Commentary on Woodruff

by Mark L. McPherran

It is a striking feature of the dialogues Professor Woodruff has examined in his paper that both draw attention to the courage of Socrates on the battlefield of Delium (Ap. 28e; Laches 181a-b, 188c-189c; cf. Symp. 220d-221b). In the Apology the intent of Plato's reference is clear: we are to recognize not only the civic virtue of Socrates in his physical defense of Athens at the edge of a lost battle, but also the courage with which he obeyed his divine injunction to philosophize, even in his last and fatal intellectual defense of the elenctically-examined life. Notwithstanding Woodruff's warning to steer our scholarship clear of the Socrates of our hearts, it seems clear that we are supposed to find in Socrates a virtuous Hercules of the Athenian stables (Ap. 22b), standing firm against the impious onslaught of hubristic moral knowledge claims.

Just as striking as this common testament to courage in our dialogues are their shared Socratic disclaimers of knowledge of what virtues such as courage are (Ap. 21b-d; Laches 186b-e, 200e). These disclaimers receive their theoretical backing through the repeated failures of the elenchus to elicit knowledge of virtue-concepts from Socrates and his interlocutors. On most accounts of what goes by the name of the 'principle of the priority of definition'—call it principle P—we are then faced with a puzzle if not a fatal paradox: if we suppose that (P) knowledge of a general moral concept $M$—the knowledge of a complete definition of the concept $M$—is logically prior to knowledge of anything else about $M$, including being able to know or recognize act-tokens of type $M$, neither Socrates, nor Plato, nor Laches, nor ourselves, are justified in finding Socrates brave, either at Delium, in the court docket, or on his death-
Moreover, because the elenchus relies for its demonstrative power on the use of counter-examples and general principles, its use as a tool of philosophical discovery is undercut by P.

Both Woodruff and I desire to dispel the apparent contradiction here by offering a Socratic account of knowledge and the passages used to support P that will ensure Socrates' claims of ignorance while retaining Socratic bravery and our recognition of it, as well as allowing the elenchus to function as a implement of moral instruction commensurate with Socrates' immense confidence in it. I also accept much of the broad outline of Woodruff's characterization of moral expertise, the various roles of the elenchus, the Socratic project, and in the end, the


For an additional account of Socrates' use of the interpretive elenchus in respect of the oracle (one somewhat at variance with Woodruff's account), see my "Socrates and the Duty to Philosophize," Southern Journal of Philosophy 4 (1986): pp. 541-560. Among other issues, my thesis disputes Woodruff's claim that Socrates thinks that the interpretive elenchus has "...only modest results...in view of the principle of the priority of definition," (p. 84). Rather, it seems to me that Socrates takes the oracular pronouncement as interpreted by his elenctic procedure to be the moral guarantee of his mission and one of the warrants for the soundness of the elenchus itself (additionally, Woodruff's own later modification of P undermines his claim here). See also T. Brickhouse and N. Smith, "The Origin of Socrates' Mission,"