circumstance if, once ascertained, it renders unnecessary any further deliberation and investigation about an agent's normative situation in those circumstances.

If we accept these formulations, we should recognize not only that there are three kinds of reason, but also that to be a reason for action is to be a fact that aggregates value to a given action for a given person in a given situation. If we do so, we will have a definition of a reason for action in general and of the different kinds of reasons for action that exist. But there are still two further clarification that need to be made.

The first clarification concerns the use of the word 'better' in my formulations. Although the use of this term might give the impression that the formulation proposed here commits Socrates to some sort of utilitarianism, this is not the case. Since I haven't said anything about how exactly Plato's Socrates thinks that we should measure which actions are better, this formulation is neutral in what concerns the controversy over whether or not Plato's Socrates recognized the so called "non-eudaimonistic reasons", i.e. reasons for acting that are

not related to the promotion of the happiness of the agent that acts or of anybody else.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, all we need to attribute to Plato's Socrates in order to understand the use of the word "better" in my formulations of the different kinds of reasons for action is the thought that a fact that is a reason for an action is a "good-making" fact about that action, i.e. a fact that aggregates value to it. For, if that is so, since my formulation only established a fact as a reason for action all else being equal, and since I've delimited the scenarios in which all else is equal as the scenarios in which there are no opposing reasons that speak in favor of an alternative and incompatible course of action, it seems we can indeed say that in such cases "good-making" facts are "better-making" facts, i.e. facts that establish a given action as having more value than the alternative course of action, no matter the way we propose to measure the values of different courses of action.

The second clarification concerns the concepts of sufficient and conclusive reasons for acting. Although Scanlon himself formulates these concepts in terms of particular facts that give an agent a reason for a given course of action, and I myself have followed his lead here, the author rightly points out that often it is not a single fact, but a set of facts, that gives an agent a sufficient or a conclusive reason to act in a certain way (Scanlon, 2014, 107-108). Since I see no reason to say that Plato's Socrates would want to disagree, I shall also hold that this can be the case.

Once more, this is an important observation because, as we shall see shortly, we have good reason to believe that in the circumstances in which the PSV holds it is a set of facts, and not an isolated fact, which generates the reason for action that, according to Socrates, the

---

<sup>11</sup> As far as I can tell the majority of specialists still suppose that according to Plato's Socrates every reason for action is somehow connected to the agent's happiness. Two rare exceptions are Sparshott (1992, p. 421) and Crisp (2003, p. 65). According to them, Plato's Socrates not only recognizes the existence of non-eudaimonistic reasons but also holds that in some contexts these reasons could be sufficient, if not conclusive, reasons for acting.

individuals which find themselves in these circumstances have for acting in accordance with the PSV.

### **3. Virtue as a conclusive reason: the sovereignty of virtue and the weighing model of practical deliberation**

In order to begin delineating my formulation of the first part of PSV I will need to answer three questions: what is the action that the PSV recommends? What are the circumstances in which the PSV is valid? And, finally, what is the strength of the reason provided by the fact, or set of facts, that gives us reason to perform the action that the PSV recommends?

The first question is the one most easily answered: the PSV recommends virtuous actions instead of vicious actions.

As for the second question, we should start by recognizing that in his formulations of the PSV Socrates does not clarify what exactly are the circumstances in which the PSV is valid. Indeed, even though it is clear that this principle recommends virtuous actions instead of vicious actions, Socrates does not tell us if he thinks that in every situation there are virtuous and vicious actions that are open to us and among which we must choose, if there are some circumstances in which we must choose between actions that are neither vicious nor virtuous, if there are circumstances in which we must choose between virtuous actions, or if there are circumstances in which we must choose between vicious actions.

Be that as it may, I believe Vlastos was right when he began his formulation of the PSV stating that “(a) whenever we must choose between exclusive and exhaustive alternatives which we have come to perceive as, respectively, just and unjust or, more generally, as virtuous (*kala*) and vicious (*aiskhra*), [...]” (Vlastos, 1985a, p. 6). As I understand it, what Vlastos’ formulation implies is that the PSV holds in situations where an agent has to choose between the performance of an action that is simply virtuous, i.e. is not vicious in



any way, and the performance of an action that is simply vicious, i.e. is not virtuous in any way.

