

Futter, D.B. 2025. *Socrates' Search for Wisdom: An Exegetical Inquiry*. Oxford/New York: Routledge. Pp. xviii + 282. ISBN 978-0-367-40863-3. £124.00; ZAR2687.76 (South Africa).

Socrates' Search for Wisdom is a thoroughly engaging and challenging contribution to studies of Socrates' philosophical activity. It explores the nature, process, goal, and effectiveness of Socrates' practice. This exploration is conducted primarily through case studies of 'Plato's dialogues on virtue' (p. 3): *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Republic I*, and *Meno*. It is augmented by discussion of central issues of Socratic scholarship and supplemented by a welcome examination of the *Apology* and Socrates' own statements about his mission. Its fundamental conclusion is that Socrates does not try to refute interlocutors so much as to engage them in exegetical inquiry, through which they (and perhaps even he) might come to understand virtue better. Exegetical inquiry operates on the assumption, which may sometimes be ironic, that an interlocutor possesses the knowledge which the inquiry seeks. Socrates' aim is to draw out, inspect, and clarify that knowledge, which is contained not only in interlocutors' thoughts but also in their lived experience. This aim distinguishes exegetical inquiry from argument (in the narrow sense) that seeks only to validate or invalidate entailments and prove or refute conclusions.

After a brief exposition of methodology (Part 1), Futter examines the application of the exegetical model in each of the dialogues of definition (Part 2). Much to his credit, Futter sustains attention on the texts themselves; extensive scholarship supports but does not intrude upon the examination, which feels both fresh and unblinkered. The examination is character-driven, according to the principle that claims in a dialogue should be interpreted in relation to a speaker's character. This approach is fruitful; it allows Futter to flesh out the skeleton of exegetical inquiry with attention to variety and nuance. *Euthyphro*, for example, presents himself as an expert on matters of piety, principally on the basis of his 'exact understanding' (*Euthyphr.* 5a2). His status as an expert is not challenged, even when he says things that appear wholly mistaken. Instead, Socrates treats *Euthyphro* as either reticent or condescending (or both) and implores him to share his wisdom fully and plainly. *Laches*, by contrast, is presented as an expert about courage on the basis of his deeds in battle (*Lach.* 189a-c). Unlike *Euthyphro*, *Laches'* difficulty is to speak what he knows. *Charmides* and *Polemarchus* are not authorities on temperance and justice, respectively; when questioned by Socrates they endorse views of others who are.

Nevertheless, despite the external source of their opinions, their adherence to them is sincere and personal. Thus, Socrates can engage them in exegetical inquiry that draws out their attachments and reasoning. By contrast, Nicias and Critias propound the views of others in order to exclude themselves from Socratic examination. Meno, who consistently declines to put himself on the line, is a paradigmatically noncommittal. Accordingly, Socrates abandons exegetical inquiry with all three of them, since he is unable to draw out what *they* know. Thrasymachus is a special case. He regards himself as both an expert and an equal to Socrates, but he lacks a clear view of himself. The opinions he so passionately expresses and defends are his own, but what he understands best and is attached to most is not justice (about which Socrates exegetically questions him), but tyranny. Socrates is able to expose Thrasymachus' disconnection from himself, with genuine effect on him.

In all of these cases, Futter argues, Socrates either practises exegetical inquiry directly, or emphasises its conspicuous absence. Although the common supposition in all of the conversations is that there is truth to be explained whenever someone sincerely expresses what he/she thinks, the application of exegetical inquiry is different according to the different relationships between the characters and the truth they speak or withhold. The question at this point is not whether Socrates practises exegetical inquiry, but why? Does he really hope to learn what piety is from Euthyphro, or what temperance is from Charmides? Futter's answer is that he does not: Socrates already knows what virtue is (it is knowledge). He engages in exegetical inquiry in order to teach this wisdom to others.

In order to establish this claim, Futter provides an excursus on definition, knowledge, and the elenchus in the Socratic dialogues (Part 3). He argues that the aim of Socrates' quest for definitions is neither refutation nor result (elenchus), but growth in understanding (psychagogy). Such growth cannot be accomplished merely by accepting (or rejecting) beliefs, but only through examining and living with them. Defending this view requires Futter to reinterpret Socrates' 'priority of definition' principle (PD) as well as his paradoxical claim that 'virtue is knowledge' (VK).

PD is often understood as the fallacious principle that in order to identify instances of a general idea one must first be able to provide an adequate definition of it. Futter argues that this is not how Socrates understands PD. Rather, Socrates thinks that the ability to identify instances implies that one has some kind of attachment to knowledge of the general idea. This may be an incorrect view, but it is not an obviously fallacious one, and it has some support from Platonic texts. Moreover, it provides an impetus for exegetical inquiry: if someone is able to identify at least one instance of virtue, then

inquiry with him might be able to draw out the knowledge that underpins that identification.

