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# On What Socrates Hoped to Achieve in the Agora

The Socratic act  
of turning our attention to the truth

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# On What Socrates Hoped to Achieve in the Agora

The Socratic act of turning our attention to the truth

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## Introduction

This thesis wants to say that Socrates was a teacher of his fellows. He engaged with them through dialogue because he cared for their wellbeing, or as he might have put it: for the state of their souls.

He was an intellectual and he had an intellectualist view of people and reality. He felt that right-mindedness was reasonable; and thus he believed that learning and developing understanding brought people closer to being virtuous; to goodness; and so to mental health.

Socrates was a philosopher, and he considered this to be the most prudent and exalted *approach* to life. He taught his fellows how to be philosophers, and he urged them as best he could to take up the philosophical stance.

His form of care for others was ‘intellectualist’. He cared ‘for the souls of others’ and for his own with intellectual involvement *because* he believed that this was the most appropriate way. He had a view of the human soul that produced intellectualist views of what wellbeing is and how it is achieved.

He himself was a humble and able thinker, and was fully devoted to being virtuous and to helping his fellows to do the same.

This thesis addresses the question of what Socrates did in the agora (his aims) and how he went about doing it (his methodology).

Our answer might seem obvious. One might wonder what is new about saying that Socrates was a philosopher, and that he cared for the souls of his fellows and that he urged them to become virtuous. Perhaps nothing of this is new.

Nevertheless, we find that making this ‘simple’ statement about Socrates is not that simple at all. We find that in Socratic scholarship there exist a plethora of contrasting voices that make it rather difficult to formulate even such a basic description of what Socrates did.

We do not wish to create a novel and different reading of Socrates. We do not think that this is even possible after civilization has been interpreting Socrates for millennia. We do not see innovation for its own sake as desirable. We prefer clear understanding to the eager ‘originality’. Therefore rather, our aim with this work is to defend and clarify a very basic picture of Socrates as an educator.

We see this work as clearing away clutter so as to *begin* our life-long study of Socratic thought and action: by laying a foundation with which we can read Socratic works and discern their meaning.

## The chapters

Our first chapter begins by making the case that Socrates was indeed an educator. We deal with three problems faced by this assertion.

Firstly, Socrates himself is seen in the *Apology* to be denying that he was anyone's teacher. Some scholars have taken this statement literally and have argued that Socrates was not therefore in any way concerned with educating others.

To this we answer that Socrates' disclaimer cannot be read literally, since the pedagogical nature of his engagement with the epistemic state of others is undeniable. Therefore, we make the case that more nuanced interpretations of Socrates' apparent disclaimer are more correct.

Secondly, we deal with an argument made by some scholars that Socrates did not care for the souls of his fellows and did not therefore have any program for helping them to improve. They claim that he cared only for himself.

We answer this argument on two points. Firstly we say that there is ample textual evidence against such a reading; and secondly, we make the case that helping others to improve their relationship to virtue was an integral part of Socrates' idea of what it means to be virtuous. Therefore, helping himself would necessarily have involved helping others also. Therefore, as far as Socrates is concerned, it is nonsensical to make such a distinction.

Thirdly, we deal with a somewhat popular view today that Socrates 'failed' as a teacher. Some scholars have argued that Socrates had no beneficial effect on his fellows, or even that he had a harmful one.

We disagree with this position and we raise a number of objections to it. We make a case that Socrates' impact was vast and multifaceted. We remark on the fact that

Socrates had a large effect on the history of thought inspiring many philosophical works and schools of thought; his obvious impact on some of his students including Plato and Xenophon; his continued influence on the intellectual circles of the Roman empire; and all the way up to the modern day.

We refer also to the impact he has on the readers of Plato's works, both today and throughout history, and claim that this impact is reflective of how he impacted his own contemporaries; as well as on the listeners who participated in actuality passively to his conversations with a target interlocutor.

We acknowledge that some degree of 'failure' is seen in Plato's works but we make the case that this perceived failure is intentionally portrayed, and we argue that Plato himself might have intended it to be felt more as a success. Furthermore, we make the point that the event of Socrates' *failure to have a positive effect on his interlocutor* seen in Plato's works is exaggerated by scholars and that many indications Plato gives us of Socrates' great success and deep impact need to be better appreciated.

In chapter two we address the question of: what was Socrates a teacher of? We deal first with the common assumption that Socrates was a teacher of virtue. We say that even though such a reading might seem reasonable and somehow intuitive it cannot be supported by the texts. We point to the fact that Socrates genuinely believed that he had never come across a teacher of virtue, and that this would have included himself.

We consider the attempt of Daniel Devereux to absolve Socrates of this conviction and thus allow us to characterize him as such. He does this by drawing a distinction between different meanings of 'teacher'. However we find that Devereux's attempt is unsuccessful and the problem remains.

We show that this dilemma is significant: since we want to say that Socrates taught *something* that pertained to helping people become more virtuous. Our own case is



that Socrates used educational dialogue as a path to virtue. Therefore, we encounter a problem. For in a sense, this amounts to saying that Socrates was a teacher of virtue.

We answer this problem by clarifying what is meant by philosophy; by discussing the relationship of philosophy to virtue; and saying that Socrates was a teacher of philosophy rather than of virtue; and showing that these two are significantly different and can be distinguished. We use the Protagorean definition of philosophy in order to do this and argue that the same meaning is intended at the hand of Plato.

Chapter three is primarily a work of textual research with the aim of grounding our understanding of Socrates' educational approach. Up to this point we have been saying that Socrates cared (through a form of education) for the souls of his fellows. Chapter three asks: what is the soul (for Socrates) and what does it mean to care for it?

Our findings prepare us for making sense of Socrates' educative act of care. By seeing how the soul is characterized, we show that learning is of ultimate importance to human wellbeing. We make the case that (given Socrates' conception of the reality regarding the human nature) his care for the person is 'intellectual care'.

Every educational system contains within it some assumptions regarding anthropology. Particularly if one is interested in creating an educational program that will 'benefit' people. Such a program will be built on some premises as to what is beneficial to humans, and how this is best achieved.

The purpose of this chapter is to make explicit the anthropological assumptions of Socrates' educational approach. It prepares us for better understanding the analysis of Socratic educational thought that makes up the remainder of the thesis.

Having shown the premises of Socrates' 'intellectual approach' to the care of the souls of his fellows, we then go on to deal with the criticism made by some scholars that Socrates' intellectualism was a problem for his persona as a teacher.

Scholars have argued that Socrates' intellectualism limited his effectiveness as a teacher (or even neutralized it entirely). Some even concluded that the difficulty runs so deep that Socrates could not have been a teacher at all, since he would not have been able to combine his intellectualism with teaching.

To the latter we answer that this 'perception of difficulty' cannot be attributed to Socrates: since in his own view his intellectualism would not have been a barrier to teaching. As we have shown in our analysis of his understanding of the soul: Socrates would have thought that 'intellectual care' was very appropriate. He would have seen his intellectualism not as a barrier but as a special ability to care. He might even have felt that such an ability brought with it the responsibility to care for his fellows by teaching them.

Secondly, we argue that the criticism that Socrates was too much an intellectualist to have a positive effect on learners is based on a misunderstanding of Socratic intellectualism.

We look at the literature around Socratic intellectualism so as to formulate a more complex and sensitive understanding of Socratic intellectualism than the one used by his critics.

The case is made that Socrates' intellectualist educational approach did not disregard the sentient and attitudinal aspects of learning (as the critics say), but rather that great attention was paid to these. We argue that Socrates saw these aspects of a person as critical to their ability to engage in philosophy. We offer an analysis of the *Gorgias* as illustration of this.

We take this up again in our concluding chapters (chapters six and seven) where we argue that Socrates' educational methodologies addressed the matter of attitude and sentiment closely.

So what did this intellectual teacher who acted out of care for his fellows do? In chapter four take issue with a rather widespread view: which we call the negative or skeptical understanding of Socrates.

On this view what Socrates did amounted to bringing his interlocutors to a realization of their own ignorance. He did not engage them in any positive pursuit of truth (except perhaps the 'negative truth' that they were more ignorant than they thought) but acted primarily as a disputant. Some scholars who read Socrates in this way have characterized him as a skeptic.

We argue that this 'negative' reading is an impoverished description of Socrates' act in the agora. We look at how Socrates self-predicates when he speaks about himself in the *Apology* and we conclude that as interpreters we have reason to think that Socrates did much more than just bring people to an awareness of their lack of knowledge.

We make the point that Socrates was not a skeptic. In fact, characterizing him as a skeptic, or characterizing his effect on others as some how in line with skepticism is misleading.