In what concerns the strength of the reason that is provided by these facts that are the case when the PSV is valid, we have seen that Socrates clearly states that when the PSV applies we should give no countervailing weigh to any goods that could be gained by any other alternative to the just action. The Greek verb that was translated by Vlastos' as "give countervailing weigh" is *ὑπολογίζομαι*. Although one could argue that the more literal translation would be "take into account", it seems clear that to take into account, in the context of the above-mentioned passages, means to measure the eventual benefits of the alternative courses of action that Plato's character is discarding. Once we see that, the three passages quoted can be understood either as claiming that some facts are not reasons for action at all in the circumstances in which the PSV applies or, if they are, that they carry so little weight in those circumstances that an agent shouldn't even bother to include them in his calculations.<sup>12</sup> This is why Vlastos' formulation stated that "further deliberation would be useless" (Vlastos 1985a, p. 6).

If that is indeed correct, it seems we must conclude that, according to Socrates, when an agent finds himself in a situation where the PSV applies, such an agent has a conclusive reason to perform the just action. Having established that, we can then formulate the first part of the PSV as follows: *whenever we must choose between two exclusive and exhaustive actions of which one is virtuous and the other is vicious, we have a conclusive reason to perform the virtuous action.*

We can now move on to the second part of the PSV. As we've seen above, this part of Vlastos' formulation is actually about the justification of the PSV, and it has been formulated by him as stating that "(c) further deliberation would be useless, for (d) none of the

---

<sup>12</sup> Although it would be interesting to determine which of these two options represents the position held by Plato's Socrates, I shall leave this question for another occasion.

non-moral goods we might hope to gain, taken singly or in combination, could compensate us for the loss of a moral good” (Vlastos, 1985a, p. 6). In order to delineate my formulation of this part of the PSV I will need to clarify what are the facts that, according to Socrates, give us conclusive reason to act in accordance with the PSV, what is the difference between the “moral” and “non-moral” goods to which Vlastos’ is referring, and how can we conclude from this difference and from the first part of the PSV that, whenever this principle applies, an individual has a conclusive reason to act in accordance with it.

In what concerns the difference between moral and non-moral goods, Vlastos himself clarified his meaning when he defined the moral goods as the five canonical virtues recognized by Socrates’, and the non-moral goods as every other good.<sup>13</sup> His point, I take it, is that Socrates thinks that by acting virtuously people become more virtuous, i.e. achieve some gain in virtue, and by acting unjustly people become more unjust, i.e. suffer some loss in virtue.

In what concerns the facts that, according to Socrates, give us conclusive reason to act in accordance with the PSV, it seems that the answer must point out that, according to what was said above, in order for the PSV to hold three facts must be the case: (1) the agent must be choosing between two actions, (2) one of the actions must be

---

<sup>13</sup> “[...] Socrates is confronting that fatality of our lives which forces us to choose between competing values or, in the more down-to-earth language he uses himself, between competing ‘goods’ (ἀγαθά). He would recognize (cf. e.g. Eud. 279A-B) a wide variety of such ἀγαθά. Physical goods, to begin with: bodily health and strength, good looks; life itself as a biological fact – living as distinct from living well. Next on his list would come those social and intellectual goods which Socrates takes to be morally neutral, seeing no moral merit in their possession or stigma in their dispossession. Such he thinks wealth, social connections, good reputation and prestige, success in politics or war. Such too he thinks that cleverness or quickness of mind which the wickedly cunning may have on a par with the wisely good. Over against all these he sets the moral goods, his five canonical virtues, all of which, given his well-known doctrine of the unity of the virtues, stand or fall together: whatever stake any of them has in a given choice, each of the other four has the same” (Vlastos, 1985a, p. 6). This use of the terms “moral” and “non-moral” can also be found in the works of other scholars, see. f. ex. Irwin, 2003, p. 87-88.