VK is more difficult to defend. It seems plainly false that knowing what virtue is (in the sense of being able to give an adequate definition of it) will make one virtuous, just as being virtuous does not endow one with an adequate definition of it. Futter defends VK by reinterpreting the kind of knowledge it involves. On his view, the knowledge that is virtue requires experience and appreciation, in much the same sense that 'to have known love' requires experience and appreciation of love. Of course, one can experience and appreciate love and still come to despise it. Futter needs more, and it comes in the form of a disposition: knowledge of virtue is 'internalised' knowledge (p. 180) that is 'cultivated by activity' (p. 174).

Armed with these interpretations of PD and VK, Futter returns to the dialogues of definition to show Socrates at work teaching his interlocutors through exegetical inquiry (Part 4). Because PD implies that an interlocutor already has latent knowledge of virtue, exegetical inquiry can be fruitful in articulating it. Because virtue is knowledge—specifically, it is 'knowing virtue to be knowledge' (p. 171)—exegetical inquiry can both display and cultivate virtue. Insofar as exegetical inquiry is successful, it exposes to interlocutors their natural orientation toward their own knowledge (i.e. toward self-knowledge). Futter considers only those interlocutors with whom exegetical inquiry is at least partly successful (Euthyphro, Laches, Charmides), but his characterisation of these cases is thorough and attractive.

The book concludes with a discussion of exegetical inquiry in the *Apology*, where Socrates most fully describes his life and activity. Futter focuses on Socrates' narrative about the Delphic Oracle's response to Chaerephon—that 'no one is wiser [sc. than Socrates]' (Ap. 21a6-7). With wonderful economy, Futter argues that Socrates' narrative exemplifies exegetical inquiry (of the Oracle itself), shows Socrates being inducted into exegetical inquiry (since through it he obtained knowledge of himself), and shows Socrates coming to understand the Oracle as commanding the practice of exegetical inquiry (since through it human wisdom is obtained). If this is correct, then the *Apology* goes a long way toward supporting Futter's arguments.

Socrates' Search for Wisdom provokes many questions, of which I shall mention two, one programmatic and the other philosophical. The first concerns how this project of interpreting Socrates might be carried through to the rest of Plato's dialogues. Futter restricts his discussion to five dialogues because they are the ones that seek definitions of virtue, but (a) other dialogues are about virtue even if they are not definitional (e.g. *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*), and (b) Socrates' whole philosophical activity is important, not just his definitional inquiries. As Futter himself admits,

Socratic inquiry is about ‘all the acts and dispositions of the human soul’ (p. 175). One wonders, then, how dialogues that are not about virtue or definition (e.g. *Ion*, *Hippias Minor*, *Menexenus*, *Cratylus*, *Euthydemus*) might fill out our understanding of Socrates. Beyond that, we may also wonder about the full Platonic corpus. Futter gives some indication of holding a unified interpretation of Plato, through appeals to the theory of recollection (pp. 121-125), the simile of the divided line (p. 165), and Platonic metaphysics generally. Moreover, he draws on our experience, as meta-participants in the dialogues, to speak movingly about the purpose and effect of Plato’s works on us. How then should we understand the philosophical purpose of dialogues in which Socrates presents and defends positive views, as opposed to ones in which he only inquires? What has happened to exegetical inquiry in dialogues where Socrates is backgrounded (e.g. *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Timaeus*)?

The philosophical question concerns the relation between exegetical inquiry and virtue. On Futter’s view Socrates teaches virtue in a way that cultivates it in his interlocutors. This works well enough when the virtue being cultivated is wisdom, because inquiry is a special circumstance for wisdom. For the argument that inquiry cultivates virtue to be fully convincing, however, it must also apply to each of the other virtues. Moreover, inquiry must cultivate courage, temperance, and so on, not just in philosophical conversation (where, plausibly, attenuated forms of these virtues apply), but in the special circumstances of each virtue. For example, those who know courage must recognise when and why they should take a stand (or a course of action) in dreadful circumstances and act accordingly. It is reasonable to be sceptical about the efficacy of inquiry for these purposes. Perhaps what is cultivated by inquiry is an intentional disposition to virtue rather than virtue itself.

I raise these questions not to criticise the scope or substance of Futter’s interpretation. On the contrary, I want to indicate in some small way how well *Socrates’ Search for Wisdom* challenges a reader to engage in exegetical inquiry with and of it; an outcome that Futter explicitly seeks. In this he is unquestionably successful.

Rick Benitez
The University of Sydney