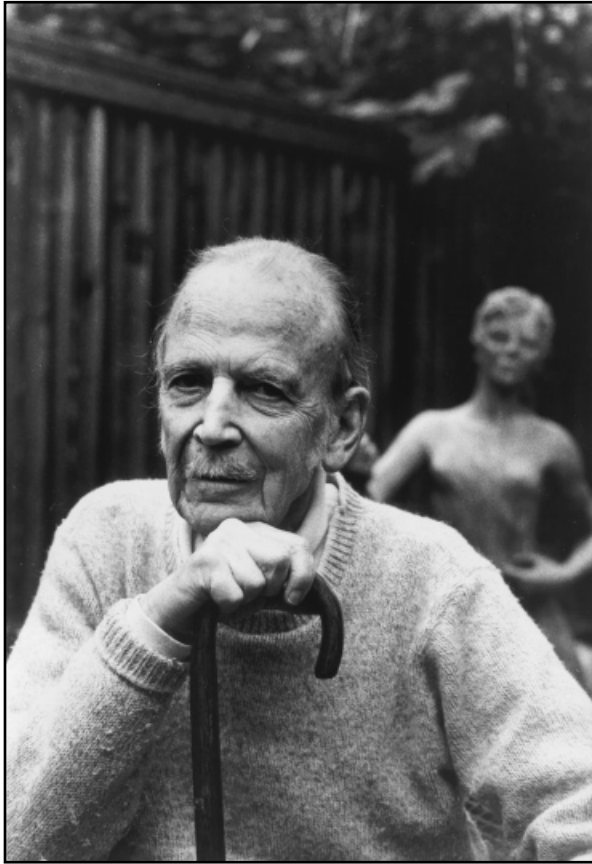

GREGORY VLASTOS



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PROFESSOR EMERITUS Gregory Vlastos died of cancer on 12 October 1991, at the age of eighty-four. When he died he held a McArthur Fellowship; he was the oldest scholar ever to receive this recognition. Though a scrupulously modest man, he admitted to friends that the award was not only welcome, but appropriate in one sense: he felt he had never done as good work as he was doing in his eighties. His splendid book *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, published shortly before his death, proves he was right.

Vlastos was born in Istanbul on 27 July 1907. His mother was Scottish, his father Greek. After receiving a B.A. from Robert College in Istanbul, he moved to the United States, earning a Ph.D. in philosophy at Harvard in 1931. His first teaching job was at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. He joined the excellent philosophy department at Cornell in 1948, and then moved to Princeton as Stuart Professor of Philosophy, where he taught from 1955 to 1976. He was busy in retirement, serving as Mills Professor of Philosophy at Berkeley from 1976 to 1987, with a break as Distinguished Professorial Fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge University, in 1983–84; Cambridge also awarded him one of the several honorary doctorates he received. As an octogenarian, he accepted three prestigious lectureships: he gave the Gifford Lectures at the University of St. Andrews, the British Academy Lecture on Socrates in the Master Mind series, and the Townsend Lectures at Cornell. He was twice awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a corresponding fellow of the British Academy, and a member of the American Philosophical Society.

He did much to promote the welfare of other members of his profession. He was instrumental in obtaining a lasting source of financial aid for the philosophy department at Princeton while he was chairman; largely through his efforts, the Princeton department became what was widely acknowledged to be the best in the country. He was a founding father of the Council for Philosophical Studies, which enabled the three divisions of the American Philosophical Association to become a single national organization, and found financial support for a number of influential summer institutes in philosophy. After spending a productive year at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, he decided there should be a similar facility for the humanities, and he worked assiduously to procure the funds, and a location, for the establishment of the successful National Humanities Center.

Vlastos's written output was generous, especially considering the tremendous care he took to uncover and weight relevant evidence, the sympathy and insight he bestowed on the views of others, particularly those

with whom he disagreed, and the attention he paid to precision and elegance of expression. Much of his published work is on Plato: there are his books, *Plato's Universe* (1975), and *Platonic Studies* (1973), which brings together a number of his important articles on Plato. He also edited two valuable collections of critical essays on Plato, *Plato I* on metaphysics and epistemology and *Plato II* (1978) on ethics, politics, and philosophy of art and religion. In 1971 he edited a collection of essays, *The Philosophy of Socrates*; the introduction foreshadows many of the themes of the later book on Socrates. A number of Vlastos's articles instigated extended research by others; many of these are classics in the field.