Both ancient and modern skeptics view the refusal to form beliefs and the acknowledgement of one's ignorance as a form of intellectual integrity. We show that such a sentiment was foreign to Socrates, and even contradictory to his own devotion to enquiry and his love for truth.

Furthermore, we show that Socrates thought of ignorance as an evil that was particularly harmful for people. We argue therefore that although he might have brought people through the stage of realizing their actual epistemic state (and given

them reason to revoke and conceit to wisdom they might have entertained) he would not have left them in a state of ignorance. Becoming aware of one's ignorance might have been an important tool in Socratic education, but we cannot say that it was its primary aim.

We discuss further the possibility that Socrates was a skeptic in the sense of thinking that knowledge was impossible. To this view we raise the objection that Socrates was very much devoted to learning and enquiry himself. We are not able to say that Socrates merely used dialogical enquiry to show to people that their knowledge was lacking *because* we would then have trouble making sense of why Socrates himself enquired. Presumably he would have already known that 'he knows nothing of value' and he would not have needed enquiry to remind him of this.

Socrates must somehow benefit from enquiry otherwise; and he thought that he benefited his fellows over and above bringing them to the realization of their lack.

We move on to discuss how scholars have understood Socrates' disavowal of knowledge in the *Apology*. We address particularly those scholars who have taken a 'skeptical' reading of the text.

We show that this reading of the text is not supported by the passages; and we suggest a different reading. We show that Socrates' discussion of himself in the *Apology* and his disavowal of knowledge does not emphasize (as is often thought) his skepticism. Rather, it describes (what we call) his intellectual humility. We make an argument that we need to shift our focus when interpreting this text.

Following this we briefly touch on the subject of *aporia*. *Aporia* has often been understood as an awareness of one's lack of knowledge regarding a topic. We propose that it can be understood rather as a form of self-knowledge (among other things).

In chapter five we take up the topic of the knowledge requirements of teaching. We speak partly to the problems raised when one tries to understand Socrates' disavowal of knowledge together with his role as a teacher of others.

We ask whether Socrates can 'teach without knowing'. Some scholars have made the argument that Socrates set a high standard of knowledge required of a teacher of virtue; and that he himself failed to meet this standard (by his own admittance). This results in a problem. Namely, that Socrates did not qualify, by his own terms, to be a teacher of others.

We answer this position in two ways: firstly we counter the view that Socrates did require teachers (pertaining to virtue) to have (what is called) expert knowledge of virtue.

Secondly, we make the case that since Socrates was a teacher of philosophy, he would not have in any case been required to meet the supposed standard of knowledge regarding virtue. Socrates taught (we argue) philosophy (the process of enquiry and its attitude); and in this he was an expert.

We show that Socrates was an 'expert enquirer' and that he knew very well that process which he taught to others. We also note that Socrates never denied having this knowledge.

We then introduce our idea of Socratic education as a sort of 'apprenticeship in philosophy'. He had expert skills in enquiry (and philosophy). Therefore, even if we did want to hold him against a supposed criterion of expertise in the subject matter taught, Socrates would have had no problems meeting the criteria.

In chapter six we address the question of Socrates' teaching method directly. In this chapter we bring the learning of the entire thesis together to help us assess the different claims regarding Socrates' methodology.

We discuss the standard view that Socrates' method of dialogical engagement was the elenchus. Chapter six is partly in the form of a literature review where we consider the problems of the elenchus and its limits as a concept for describing Socrates' act in the agora.

We look at much of the scholarly disagreement around the elenchus whilst concentrating on what scholars actually have agreed on regarding what Socrates did.

We then go on to make the case that Socrates spoke differently to different people and that he would have used more than one 'technology' in his attempts to engage his fellows in learning and improvement.

We find that the elenchus is as such too limited of a concept to carry the whole of Socrates' educational act.

Finally in chapter seven we conclude the thesis by giving a general description of what we see as the Socratic educative act in the agora.

The manner with which we speak about Socrates' methodology might seem somewhat too general. It is. The purpose of doing this is to emphasize the idea that Socratic scholarship in the analytic tradition has used too narrow a framework for interpreting Socrates' educational practice. This has limited our understanding of him. My purpose is to break open this framework somewhat, and to suggest that a wider lens is needed if we are to make any real sense of who Socrates was and what he did.

His dialogical engagement of others was a practice that can only be properly understood if we contextualize it appropriately, as I have tried to do in this thesis, within Socrates thought around people, wellbeing and learning.

We then finish the thesis by commenting on how the elenchus as a particular teaching technology fitted in to Socrates' more general project of teaching philosophy.

Our aim is not to say that Socrates did not use 'elenchus'; neither is it to participate in the vast and nuanced discussions in literature regarding the details of the elenchus. Our aim is to position the elenchus in a broader description of the Socratic educative act.

With this we conclude our current study of what Socrates did amongst his fellows, and what it was that he hoped to achieve with this practices.

#### A few practical points

The reader will notice that I use terms education, pedagogy and andragogy interchangeably throughout the thesis. Andragogy is simply a term from adult education that is meant to denote the fact that Socrates' education was directed essentially at adults.

The term pedagogy is used in its modern less precise sense. It should not be taken to mean (as it did in the time of Plato's writing) the education of children. It is merely used here as another word for education. Its particular contribution for our purposes is that it denotes a well thought out intentional approach to education. It carries the feeling of processes of education that are supported by reflection upon the basic premises that underlie them.

We use this term because we do not see Socrates as a 'casual' teacher who accidentally achieved some learning in his interlocutors. Instead, we see him as a philosopher of education who had his own analysis of the epistemic problems that people faced, and who had an intentional approach that targeted these epistemic problems.

However, these three terms are used interchangeably and they always refer to the same: Socrates dialogical educative act.

It also needs to be said that this thesis is speaking about the Socrates that is found in Plato's works. We do not go into the portraits of Socrates that are found in other works such as the writings of Xenophon, Aristotle, Aristophanes, Hellenistic philosophical schools or the Neo-Platonists. We do not concern ourselves in this current work with the question of the historical Socrates.

We speak only about the Socrates that is known to us from Plato's dialogues. The reader should understand that any reference to Socrates in the thesis (unless otherwise indicated) is reference to Plato's Socrates.

Furthermore we restrict ourselves largely to the Platonic dialogues that are considered by scholars to be 'Socratic'. This is because we want to avoid what is known as the 'Socratic question'. We believe that much of what we say of Socrates can be found in more of Plato's writings; and perhaps we would even dare say that a study of Socrates that took all of Plato's dialogues into consideration would produce a richer and more correct portrait of him.

However, this is not attempted in the current thesis since it would raise many scholarly objections and difficulties that we do not have the capacity to address satisfactorily in this thesis.

Most of the dialogues used here are counted as either 'early' or 'transitional' with the exception of the *Theaetetus* which is generally dated as later middle. However, it is still read by many as 'Socratic' and it is considered to be a return to the Socrates of the 'early' works<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Rowe (2009: 34)



Finally, I would like to thank Professor Sarah Broadie, Dr. Andrew Mason and Professor Theodore Scaltsas for their many attentive comments and criticisms of this thesis, which I feel have improved this work greatly.

### **I. Was Socrates a teacher?**

Yes, he was some sort of an

#### **I.**

‘Socrates is often characterized as one of the greatest teachers the world has seen. Yet he denies that he is a teacher.... The resultant dilemma is the problem of Socratic teaching.’<sup>2</sup>

I want to begin by asking whether or not Socrates can be characterized as an educator. The answer I will give is that yes, the Socrates we know in Plato’s works can unreservedly be called an educator.

Reaching such a conclusion however, is not unproblematic. There are several reasons why one might doubt this assertion. Sections I.I to I.III deal with some of the difficulties of this statement.

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<sup>2</sup> Reeve (1990)

Let us first be clear about what we mean with the term ‘educator’. An educator is one who educates, and the *New Oxford Dictionary of English*<sup>3</sup> defines ‘educate’ in three ways:

- to give intellectual, moral and social instruction to someone
- to provide or pay for instruction for someone, especially at a school
- and, to give someone training in or information on a particular field

To ‘instruct’ is defined as:

- to teach someone a subject or skill
- and, to give a person direction or information.

Finally, to ‘teach’ is defined as:

- show or explain to someone how to do something

I will make the case that each of these terms can assuredly be applied to Socrates. He was not linked to any school or institution, nor did he take up the role of teacher in any formal sense. Nevertheless, he gave intellectual, moral and social instruction, he taught skills, he gave direction, and he showed his fellows ‘how to do something’.

