This is a long-awaited book, and our expectations are not disappointed*. It is also, as it turns out, the author’s last work. Gregory Vlastos died in October, 1991, only a few months after the book appeared. So here we meet Vlastos for the last time, and in splendid form: the writing was never more vigorous, the reasoning never more carefully worked out. It is a dazzling performance for an author in his eighties. In this work the most influential and beloved Plato scholar of our generation brought a lifetime of learning to bear on a topic long dear to his heart, and he produced a magnificent book. It is at once a major interpretation of Plato’s earlier works, and perhaps the fullest reconstruction of the philosophy of Socrates that has ever been attempted. (The closest parallel is Heinrich Maier’s Sokrates, published in 1913 and now quite out of date.)

The genesis of the book, as the author tells us in the Introduction, goes back to 1953, with a manuscript on Plato’s Socratic dialogues which Vlastos never published, but out of which emerged his classic introduction to the Protagoras and his paper “The paradox of Socrates” (1958). Vlastos returned to Socrates in earnest in 1978 when he was invited to give the Gifford Lectures. It is these lectures on Socrates, delivered in 1981, that form the basis for the present book. The intricate argumentative structure of the book and the rich documentation that supports it bear witness to the fact that for a decade Vlastos had been trying out his theses on various audiences and was refining and reinforcing his views in response to criticism. Those parts of the book that appeared earlier in article form often bear the mark of substantial rethinking. At the time of his death Vlastos was preparing a second volume to include revised versions of two major pieces, “The Socratic Elenchus” (1983) and “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge” (1985), both of which are frequently referred to in the present work. The book also includes 70 pages of “Additional Notes” on detailed problems of interpretation.

What Vlastos offers us is essentially his own solution to the age-old

problem of the historical Socrates. Vlastos argues for two principal theses, both of which will be examined here in detail. The first thesis is that two distinct, even antithetical philosophies are presented by Socrates in Plato’s dialogues. The second thesis is that the earlier of these two philosophies – the philosophy presented by Socrates in the earlier dialogues – is in fact the philosophy of the historical Socrates, whereas the later dialogues present Plato’s own ideas.

It is a delicate matter to criticize such a book after the author’s death, particularly if, like the present reviewer, one finds oneself in fundamental disagreement with Vlastos on both of his principal claims. If I am right, he is mistaken in these claims; and conversely. Gregory Vlastos was never one to shun criticism, and I shall press my case against his two theses as forcefully as I can. But our disagreement on these two central issues in no way diminishes either my admiration for the book or my great and affectionate regard for its author. No one in the twentieth century has made a greater contribution to the study of Greek philosophy, and to the study of Plato in particular.

In any case the book has many merits that are quite independent of the two controversial theses. The first chapter, on Socratic irony, is a masterful contribution to the history of that topic. Vlastos makes clear the enormous contrast between the Greek notion of eirôneia as “dissembling”, which his contemporaries applied rather disparagingly to Socrates, and the concept of irony that we have inherited and which is already fully developed in Cicero’s understanding of ironia as “the height of urbanity, elegance, and good taste” (p. 28). Vlastos shows that this transformation is entirely due to Socrates, and above all to the picture of Socrates given in the Platonic dialogues. In chapter 4, “Elenchus and mathematics”, the importance of mathematics for the development of Plato’s thought is treated with outstanding insight and scholarship. Chapter 7, on Socrates’ rejection of retaliation, is probably the high point of the book. No one before Vlastos had so clearly demonstrated how revolutionary for Greek thought is the claim that it is always wrong to harm others, never right to take revenge on your enemies. The final chapter, “Happiness and virtue in Socrates’ moral theory”, is also a major treatment of Socratic-Platonic ethics. In particular, Vlastos’ formulation of the principle of the Sovereignty of Virtue (pp. 209-213) strikes this reviewer as definitive. Virtue is the sovereign good in the sense that no non-moral goods, “taken singly or in combination, could compensate us for the loss of a moral good. Virtue being the sovereign good in our domain of value, its claim upon us is always final” (pp. 210f). Not every interpretation in this chapter can pass uncontested, but it will be the