simply virtuous and (3) the other action must be simply vicious. Now, fact (1) by itself does not seem to generate any reason for an agent to act in any given way, but it seems very plausible to say that, according to Socrates, both facts (2) and (3) do generate reasons for an agent to do the virtuous action. Since, as we held before, the PSV only applies in situations where the agent must choose between two options which are exclusive and exhaustive, a reason not to do one of them is a reason to do the other. Therefore, it seems in such a scenario both the fact that one of the actions is vicious and the fact that the other action is virtuous gives the agent a reason to perform the virtuous action.

If that is really so, we can formulate the PSV as follows: *whenever we must choose between two exclusive and exhaustive actions of which one is virtuous and the other is vicious, we have a conclusive reason to perform the virtuous action. Further deliberation would be useless, because the gain in virtue provided by the performance of any virtuous actions coupled with the loss in virtue provided by the performance of any vicious action gives us a reason to do any virtuous action that outweighs any reasons we could possibly have to do any vicious action.*

If what is said above is correct, I believe we can say this formulation maintains the scope and the strength of the Socratic principle, avoids the problem we found in Vlastos' formulation by making no claim about the reliability of our perceptions, and can be accepted regardless of our position about Socrates' opinion on the limits of our knowledge. For these reasons, I think it ought to be preferred.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> This paper was written as part of the project "Capacities and dispositions: explanatory principles of action in Plato and Aristotle", which was contemplated with financial aid by the *National Council for Scientific and Technological Development* – CNPq in the Universal Call MCTIC/CNPQ N° 28/2018.

## Bibliography

- ADAMS, D. (2014). Sophia, Eutuchia and Eudaimonia in the Euthydemus. *Apeiron* 47, n. 1, p. 48-80.
- ALVAREZ, M. (2016). "Reasons for Action: Justification, Motivation, Explanation". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Winter 2016 Edition*. Ed. by Edward N. Zalta. Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/reasons-just-vs-expl/>.
- ANNAS, J. (1993). Virtue as the Use of Other Goods. *Apeiron* 26, n. 3-4, p. 53-66.
- ANNAS, J. (1999). *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*. New York, Cornell University Press.
- AUFDERHEIDE, J. (2013). An Inconsistency in the Philebus? *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, n. 5, p. 817-837.
- BARNEY, R. (2006). Socrates' Refutation of Thrasymachus. In: SANTAS, G. X. (ed.). *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's Republic*. Malden, Blackwell Publishers, p. 44-62.
- BENSON, H. H. (2000). *Socratic Wisdom: The Model of Knowledge in Plato's Early Dialogues*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- BENSON, H. H. (2015). *Clitophon's Challenge: Dialectic in Plato's Meno, Phaedo, and Republic*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- BERKER, S. (2007). Particular Reasons. *Ethics* 118, n. 1, p. 109-139.
- BRICKHOUSE, T. C.; SMITH, N. D. (1994). *Plato's Socrates*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- BRICKHOUSE, T. C.; SMITH, N. D. (2010). *Socratic Moral Psychology*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- BROWN, L. (2012). Glaucon's Challenge, Rational Egoism and Ordinary Morality. In: CAIRNS, D.; HERRMANN, F.-G.; PENNER, T. (eds.). *Pursuing the Good: Ethics and Metaphysics in Plato's Republic*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 42-60.
- BUTLER, J. (2008). A Holistic Defense of Justice in the Republic. *Apeiron* 41, n. 4, p. 229-246.