## **I.I**

The first problem that my thesis faces is that Socrates himself seems to have outright denied any association between education and himself. In the *Apology*, at 33a5, Socrates rejects the impression that the Athenian court had of him – namely that he was a teacher. He denies this categorically saying the following<sup>4</sup>:

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<sup>3</sup> Edited by Pearsall (1998)

<sup>4</sup> Translation by Grube, G.M.A, in Cooper (1997)

‘I have never come to an agreement with anyone to act unjustly, neither with anyone else nor with any of those who slanderously say are my pupils<sup>5</sup>. I have never been anyone’s teacher<sup>6</sup>. If anyone, young or old, desires to listen to me when I am talking and dealing with my own concerns, I have never begrudged this to anyone...’

and he continues:

‘And I cannot justly be held responsible for the good or bad conduct of these people, as I never promised to teach them anything and have not done so. If anyone says that he has learnt anything from me, or that he heard anything privately that the others did not hear, be assured that he is not telling the truth.’<sup>7</sup>

This text appears to be explicit, and some scholars have accepted that it should be interpreted literally<sup>8</sup>. However, scholars have good reason to consider this text as ambiguous and as requiring a more labored interpretation. The reason is that any familiarity with Plato’s texts leaves one with the impression that Socrates was particularly engaged in educating others. In fact, it might not be an exaggeration to say that everything Socrates does in Plato’s works is an act of educating.

I also hold this view: that we are entitled to see Plato’s Socrates as an educator, since, his approach to his interlocutors was first and foremost educational. We can say this because, as I will now elaborate, Socrates’ focus in conversation was entirely concerned with the epistemic condition of his interlocutors and audience.

Socrates’ manner of interacting with others directly and thoroughly addressed their epistemic state, by attending to the following elements: what the interlocutor knew; what they thought they knew; the disputation of any inappropriate claims to knowledge which they made; and the evaluation of the opinions they held.

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<sup>5</sup> μαθητὰς

<sup>6</sup> διδάσκαλος

<sup>7</sup> 33b

<sup>8</sup> See for example Nehamas (1992)

Furthermore, having put his hand to ‘correcting’ their existing epistemic state, Socrates also tried to assist his interlocutors to make ‘correct’ steps towards learning – so as to improve their method of dealing with knowledge generally.

Consider some occasions when Socrates is seen doing this:

(a) *what they knew*

Socrates appears to have been interested in how well his fellows were being educated, and the state of their learning. An example of this is seen in the *Theaetetus*. From the start of the dialogue we see Socrates taking an interest in what Theaetetus knew. Socrates begins his conversation with the young man admitting that he wants to engage him in dialogue so that he may get to know him<sup>9</sup>. By this he means that he wants to see Theaetetus’ intellectual state.

Socrates listens with great interest when Theaetetus tells him about a mathematical discovery he had made earlier<sup>10</sup>. Socrates and Theaetetus then use this knowledge that Theaetetus already has of how numbers can be categorized, and applies it to the concept of definition. In this manner Socrates takes what Theaetetus already knows and uses it to teach him something more<sup>11</sup>. He says:

‘Excellent.... You gave us a good lead just now. Try to imitate your answer about powers. There you brought together the many powers within a single form; now I want you in the same way to give one single account of the many branches of knowledge.’<sup>12</sup>

Socrates is seen here as giving Theaetetus direction and leading towards learning.

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<sup>9</sup> *Theaetetus* 145b, translated by M. J. Levett (1997)

<sup>10</sup> 147d-148b

<sup>11</sup> 147d

<sup>12</sup> 148d

The same interest is seen at the start of the *Charmides*. Socrates has been away from Athens for some time, and upon his return he visits the wrestling-school. There he meets with fellow Athenians, and the first thing he asks them is regarding the state of philosophy: ‘...whether any of the young men had distinguished themselves for wisdom...’<sup>13</sup>.

(b) *what they thought they knew*

Socrates differentiated between knowledge that was had by the interlocutor, as we saw in the case of Theaetetus, and false beliefs that were entertained by them. As much as Socrates is seen praising Theaetetus for his achieved knowledge, he is elsewhere seen deconstructing and disputing beliefs that he considered to be false.

Socrates was in the habit of identifying what his interlocutors thought they knew about a matter – the knowledge they claimed to have regarding it – and of evaluating this supposed knowledge, examining whether or not an interlocutor did in fact know what they thought they knew. Typically, Socrates would find a way to demonstrate to his interlocutor that they did not in fact know what they believed that they knew.

This practice has come to be known primarily as Socratic *elenchus* and has been deemed by some as the main element of Socratic dialogue<sup>14</sup>.

This aspect of Socrates’ engagement with the epistemic condition of his interlocutor is perhaps the most central one. Socrates himself refers to this as his practice amongst the Athenians whilst he is summarizing his life’s activity for the people of the court. In the *Apology* Socrates tells us the following:

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<sup>13</sup> 153d

<sup>14</sup> See for example Vlastos (1982)

‘I very reluctantly turned to some such investigation as this: I went to one of those reputed wise... Then, when I examined this man... my experience was something like this: I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not.’<sup>15</sup>

*(c) the disputation of any inappropriate claims to knowledge which they made*

When an interlocutor made a claim to knowledge Socrates would test it to see how rigorous it was. As we can see from the above quote, Socrates made it his business to demonstrate to people – through dialogue – that they did not in fact know that which they believed they knew.

As Socrates recognizes in the *Apology*, this practice made him very unpopular. He went on to say: ‘As a result he came to dislike me, as so did many of the bystanders’<sup>16</sup>. By Socrates’ own assessment, this is the primary reason why he came to be on trial – the trial at which he was finally sentenced to death<sup>17</sup>.

However Socrates did not engage in this practice in order to be a pest to his fellows, although he was felt as such – being as annoying as a gadfly. This was a practice that Socrates felt was so appropriate that he gave his life for it.

Socrates gave his life to this practice – both in the sense that he dedicated his life to engaging his fellow men to such scrutiny, and in the sense that he was willing to die rather than stop this dialogical procedure he enacted repeatedly during his lifetime<sup>18</sup>.

What Socrates gave his life for was this: for the practice of liberating people from misconceptions – and from any conceit of wisdom that arose from harboring these

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<sup>15</sup> 21c

<sup>16</sup> 21d

<sup>17</sup> 20d

<sup>18</sup> see *Apology* 29d

misconceptions. As he explains in the *Apology* at 29b, Socrates did so because he believed that ‘surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know.’

In Socrates’ pedagogical view, a piece of misinformation is harmful because it functions as a mental stumbling block for the person. It interferes with his ability to be virtuous, and to seek to become virtuous in a variety of ways. In light of this, even a person who knows nothing – but who does not presume to know that which he does not – is better off than one who has the impression that he knows something that he does not in fact know.

Thinking that one knows what they do not know is a bigger fault than when one humbly - unanimously with Socrates – is aware of the limits of their knowledge, who knows that they don’t know.

This position is one we can see clearly in the *Theaetetus*. In this dialogue Socrates reveals to Theaetetus that his is in fact the art of midwifery<sup>19</sup>. He uses the profession of the midwife to metaphorically parallel the elements of this art to his own intellectual activity<sup>20</sup>. Of this art he says: that it can identify when one holds a belief which is correct or one that is not correct – which thus needs to be discarded:

‘the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth.’<sup>21</sup>

Following this Socrates shows that it is harmful for one to entertain errors (beliefs which are not true) saying: ‘...because they set more value upon lies and phantoms than upon the truth; finally they have been set down for ignorant fools...’<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> 149a, all translations are by Levett, M., J in Burnyeat (1990)

<sup>20</sup> 149b and 150b

<sup>21</sup> 150c

<sup>22</sup> 150e

He then goes on to tell Theaetetus that he ought not to be upset if Socrates demonstrates to him that he does not know what he thinks that he knows, because if this happens it will be for his own benefit:

‘when I examine what you say, I may perhaps think it is a phantom and not truth, and proceed to take it quietly from you and abandon it. Now if this happens, you mustn’t get savage with me.... people have often before now got into such a state with me as to be literally ready to bite when I take away some nonsense or other from them. They never believe that I am doing this in goodwill.... I don’t do this kind of thing out of malice, but because it is not permitted to me to accept a lie and put away truth.’<sup>23</sup>

Finally, at the closing of the dialogue, after it was agreed that the definition of knowledge which Theaetetus had entertained was false, Socrates says:

‘Theaetetus, if ever in the future you should attempt to conceive or should succeed in conceiving other theories, they will be better ones as the result of this enquiry. And if you remain barren, your companions will find you gentler and less tiresome; you will be modest and not think you know what you don’t know. This is all my art can achieve...’<sup>24</sup>

*(d) the evaluation of the opinions they held*

Socrates considered that 'knowledge was not acceptance of second-hand opinion which could be handed over...but a personal achievement gained through continual self-criticism.'<sup>25</sup> In other words, Socrates guided people, through discussion, to carry out a critical evaluation of their own beliefs and claims.