In the introduction to *Plato I*, Vlastos writes:

The last three decades have witnessed a renaissance of interest in Plato among philosophers throughout the world. . . . Plato is being studied and argued over with greater vigor than ever. . . . Much of this new zeal for Platonic studies has been generated by the importation of techniques of logical and semantic analysis that have proved productive in contemporary philosophy. By means of these techniques we may now better understand some of the problems Plato attempted to solve. . . . The result has been a more vivid sense of the relevance of his thought to the concerns of present-day ontologists, epistemologists, and moralists. He has become for us less of an antique monument and more of a living presence.

Aside from a key omission, it would be hard to give a better description of the astonishing change that has taken place in the study, not only of Plato, but of ancient Greek philosophy generally, in the past half century. What Vlastos failed to mention was that he, more than anyone else, had brought about this transformation. He accomplished this in part by applying (as he says) the techniques of contemporary analytic philosophy to the Greeks. One result was to greatly sharpen a number of familiar problems as they present themselves in Plato: the "third man" argument, the role of reasons and causes in the explanation of action, predication and the forms. Vlastos also put ancient Greek philosophy back into the mainstream of today's philosophy curriculum by directing attention to the issues raised by the Greeks that are easily recognized as contemporary concerns. Here is a very partial list of topics drawn from the titles of Vlastos's papers or chapter headings: justice and equality, *akrasia*, political obedience and disobedience, happiness and virtue, slavery, the rejection of retaliation.

He was a superb teacher. He made little attempt to indenture his students to his ideas, but his influence was vast. Generations of students

went on to develop his views, but even more, his methods and his attitudes. It is characteristic that he dedicated his last book to “colleagues and students whose partnership has shaped my search.” Partnership in the enterprise of philosophic investigation was indeed what he offered his students, and this was the key to his success as a teacher. Not only was he genuinely open to criticism from his students; real pleasure would show in his face when a student came up with a well-judged criticism of something he had said or written. It was for just such a benefit, his reaction seemed to say, that he had put his work into circulation. He submitted his students’ work to the same honest and careful scrutiny that he expected from them, and as a result his criticism could sometimes be unsparing. Yet they would take it from him with good grace because they recognized that this was the conduct expected of partners.

His study of Plato gradually led him to the view that in Plato’s dialogue we find two philosophies: that of Socrates, and, gradually diverging from this, Plato’s own doctrines. He sympathized with the assumptions that sustained Socrates’ confidence that the elenctic method would lead not only to a consistent set of beliefs and evaluative attitudes but also to correct judgments. He saw Socrates as more concerned with the question how to live than with the ontological and epistemological worries that obsessed Plato.

Those who were fortunate enough to know Gregory Vlastos could not resist comparing him with Socrates, though he would certainly have resisted the comparison. He shared with Socrates the unshakable concern with the question how one should conduct one’s life, and whatever conclusions he reached in this matter he applied first of all to himself. He treasured his relations with his students, his colleagues, and his friends. He loved good discussion and the company of his intimates. He was a charming, witty, and gracious guest, an endlessly generous host. Like Socrates, he was uncomplaining in the face of pain and discomfort; he gave up jogging only when, at eighty, it became impossible. In some ways he differed from Socrates. His irony was gentle, and never at the expense of others. He was too courteous, too kind, to want to alter the beliefs of others by publicly shaming them; he preferred the force of example. In the preface to *The Philosophy of Socrates*, dated April 1970, he writes:

My wife died suddenly while this book was in press. I dedicate my essay to her memory. I do so because of what our love meant to my work. The best insight in this essay—that Socrates’ ultimate failure is a failure of love—grew out of what I learned about love from her.

This unabashed declaration epitomizes Gregory's work and his life. He loved, and he was greatly loved.

Elected 1989

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This memoir originally appeared as an *In Memoriam* essay for the University of California in 1992. It is used with the permission of Professor Ferrari and of the Academic Senate of the university. Professor Davidson died on 31 August 2003.