- BUTLER, T. (2007). On Today's Two-Worlds Interpretation: Knowledge and True Belief in Plato. *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 45, n. 1, p. 31-56.
- CARONE, G. R. (2000). Hedonism and the Pleasureless Life in Plato's *Philebus*. *Phronesis* 45, n. 4, p. 257-283.
- CARONE, G. R. (2003). The Place of Hedonism in Plato's *Laws*. *Ancient Philosophy* 23, n. 2, p. 283-300.
- CARPENTER, A. D. (2011). Pleasure as Genesis in Plato's *Philebus*. *Ancient Philosophy* 31, n. 1, p. 73-94.
- CRISP, R. (2003). Socrates and Aristotle on Happiness and Virtue. In: HEINAMAN, R. (ed.). *Plato and Aristotle's Ethics*. Aldershot, Ashgate, p. 55-78.
- DIMAS, P. (2002). Happiness in the *Euthydemus*. *Phronesis* 47, n. 1, p. 1-27.
- EVANS, M. (2008). Plato's Anti-Hedonism. *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium of Ancient Philosophy* 23, n. 1, p. 121-145.
- FEREJOHN, M. T. (1984). Socratic Thought-Experiments and the Unity of Virtue Paradox. *Phronesis* 29, n. 2, p. 105-122.
- FINE, G. (1978). Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V*. *Archiv Für Geschichte Der Philosophie* 60, n. 2, p. 121-139.
- FINE, G. (1990). Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V-VII*. In: EVERSON, S. (ed.). *Companions to Ancient Thought 1: Epistemology*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 85-115.
- FINE, G. (2008). Does Socrates Claim to Know That He Knows Nothing? In: INWOOD, B. (ed.). *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*. Vol. 35. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 49-88.
- FINE, G. (2016). The 'Two Worlds' Theory in the *Phaedo*. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, n. 4, p. 557-572.
- FLETCHER, E. (2014). Plato on Pure Pleasure and the Best Life. *Phronesis* 59, n. 2, p. 113-142.
- FORSTER, M. (2007). Socrates' Profession of Ignorance. In: SEDLEY, D. N. (ed.). *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*. Vol. 32. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 1-35.

FOWLER, H. N. (trans.) (1990). Plato. *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*. London, Harvard University Press.

FREDE, M. (1992). Introduction. In: LOMBARDO, S.; BELL, K. (trans.). Plato. *Protagoras*. Indianapolis, Hackett Pub. Co.

GERSON, L. P. (2003). *Knowing Persons: A Study in Plato*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

GONZALEZ, F. (1996). Propositions or Objects? A Critique of Gail Fine on Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V*. *Phronesis* 41, n. 3, p. 245-275.

GOSLING, J. C. B.; TAYLOR, C. C. W. (1982). *The Greeks On Pleasure*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

GULLEY, N. (1968). *The Philosophy of Socrates*. New York, St. Martin's Press.

HACKFORTH, R. (1928). Hedonism in Plato's *Protagoras*. *Classical Quarterly* 22, n. 1, p. 39-42.

HACKFORTH, R. (1945). *Plato's Examination of Pleasure*. A Translation of the *Philebus*, with Introduction and Commentary. New York, Bobbs-Merrill.

IRWIN, T. (1992). Socratic Puzzles: A Review of Gregory Vlastos, Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher. In: ANNAS, J. (ed.). *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*. Vol. 10. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 241-266.

IRWIN, T. (1995). *Plato's Ethics*. New York, Oxford University Press.

IRWIN, T. (2003). Glaucon's Challenge: Does Aristotle Change His Mind? In: HEINAMAN, R. (ed.). *Plato and Aristotle's Ethics*. Aldershot, Ashgate, p. 87-108.

IRWIN, T. (2007). *The Development of Ethics: From Socrates to the Reformation*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

JAULIN, A. (1996). *Socrate, Ironie et philosophie morale, (Socrates, Ironist and moral philosopher)* by Gregory Vlastos, Catherine Dalimier. *Revue Philosophique de La France et de l'Étranger* 186, n. 1, p. 167-169.