This critical evaluation that Socrates directed was a rather ‘personalized’ act. By this it is meant that Socrates assisted people to evaluate the correctness of each claim to knowledge by prompting them to weigh it up together with their own other beliefs.

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<sup>23</sup> 151c-d

<sup>24</sup> 210c

<sup>25</sup> Kidd 1967: 483



He had an approach in dialogue to push people to personalize their claims to knowledge. Together with his interlocutor, Socrates analyzed his interlocutor's claim to knowledge in such a manner that the other was forced to personally evaluate whether he believed the claim to be true.

Socrates' way of forcing the interlocutor to evaluate seriously his own claims to knowledge was this: through dialogue Socrates revealed the consequences of each claim. His interlocutor then became sharply aware of the consequences of the claim he had been making. Thus, impelled by Socrates to face these consequences, the interlocutor was led to evaluate claims that he had assumed to be his knowledge.

Socrates perhaps would begin by examining one opinion, but from there lead his interlocutor to examine his views and attitudes in general. Such dialogical activity seems to have been a regular characteristic of his. The introduction made of Socrates by Nicias in the *Laches* gives us a nice summary of this behavior:

'You don't...know that whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation must necessarily, even if he began by conversing about something quite different in the first place, keep on being led about by the man's arguments until he submits to answering questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived hitherto. And when he does submit to this questioning, you don't realize that Socrates will not let him go before he has well and truly tested every last detail.'

And he concludes saying:

'I realized some time ago that the conversation would not be about the boys but about ourselves, if Socrates were present.'<sup>26</sup>

*(e) assisting them to make 'correct' steps towards learning*

At the start of the *Theaetetus* Socrates says to Theaetetus:

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<sup>26</sup> *Laches* 187e-188c

‘But with those who associate with me it is different. At first some of them give the impression of being ignorant and stupid; but as time goes on and our association continues, all whom God permits are seen to make progress – a progress which is amazing.... Yet it is clear that this is not due to anything they have learned from me; it is that they discover within themselves a multitude of beautiful things, which they bring forth into the light.’

‘But it is I, with God’s help, who deliver them of this offspring. And the proof of this may be seen in the many cases where people who did not realize this fact took all the credit to themselves and thought I was no good.’

‘They have then proceeded to leave me sooner than they should.... And after they have gone away from me resorted to harmful company, with the result that what remained within them has miscarried; while they have neglected the children I helped them to bring forth, and lost them, because they set more value upon lies and phantoms than upon truth; finally they have been set down for ignorant fools.... Sometimes they come back.... and they begin again to make progress.’<sup>27</sup>

In this confession that Socrates makes it is shown that he considered himself as serving a vital role: that of helping others to think properly. He guides them, as is suggested, to place value upon truth and not upon lies and phantoms, and in this way, assisted people to think well and to form correct concepts. Socrates had a method, we are told here, of ensuring that people are thinking truthfully. By concentrating on truths, and by shunning falsehood and ‘phantoms’, people become able to think successfully.

*(f) ...so as to improve their method of dealing with knowledge*

And finally, consider Socrates’ statement of the truth condition of knowledge. In the *Republic* Socrates states that the objects of knowledge must be true<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> *Theaetetus* 150d-151a

<sup>28</sup> *Republic* 477a

If we add this to the aforementioned point, then we find that by helping people to think more truthfully, Socrates also helps people to deal better with knowledge, and subsequently, to come closer to it.

We have briefly outlined the main elements of Socrates' preoccupation with the epistemic state of others. It is this behavior of his that allows us to say that Socrates was indeed an educator of others. He gave them intellectual instruction, he taught them the skills of enquiry and of the pursuit of truth, and he gave them direction, both in their thought processes and in their life in general, urging them to live the life of philosophy. By consciously and intentionally attempting to help others improve their epistemic state, Socrates was a teacher.

### Socrates' denial

With this in mind then, one is less inclined to understand Socrates' denial – that he was ever anyone's teacher – in a straightforward manner. The interpretation of this claim becomes more complex. There are three possible ways in which Socrates' denial may be understood.

The first is that Socrates meant what he said literally. Alexander Nehamas, for example, took this view and concluded that Socrates was not a teacher at all. He argued that the only reason we – as readers of Platonic dialogues – feel Socrates to be pedagogical is because Plato, being himself interested in education, misrepresented Socrates to us as such.

The second possibility is that Socrates did not mean his denial *truthfully*, but that he was somehow lying.

The third possibility is that Socrates did mean his denial, but that he meant it in a somewhat more labored sense. This is the most common sort of interpretation.

Gregory Vlastos<sup>29</sup> for example, held that Socrates made this denial using ‘complex irony’. Complex irony is when a word is used in two senses at the same time, where the one sense is denied and the other is being asserted.

Vlastos thus argues that: ‘in the conventional sense, where to “teach” is simply to transfer knowledge from a teacher’s to a learner’s mind, Socrates means what he says. But in the sense which *he* would give to “teaching” – engaging would-be learners in elenctic argument to make them aware of their own ignorance and enable them to discover for themselves... in that sense of teaching Socrates would want to say that he *is* a teacher...’<sup>30</sup>

C. D. C. Reeve (1990) offers an interpretation along the same lines. He also distinguishes between different sorts of teaching and concludes that Socrates is denying that he is a teacher in the sense which would have been familiar to his audience. He says that: ‘the beliefs drawn upon by Socrates in the elenctic examination are those of his interlocutor. The beliefs he draws out are already (implicitly) there. He imparts nothing of his own. This is what renders his disclaimer of teaching credible’<sup>31</sup>.

Gary Alan Scott (2000), in a more recent work, has argued the same point. He suggests that it is a common technique of Plato’s to use the refutation of conventional labels in order to make a distinction regarding Socrates<sup>32</sup>. This denial then, according to Scott, is used in order to differentiate between the methods and objectives of Socrates and those other practices prevalent of his day.

Scott makes the point that, at the time of Socrates’ life, the notion of a teacher would have referred to two types, neither of which were applicable to Socrates. The first, the

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<sup>29</sup> Vlastos 1991

<sup>30</sup> 1991: 32

<sup>31</sup> 1990: xii

<sup>32</sup> 2000: 14

*pedagogue*, was a sort of escort that youths had whose main role was to make sure that the youths do what they are supposed to do. These pedagogues were often slaves. The second sort would have been the sophist, a type that Socrates was eager to differentiate himself from<sup>33</sup>.

Indeed, alongside these two sorts of educators that Scott mentioned, there were others in the Athens of Socrates' time. There were for example the *paidotribes* (gymnastic tutors); those teaching vocational skills; and other philosophers or mathematicians who tutored pupils (as were Anaxagoras and Theodoros).

Arguably though each of these trainers claimed a field of expertise which they passed on to the pupil. The point that Scott, Vlastos and Reeve make is that Socrates did not teach in this manner. He did not inculcate any body of knowledge into pupils: and therefore, they claim, he differentiates himself by denying that he was a teacher<sup>34</sup>.

Of the three possible ways to interpret Socrates' denial, the most acceptable appears to be the third: the one held by Vlastos, Reeve and Scott among others. The view that Socrates, in voicing this denial, was referring specifically to certain notions of 'teacher' - which would have been familiar to his audience, but from which Socrates wanted to be disassociated – seems to be the most correct. For two reasons:

Firstly, it allows us to continue to conceive of Socrates as an educator, which - as argued earlier – any familiarity with Socratic dialogues compels one to do. Secondly, as Scott (2000) argued, this would not be an awkward reading of the text but rather a commonplace one – since it is often the case that Plato uses such refutation of conventional labels when he is giving a description of Socrates. It is a common method used by Plato to delineate the Socratic persona.

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<sup>33</sup> 2000: 13

<sup>34</sup> See also Brickhouse and Smith (2009)

Nehamas, who supported the view that Socrates was indeed not a teacher at all, dealt with the imposing impression of Socrates as an educator in Plato's dialogues in the following manner: by suggesting that it was Plato's interest in education that is 'written into' Socrates. Nehamas argued that Socrates himself was not involved in education, but that Plato was interested in it, and therefore 'wrote' the Socratic character in such a way<sup>35</sup>.

This however seems unlikely to me and I see no realistic way to approach the interpretation of Socrates in this light. I say that because: given the thorough educative nature of Socratic dialogue, were we to remove traces of pedagogy from the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues, then nothing would be left of him.

The Socrates whom we know through Plato's works is so radically pedagogical, that if we remove pedagogical elements from his persona, there would be no persona left over to speak of. There would be no Socrates left to differentiate from any character created by Plato.

Finally, the second option – that Socrates did not mean what he said at all – would amount to saying that Socrates lied to his audience. This would be a most unfortunate position to hold and it would be in contradiction with the character of both Socrates and the dialogue.

We should notice that at the start of the dialogue, little before the passage where Socrates denies being a teacher, Socrates makes the point of emphasizing the sincerity of his speech. 'From me', Socrates says, 'you will hear the whole truth'<sup>36</sup>. It would in fact require such a convoluted explanation of the text – to support the thesis that Socrates was lying – that scholars do not tend to this possible explanation. Socrates then *meant what he said*, but he *meant it in a particular sense*.

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<sup>35</sup> 1992: 305

<sup>36</sup> *Apology* 17c

Could it not be possible though, to characterize Socrates in some other way, which would capture the essence of his activity without casting it in the light of education? Certain scholars have done so. Chessick (1982) for example names Socrates the first psychotherapist<sup>37</sup>. He says:

‘This maieutic method is certainly the first practice of individual intensive psychotherapy; Socrates encounters and engages an individual in an attempts to make the individual look into himself.’<sup>38</sup>

We might agree with Chessick that much of what Socratic education aimed to achieve would benefit a person generally, and could be considered personal progress from the point of view of psychotherapy today. Notwithstanding this affinity a psychotherapist might feel for Socrates, it would be limiting to characterize Socrates as a psychotherapist.

First of all, bringing about learning and intellectual development was the essence of the Socratic approach, whereas it is only occasionally an accidental feature of psychotherapy.

Furthermore, although it is correct to say that Socrates turned an individual’s attention to ‘look into himself’, the purpose of this was that he would thus better see the objective world round about him. The personal engagement of the individual, for Socrates, had the aim of enabling that person to learn true knowledge more effectively. It had an educational function.

The purpose of learning, for Socrates, was to lead the better life, the examined life, and to thus be better off. However, arguably this is the purpose of all education. Admitting this does not place one outside the boundaries of education, but rather locates one firmly therein.

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<sup>37</sup> See also Chessick (1977)

<sup>38</sup> 1982: 76

Let us therefore proceed having said that Socrates was indeed an educator, or otherwise, a teacher. We have agreed with Socrates that he was not one who ‘transmitted’ bits of information into empty vessels, otherwise known in educational theory as a ‘banking educator’<sup>39</sup>; but through a process of dialogue with the other, he guided them to a more ‘appropriate’ or ‘correct’ epistemic state.

## I.II

‘Why, how strange it would be, Lysimachus, to refuse to lend one's endeavours for the highest improvement of anybody!’

- Socrates, *Laches* 200e -

Socrates acted as a teacher of others, to great expense to himself. He earned no money for his activities, and indeed lost his life to the cause, as many of his fellow citizens believed that the influence he was having on youths was negative.

In a sense, following the suggestion of Paul Shorey (1969) we might say that Socrates was a philosopher amongst cave dwellers; whose attitude often provoked laughter and

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<sup>39</sup> The concept ‘empty vessel’ is used in educational theory to refer to an attitude towards the learner, where the learner is empty of knowledge and the teacher ‘pours’ facts into them, as if they were a container of learning to be filled by one who already contains the knowledge. This concept was made popular by the educator Paulo Freire when he criticized what he called ‘banking education’. Banking education is what Freire called processes of education where facts are deposited by a knower (the teacher) into the learners (as if they were empty vessels).

Freire severely criticized such pedagogical processes and argued that they are not worthy of the name education. Instead he argues that dialogue is the only natural and appropriate way to bring about any significant learning. See for example: Freire (1970)



disdain; and when it became possible to lay hands on him and kill him, his fellows did so<sup>40</sup>.

A question arises: why would any enlightened person reside in the cave? Why did Socrates dedicate himself to this act of ‘turning the mind’ of his fellows<sup>41</sup>? The answer is simple. Socrates did so because he cared for his fellows. He cared for the condition and fate of the ‘souls of men’<sup>42</sup>.

I shall argue that Socrates felt that it was his responsibility to attend to the souls of others. It was for this reason that, as we are told in the *Apology*, he urged people to seek virtue, and by his own admittance, doing so benefited them more than any service the gods could have bestowed upon the city<sup>43</sup>.

Alexander Nehamas (1992) claims a contrary view: he presents Socrates as one who concerned himself solely with his own development, who was indifferent to the wellbeing of the souls of others, and who therefore did not intentionally engage in any act of educating. He states this view again (1999: 130) when speaking about Nietzsche’s understanding of Socrates<sup>44</sup>.

Nehamas says of Socrates that: he was ‘totally unconcerned with the moral improvement of others’; that he did not have ‘even in its most rudimentary form, the sort of program for moral education that Plato and Aristotle developed after him’;

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<sup>40</sup> See Shorey’s comment at point 517a of the *Republic*, found in Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vols. 5 & 6*, translated by Paul Shorey, Harvard University Press, London, 1969

<sup>41</sup> This characterization of Socratic education is discussed further in chapter VI.

<sup>42</sup> Reference to the *Theaetetus* 150b8

<sup>43</sup> *Apology* 30a

<sup>44</sup> Nehamas writes: ‘His Socrates...does not attend to “the benefit of the human race,”...His concern is only with the care of himself – in this respect, he is much closer to the image we find...in Plato’s early dialogues...’

and, that ‘all he was concerned about was the salvation of his own and not of any other soul.’<sup>45</sup>

I will argue that Nehamas is incorrect on this point using two arguments. The first is textual, for in the Platonic texts, where Socrates is featured, there is evidence that Socrates did care about the state of the souls of his fellows<sup>46</sup>. The second argument made will be that ‘caring for the souls of others’ is in fact a prescription of Socrates’ philosophy.

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<sup>45</sup> 1992: 283

<sup>46</sup> Nehamas may want to negate the strength of the textual evidence by saying that these sentiments – like the educational concerns we see Socrates expressing – belong rather to Plato, and that these were put on the historical Socrates by the writer. However, notice that there is a significant problem with such a claim. The fact is that there exist very few other sources regarding the character of Socrates. There does not exist a historical body of information regarding Socrates which a scholar can compare with the personality presented by Plato in his dialogues. If then a scholar, like Nehamas, wants to claim that Plato is misleading us in how we view Socrates, they need to provide us with some reason as to why we might imagine a Socrates different from the one presented by Plato. Indeed, the second main source on Socrates that we have alongside the works of Plato are the writings of Xenophon, who, it can be argued, does not at all support Nehamas’ claim. Xenophon, whether he be an accurate source or not, presents Socrates as being much concerned with education.

There does not seem to be any reasonable basis from which Nehamas can claim that Socrates was different from how Plato presented him to us, because if Socrates really was something other than what Plato has presented, we then have no textual evidence for knowing how he was. If Plato has projected on to Socrates an interest in education, then we have no way of looking behind this projection.

If Nehamas wanted to counter the textual evidence that we have in Platonic texts regarding Socrates then he would need to provide us with a reasonable function that will guide us in our imagining a Socrates *different* from the one Plato has introduced us to. I do not see that there is sufficient reason to believe that we can imagine a Socrates behind the Platonic Socrates. I cannot conceive of what criteria Nehamas might employ in order to say what Socrates was like in contrast to how Plato has described him.

Until such proof is presented however, we can reasonably hold that evidence taken from the Platonic corpus is informative on this matter: as to whether or not Socrates can be said to have cared about the souls of his fellows. With this in mind, let us then consider the texts which challenge the view that Socrates did not care about the souls of others.

Gregory Vlastos (1991) has also made a claim that we can separate Socrates the philosopher from Plato the philosopher within the Platonic dialogues. However, notice that Vlastos makes a very different move. Vlastos has claimed that based on the textual evidence of the Platonic dialogues one can distinguish two separate philosophical personalities, which can be taken to be representative of the two philosophers Plato and Socrates. Vlastos is making a claim that is grounded in the text that are available to us.