- JEFFREY, R. C. (1983). *The Logic of Decision*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- KAHN, C. (1992). Vlastos's Socrates. *Phronesis* 37, n. 2, p. 233-258.
- KRAUT, R. (1984). *Socrates and the State*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- KRAUT, R. (1992). Review of Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosophers, by G. Vlastos. *The Philosophical Review* 101, n. 2, p. 353-358.
- LAMB, W. R. M. (trans.) (1983). Plato. *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*. London, Harvard University Press.
- LESHER, J. H. (1987). Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25, n. 2, p. 275-288.
- MILLER JR., F. D. (2005). Plato on the Rule of Reason. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 43, p. 50-83.
- MIGILIORI, M. (2004). Socrate è forse un edonista? In: CASERTANO, G. (ed.). *Il Protagora di Platone: struttura e problematiche*. 2 vols. Napoli, Loffredo, p. 528-573.
- MORAVCSIK, J. M. (1993). Review of Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher by Gregory Vlastos. *Mind* 102, n. 405, p. 206-210.
- REEVE, C. D. C. (1989). *Socrates in the Apology: An Essay on Plato's Apology of Socrates*. Indianapolis, Hackett Pub. Co.
- RESHOTKO, N. (2001). Virtue as the Only Unconditional – But Not Intrinsic – Good. *Ancient Philosophy* 21, n. 2, p. 325-334.
- RIDER, B. (2012). Wisdom, Εὐτυχία, and Happiness in the *Euthydemus*. *Ancient Philosophy* 32, n. 1, p. 1-14.
- RIDER, B. (2012). Socrates' Philosophical Protreptic in *Euthydemus* 278c–282d. *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 94, n. 2, p. 208-228.
- ROWE, C. (2007). The Moral Psychology of the *Gorgias*. In: ERLER, M.; BRISSON, L. (eds.). *Gorgias – Menon*. Selected Papers from the Seventh Symposium Platonicum. Sankt Augustin, Academia Verlag, p. 90-101.

- RUDEBUSCH, G. (1999). *Socrates, Pleasure and Value*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- SCANLON, T. (2014). *Being Realistic about Reasons*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- SESONSKE, A. (1963). Hedonism in the *Protagoras*. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 1, n. 1, p. 73-79.
- SHIELDS, C. (2006). Plato's Challenge: The Case against Justice in *Republic II*. In: SANTAS, G. X. (ed.). *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's Republic*. Malden, Blackwell Publishers, p. 63-83.
- SPARSHOTT, F. (1992). Review of *Socrates on Trial*, by Brickhouse and Smith; *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* by Gregory Vlastos. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22, n. 3, p. 411-425.
- SULLIVAN, J. P. (1961). The Hedonism in Plato's *Protagoras*. *Phronesis* 6, n. 1, p. 10-28.
- TATE, J. (1946). The *Philebus* – R. Hackforth. *Plato's Examination of Pleasure*. A Translation of the *Philebus*, with Introduction and Commentary. P. Vi+143. Cambridge: University Press, 1945. Cloth, 10s. 6d. Net. *The Classical Review* 60, n. 1, p. 29-30.
- TAYLOR, A. E. (trans.) (1956). Plato. *Philebus* and *Epinomis*. Ed. by Raymond Klibansky. London, Nelson.
- TAYLOR, C. C. W. (1992). Review of *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, by Gregory Vlastos. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42, n. 167, p. 228-234.
- TAYLOR, C. C. W. (trans.) (2002). Plato. *Protagoras*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- VLASTOS, G. (1969). Socrates on Akrasia. *Phoenix* 23, n. 1, p. 71-88.
- VLASTOS, G. (1985a). Happiness and Virtue in Socrates' Moral Theory. *Topoi* 4, n. 1, p. 3-22.
- VLASTOS, G. (1985b). Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35, n. 138, p. 1-31.
- VLASTOS, G. (1991). *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.



WEISS, R. (2006). *The Socratic Paradox and Its Enemies*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

WHITE, N. (1995). Review of *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, n. 1, p. 237-242.

WOLFSDORF, D. (2004). Socrates' Avowals of Knowledge. *Phronesis* 49, n. 2, p. 75-142.

---

Submitted in 08/06/2019 and accepted for publication 21/03/2020



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

---

**Do you wish to submit a paper to *Archai* Journal? Please, access <http://www.scielo.br/archai> and learn our *Submission Guidelines*.**

---