Nehamas on the other hand is making a claim that is impossible to ascertain. He is claiming that in his dialogues Plato is giving us the wrong impression about Socrates. Nehamas is claiming that he can know something about Socrates *despite* the Plato’s dialogues. This is a difficult case to make as we do not have enough sources to disagree with Plato’s portrayal of Socrates in any informed manner.

There is ample textual evidence that Socrates cared for the souls of his fellows. The strongest and most pronounced direct statement of this from Socrates himself is found in Socrates' most famous speech: the *Apology*. At 31b, Socrates tells his accusers outright that so much did he care for the wellbeing of his fellow citizens, that he neglected even his own affairs. He says:

‘...it does not seem like human nature for me to have neglected all my own affairs and to have tolerated this neglect now for so many years while I was always concerned with you, approaching each one of you like a father or an elder brother to persuade you to care for virtue.’

As Socrates emphasized in this passage, he neglected all of his own affairs for this cause, to the extent of bringing himself to poverty<sup>47</sup>.

Furthermore, at 30a Socrates says: ‘...there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god. For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old not to care for as your body or your wealth’ but ‘for the state of your souls’.

Other examples can be found in the *Theaetetus*. After the long dialogue - whose function was to examine and evaluate the content of Theaetetus' episteme – Socrates' makes it clear that he considers this ‘epistemic cleansing’ to have been good and profitable for Theaetetus<sup>48</sup>.

Again, at 150b6, when Socrates metaphorically introduced his ‘art’ to Theaetetus - the activity that has preoccupied his entire life – he tells him that it is to attend to and watch over the labor of the souls of his fellows. He here makes it clear that he is concerned with the ‘souls’ of his fellows – something which is thought of as linked to their epistemic state.

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<sup>47</sup> 31c

<sup>48</sup> *Theaetetus* 210c

Another occasion where Socrates declares that his intellectual activities amongst his fellows are compatible with his care for the souls of his interlocutor comes in the *Meno*, at 77, where it is indicated that Socrates, would if he could, benefit Meno through providing him with learning. He says: ‘I shall certainly not be lacking in eagerness to tell you such things, both for your sake and my own...’

Having presented occasions where Socrates plainly states that he cared for the souls of others, let us now make our point with a further argument. I will now make the case that ‘caring for the souls of others’ was a necessary element of Socratic thought.

For the Socrates we know from Plato’s works, it would be nonsense to try to separate the good of the self from the good of the other, and therefore, it cannot be said, as Nehamas has tried to say, that Socrates cared ‘only for his own soul’ and not for the souls of his fellows.

#### Caring as a necessary element of Socrates’ thought

‘we were right to agree that good men must be beneficent, and that this could not be otherwise.’<sup>49</sup>

- Socrates -

I contend that it does not make sense to say that Socrates cared about his own soul and not for the souls of his fellows. For Socrates, the caring of one’s own soul requires them to cultivate virtues which would be also to the benefit of the others. The person who cares for his own soul would be the person who would be just towards all people, who would never hurt anyone – not even his enemies – but rather, would aim to do good always.

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<sup>49</sup> *Meno* 96e

Such a person then who cared for his own soul – be he Socrates or someone else – would still be obliged by his virtue in each of his interaction with other people, to pursue the good of his fellows.

This is so because: it is for the good of one's own soul to be just, and to be just to another means to act in a way that would not undermine their benefit. It is therefore in disregard of Socrates' understanding of what is good for one's own soul that one would make distinction and the claim that: Socrates cared for his own soul and not for that of his fellows.

My argument cannot be found explicitly stated by Socrates in the Platonic texts, however, it can be constructed in three parts:

1. We can first establish that for Socrates, a man who cares for his own soul will seek to develop within himself the virtues, justice being one of these primary virtues. We can see this clearly in the *Republic*. Here Socrates challenges the general belief that it is good for a man to benefit his friends and harm his enemies and asks if it is the role of a just man to harm anyone<sup>50</sup>.

He argues that a person is made more unjust when they are harmed<sup>51</sup> and that therefore it is an injustice to them to harm them. Socrates then claims that a just man would never do such an injustice to another as to cause them harm.

Saying this he suggests that it is never good to be unjust to anyone. He goes as far as to say that it is always beneficial for a person to remain just, in the face

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<sup>50</sup> *Republic* 335b

<sup>51</sup> 335c

of all adversity, and despite any consequent loss of personal goods<sup>52</sup>. This is also the claim Socrates supports against Polus in the *Gorgias*<sup>53</sup>.

2. Following this we can show that Socrates believed that being just to another includes that you defend their wellbeing when your actions are such that they would have an effect on the other.

This can be seen in the *Crito*. In this dialogue his friend Crito urges Socrates to escape from prison so as to save his own life. He responds that ‘one must never in any way do wrong willingly’<sup>54</sup>. He also adds: ‘doing harm to people is no different from wrongdoing’<sup>55</sup>.

Socrates argues with Crito that he ought not to escape from prison and disobey the Athenian state, for in disobeying them he would undermine its authority and so harm it<sup>56</sup>.

It is important to notice from the example of the *Crito* that Socrates’ precept that one ought never to willingly harm another does not merely mean that one ought not to aggress another. Socrates and Crito here are not discussing whether they should raise a revolt against the Athenian state. Socrates’ precept is meant in the strictest sense: that if your actions will bring harm to another then you ought not to act in this way.

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<sup>52</sup> The main content of the *Republic* begins precisely when Socrates agrees to attempt to defend this view, that being just is better than being under all circumstances, at 368b.

<sup>53</sup> See *Gorgias* from 466c.

<sup>54</sup> *Crito* 49a

<sup>55</sup> 49c

<sup>56</sup> 51c

An occasion when this sentiment is demonstrated by Socrates with regards to his intellectual activities in the city is found in the *Apology*. Speaking of his pedagogical activities here Socrates tells the jury that ‘this is my course of action even, even if I am to face death many times’<sup>57</sup>.

He reveals here that he believes that his activities are beneficial for his fellows when he charges that if the Athenians kill him, they would harm themselves more than they would harm him’<sup>58</sup>. It is because the god has assigned him to procure this benefit for the city that he must go on and do it. Thus he claims that, even if the court was to let him go free on the condition that he stop his pedagogical dialogues with his fellows, Socrates would refuse to stop.

3. It is the case that Socrates considered the achievement of good philosophical thought to be beneficial for one’s soul. In contributing to how his interlocutors processed in their thought, and by enriching them with the ability to think in more philosophical manner, Socrates helped to care for the soul of his fellows.

This can be understood if we look at what Socrates says at the opening of the *Philebus*<sup>59</sup>. He clarifies his own position which he will defend thus:

‘Philebus holds that what is good for all creatures is to enjoy themselves, to be pleased and delighted, and whatever else goes together with that kind of things. We contend that not these, but knowing, understanding, and remembering, and what belongs with them, right opinion and true calculations, are better than pleasure and more agreeable to all who can attain them; those

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<sup>57</sup> *Apology* 30c

<sup>58</sup> 30c

<sup>59</sup> I do not hold that the *Philebus* as a whole represents Socrates. There are reasons to think that in the case of this dialogue the person of Socrates is indeed being used as a literary figure and is speaking in a manner which was not his own. These cannot be discussed here, however, I consider that the start of the *Philebus* – and particularly the quote used here – is compatible with the Socrates we know through Plato’s dialogues. The section that is quoted here is in line with the Socrates of other dialogues, as for example: what is said about the value of knowledge in the *Meno* as well as in the *Euthydemus*.

who can, get the maximum benefit possible from having them, both those now alive and future generations.’<sup>60</sup>

We can then assume that Socrates was aware that his activity had a positive impact on the souls of his fellows. We can see that this was so again in the *Apology*. Socrates says as much at 36c: ‘I went to each of you... and conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit... by trying to persuade him... that he himself should be as good and as wise as possible...’

Similarly, we know that Socrates believed that a faulty thought-process was harmful for a person’s soul. This can also be deduced as the flip-side of what is being said at the opening of the *Philebus*. This is why Socrates esteemed philosophy so highly and considered it to be such a worthy act, as he tells us in the *Phaedo*: the philosopher – the one who is practiced in the art of proper thought and who has overcome that which *inhibits* successful contemplation<sup>61</sup> - can be benefited by grasping truth<sup>62</sup>.

To complete our argument then, we can say this: Socrates’ activity was a noetic one – it engaged with the intellectual activity of persons. If Socrates’ influence on the intellect of his fellows had been such that it undermined their ability to think philosophically, then by his own term he would have been bringing harm to them. Equally, if his effect on them was such that it enabled them to think in a better way (as we see in the *Theaetetus* he thinks he does do<sup>63</sup>), then his activity is beneficial for people.

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<sup>60</sup> *Philebus* 11b4-c3

<sup>61</sup> 65a-d

<sup>62</sup> 65b7

<sup>63</sup> see *Theaetetus* 150b-c



It is also the case, as we have seen in the *Republic*, that by Socrates' definition, a person who is virtuous would never bring harm to others.

Therefore, Socrates, being one who constantly engaged others in dialogue could not have been a person who did not care about the effect that he was having on the minds and souls of others, but who cared only for his own soul. For by Socrates' own terms, even if he were to be primarily concerned with the state of his own soul, the attainment of justice and virtue for himself would require him to be attentive to the effect he was having on others and to strive for that effect to be a positive one.

Socrates tells us as much: that he cared about the souls of others when he says that he urged others to contemplate their lives and the state of their souls, because 'the unexamined life is not worth living'<sup>64</sup>.

His act was on the intellect of others, and therefore his contribution – for his own sake even – would always have to have been the care for the intellectual activity of others.

As we have seen in the *Philebus*, the proper care for one's intellect is the same as the care of their soul. Therefore, Socrates would have cared for the souls of others even if, as Nehamas would have it, Socrates only cared about his own soul. Thus, the distinction and point that Socrates cared only about his own soul and not for the souls of his fellows becomes, upon closer examination, nonsensical.

We have now thoroughly discussed Nehamas' claim that Socrates cared only about his own soul and not about the souls of his fellows, which was thus phrased: that 'Socrates...was totally unconcerned with the moral improvement of others' and 'all

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<sup>64</sup> *Apology* 38a

he was concerned about was the salvation of his own soul and not of any other soul'. We have found this charge to be unfounded.

Let us end by noticing what Socrates told Callicles in the *Gorgias*: that an orator who cared about the well-being of his listeners would 'always give his attention to how justice may come to exist in the souls of his fellow citizens and injustice be gotten rid of, how self control may come to exist there and lack of discipline be gotten rid of'<sup>65</sup>.

### I.III

Let us now consider a further objection to the point that Socrates was a teacher to his fellows. It could be argued, as some scholars have done, that the Socrates in Plato's dialogues regularly fails to have any positive intended educational effect on his interlocutors. If this is so, one might wonder, how can he be considered an educator, if not as a comic failure of one<sup>66</sup>.

In the *Apology* Socrates is presented to us as a sort of 'divinely appointed physician of the soul'<sup>67</sup> who did his utmost to develop in people an interest in becoming virtuous. Nevertheless, scholars have doubted whether we in fact see Plato's Socrates having any positive lasting effect on others. As Scott (2000) put it, there is a view that 'more often than not, [Socrates'] target interlocutors leave their conversations with the philosopher wholly unchanged by the experience...'.<sup>68</sup>

I disagree with this view. I tend to agree with Socrates himself, who in the *Gorgias* claimed to be indeed the most genuine undertaker of the 'true political art', that of benefiting the moral character of his fellows<sup>68</sup>; and with Vlastos (1991: 32) I find that Socrates 'does have, the effect of evoking and assisting ... effort at moral self-improvement'.

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<sup>65</sup> 504e

<sup>66</sup> Alexander Nehamas for example takes such a view at (1992: 296)

<sup>67</sup> This term is borrowed from Scott (2000:1)

<sup>68</sup> *Gorgias* 521d, commentary taken from Vlastos (1991:32)

First, let us say the little that we can about the impact of the historical Socrates. Socrates had such a long-lasting consequential influence that he marked a turning point in history. Philosophers that lived before him have come to be known as the ‘pre-Socratics’. Since Socrates did not write anything himself, his impact was instigated by his conversations with his fellows. His impact on the history of thought began with his impact on the people with whom he spoke.

Two students of Socrates whom we know had a great respect for their teacher, and who were influenced by him greatly, are Plato and Xenophon. One might want to add Antisthenes to this list<sup>69</sup>.

Alongside these two whom we can name, the time following Socrates’ death saw the creation of multiple schools of people, who developed their ideas believing they were followers of Socrates. Whether or not we agree that the schools of thought that occurred after Socrates were true to his own intentions<sup>70</sup>, we can acknowledge that his influence was a great inspiration for them. Included are: the Cyrenaics; the Cynics; the Stoics<sup>71</sup>; and the Skeptics (Kraut 2013).

His influence continued. As Magee (1998: 21) pointed out, by the first century AD, Socrates had become a cultural hero in the intellectual circles of the Roman Empire. This influence was amongst intellectuals, precisely because they felt impacted by engaging with Socrates. Nietzsche saw Socrates not just as the founder of ethics ‘but of the whole scientific tradition’<sup>72</sup>. Morrison (2012: 101) says: ‘Socrates is the mythic

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<sup>69</sup> See for example Prince (2006)

<sup>70</sup> Bett (2006) says that even though the skeptics took their link to Socrates very seriously, they even disagreed amongst themselves on how to understand what they saw as Socratic skepticism.

<sup>71</sup> Brown (2006: 275)

<sup>72</sup> See Matson and Leite (1991: 145)

father and patron saint of philosophy. One answer to the question, “What is philosophy?” is: Philosophy is what Socrates did and what he started.’

In our day Socrates is the inspiration behind many educational projects<sup>73</sup>. Affected by his teaching, educators still look to Socrates as their inspiration. As noted by Nails (2014), even the European Union’s program of life-long learning (running from 1994 to 2006) borrows its name from Socrates. This is just one of a myriad of such examples. Educators throughout history have wanted to honor their teacher by referring their work to him<sup>74</sup>.

But let us now turn to speak more precisely about Socrates as we know him through Plato’s works. Indeed, the reader will note that much of the influence that Socrates has had on people throughout history goes beyond the reach of his own person, and most of us have had contact with him only through the works of others. In our own time, this contact is primarily through Plato’s works.

Can we then say that the Platonic Socrates, the persona who is seen by some in the dialogues as failing to teach his interlocutors, had a notable impact on others? I would like to say yes. Indeed, the person of whom I am most confident to speak on behalf of is myself. I, like many others who have read Plato’s texts, can say that my contact with Plato’s Socrates has had a continuing definite and long-lasting impact on my life and thought.

If we thought of the Platonic dialogues as historical records of a particular conversation between Socrates and an interlocutor – as archives of events – then we might say that my reaction to them as a reader is irrelevant. However, if we think of the dialogues, as is indeed the overwhelming view, as Plato’s purposeful creations, intended for a reader, then, my response to them as a reader becomes more relevant.

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<sup>73</sup> Schneider (2012)

<sup>74</sup> See for example Rud, Jr. (1997)

As scholars like Strauss (1964); Krentz (1983); Ausland (1997); and Jansen (2013) have noted, Plato's writings are not in the form of a philosophical treatise, but are in dramatic form, precisely because they are designed to act on the reader. They are written to offer us an experience of philosophy rather than to transfer to us some particular philosophy.

Ausland (1997) made the case that Plato wrote in such a way that: his texts relate to the reader much the same way that Socrates related to with his interlocutors. A manner of engagement is used, to awaken one's mind to the act of philosophy<sup>75</sup>, without giving us any clear conclusive dogmas that we are to incorporate.

If the inconclusiveness that is so characteristic of Plato's dialogues has been an instigator of learning and growth for so many generations of people up to our own day, then could this same inconclusiveness experienced whilst in dialogue with Socrates also be fruitful for his contemporaries? Why do we think that we are more able today to benefit from Plato's ambiguity than Socrates' interlocutors were able, over time, benefit from Socrates'?

As a reader of Plato's texts today might testify, we often leave a Platonic dialogue unsure of what it intended to teach us. Nevertheless, few of us can honestly say that they remain untaught by Plato. Something of the sort might be true of Socrates' interlocutors. Therefore, Socrates' influence on the thought of his fellows, might not be reasonably expected to be found stated in plain terms in the exchange that takes place in the text.

Gary Alan Scott (2000: 2) noted the point that when considering the success of an exchange, one needs to be aware that the dialogues were written to function on several levels. That is to say: that in the act of writing these dialogues Plato involves four different sorts of audience simultaneously. These groups are:

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<sup>75</sup> See Ausland (1997: 382-386)

1. Between Socrates and his target interlocutor
2. Between these primary interlocutors and any third parties gathered and ‘listening in’
3. Between the primary conversation (in ‘real time’) and anyone who might hear about the conversation, or hear it rehearsed, or who might be rehearsing it themselves later
4. Between Plato and his audience.

This list of audiences includes myself; those present as audience in the *Protagoras* who might leave the conversation with the understanding that indeed it is not to be taken for granted that Protagoras has something valuable to teach them; and people like Appolodorus who ‘conceive the benefit’<sup>76</sup> that philosophy does them and who therefore spend their time contemplating Socrates’ conversations.

In light of this, an apparent failure on the part of the interlocutor might have the function of achieving success for other intended audiences. Scott (2007: xviii) for example suggests that ‘reader or auditors can learn from the mistakes of characters in conversation, or they may be able to see why a given conversation stalls or a particular line of argument runs into difficulty’.

Let us though concentrate on what occurs in the direct relationship between Socrates and his primary interlocutors in Plato’s dialogues. As several scholars have noticed, Plato who had literary freedom to present Socrates as he chose has presented to us a dedicated midwife, always about the business of urging people to turn their lives towards philosophy, who nevertheless fails on most occasions, at least on appearance, to have the desired impact on them<sup>77</sup>.

This apparent failure has brought some scholars to the conclusion that Socrates’ pedagogical approach was inappropriate and thus ineffective. Such a reading however

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<sup>76</sup> *Symposium* 173c, translation by Fowler (in Plato 1925)

<sup>77</sup> Scott 2000: 165

ignores Plato's confidence, appearing throughout his works, that Socrates was a very valuable and appropriate teacher to his fellows indeed. There are other ways though to make sense of this noted 'dramatic failure' on the part of Socrates in Plato's dialogues.

Several answers have already been given to this problem. Scott (2000: 170) for example, following Kraut (1984: 225) makes the point that Socrates' success is causing moral perplexity in his interlocutors – this being a protreptic first step in moral self improvement – and disabusing them of their conceit of wisdom. These are two things that we regularly see Socrates successfully achieving in Plato's dialogues. I agree with Kraut and Scott on this point. These are a degree of success on the part of Socrates.

However, Socrates desired to see these seeds blossom into a more fruitful and sustained progress made by his fellows; and we might still ask if and why Socrates fails to take people further than this. Socrates is not presented to us merely as a midwife who can take away a phantom child, but as one who can see a person through a successful intellectual pregnancy, one that bears the fruit of philosophy<sup>78</sup>.

As Scott (2000: 167) points out, the fact that Socrates sometimes fails to turn his interlocutors to philosophy – as we see in the examples of Alcibiades and Lysis – was not intended by Plato as a failure on the part of Socrates, but a failure on the part of the interlocutor to participate in any sustained way in the (correct) method outlined by Socrates.

Socratic dialogue required nothing less than complete devotion of one's self to the pursuit of truth. As is often noted, together with Socrates, a true philosopher who hoped to benefit from this 'examined way of life' would need to neglect his other social, financial and political interests, and have no higher aim than the attainment of virtue and truth.

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<sup>78</sup> *Theaetetus* 150d

This is not a small thing to ask, it not a small thing to do, and therefore, as is realistic, many of Socrates' interlocutors chose not to follow Socrates on this path. Their attachment to the 'goods' they hoped to gain from society prevented from seeking the 'goods' of philosophy.

As we see in the *Gorgias* whilst Socrates converses with Polus<sup>79</sup>, Socrates' idea that the goods of virtue and philosophy are fundamentally more valuable than any other goods available in society, seemed to most as an extreme and preposterous idea. One would need to spend time with Socrates, and acquire a familiarity with and love for philosophy before they were able to appreciate this notion<sup>80</sup>.

Some failure then is to be expected, since Socrates was making a very heavy demand indeed. It is Scotts (2000) opinion that Plato shows his readers this failure precisely with the purpose of giving them a realistic sense of how demanding the true philosophical life is, and to what radical extent it requires the turning away of a person from their previous attachments.

Furthermore, I consider that some failure was not a problem for Plato. The life of philosophy was for him and exercise in excellence. Although anyone, regardless of social rank was invited to do philosophy, only those whose soul tended towards excellence might remain in the bosom of philosophy long enough to benefit from it. Most people, as Plato might have thought, preferred to be involved with the pettier aspects of life.

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<sup>79</sup> *Gorgias* 468e7; 473a; 473e6

<sup>80</sup> At *Gorgias* 474b7 Socrates begins to prove his point using philosophy; *Theaetetus* 150e



The philosopher, in most people's eyes is a social failure. The social cost of philosophy then, for people who might have taken her up, appears to be too high<sup>81</sup>. Plato's texts often give some indication of this. We might say that that people fail to benefit from philosophy because they fail to love her and to choose her over other concerns of status.

We have reason to think that Plato was disappointed with the reaction of the majority to philosophy. He might have felt that they were unworthy of its fruits, since they failed to embrace philosophy, and preferred the honors of societal life to the gifts of truth and virtue. This disappointment might explain why Plato emphasized how many persons failed to take up philosophy, and he seems to have been concerned with explaining why this occurred. Consider this in contrast to Xenophon's account who declares confidently that Socrates often benefited his fellows with dialogue<sup>82</sup>.

In *Republic* 489a for example, Socrates says: '...the best among the philosophers are useless to the masses. But tell him to blame their uselessness on those who don't make use of them, not on those good philosophers.' Furthermore, regarding the dignity with which we see Socrates acknowledging the rejection he so often experiences from people, we might refer to the following quote from the same section: 'It isn't for the ruler – if he is truly any use – to beg the subjects to accept his rule.'

One reason that Socrates gives for people failing in the life of philosophy is that they leave him and his method of seeking truth too early, before they have matured in the process<sup>83</sup>. This might happen, as we have said earlier, because they do not want to

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<sup>81</sup> As Schmid (1983: 344) put it: '...the person must be willing to endure suffering humiliation, public ridicule for being refuted, just in order to persist and progress in the process of Socratic learning – and this means he must be willing to value truth and admit error, even at the cost of other, conventionally greater values such as honor (disgrace) and pleasure (discomfort).'

<sup>82</sup> *Memorabilia* 4.3.8

<sup>83</sup> See *Theaetetus* 150d

undergo the complete change demanded of them by philosophy. One might argue that Plato is pointing to this as one of the reasons for Alcibiades' failure when in the *Symposium* he admits that he avoids the company of Socrates so that he will not be transformed by him into a philosopher<sup>84</sup>.

Notice that even Alcibiades, perhaps Socrates' most famous 'failure', gives an emotional speech indicating that if he were to stay by the philosopher's side, he would be completely transformed. He makes it clear that his rejection of Socrates is not because the philosopher has no notable effect on him, but because the effect that he is capable of is far too great<sup>85</sup>.

Indeed Plato has Alcibiades say that Socrates: 'conquers every one in discourse—not once in a while, like you the other day, but always'<sup>86</sup>. Plato then could not have seen Socrates' approach as ineffective, even if he felt that many people managed to *not be benefited* by it.

Again, to refer to the point made by Kraut (1984) and Scott (2000), we might say that Socrates failed in being a teacher of virtue, something which he indeed denies being, but it is more difficult to deny that he had the effect on people which he is seen to attribute to himself as his task: the effect of making them doubt their own conceit of wisdom, making them question whether the life they lead is the better one, and turning their mind's eye to the glory of philosophy.

Another point to consider is that Athens in Socrates' time was a small place. In his lifetime, the philosopher would have met all of the Athenian aristocrats, as well as many from other cities. So you might ask whether it is reasonable to say that Socrates was a failure because there is no tangible evidence that each person of the city made progress? This is perhaps an unrealistic criterion. Not every person we see engaging

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<sup>84</sup> 215d

<sup>85</sup> *Symposium* 215d-216c

<sup>86</sup> *ibid*: 213e

with Socrates was committed to him, since Socrates would have engaged with almost everyone.

Finally, let me end by saying that several people did make progress. Nissias might be numbered among them; as well as Plato himself; Appolodorus; and on Myles Burnyeat's account, Polemarchus went on to become a philosopher under Socrates' influence<sup>87</sup>. Diogenes Laertius would add: Aeschines, Phaedo, Euclides, Aristippus<sup>88</sup>.

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<sup>87</sup> This view was given in a personal conversation with Myles Burnyeat in Cambridge 2012

<sup>88</sup> 1972: D.L.2.5 [47]

## II. What was Socrates a teacher of?

### II.

I have thus far been making the point that Socrates was some sort of a teacher; one who cared for the wellbeing of others and prodded them to seek virtue in their lives. However, this cannot simply be understood as saying that Socrates was a teacher of virtue.

That Socrates was a teacher of virtue is indeed a common assumption amongst scholars. It is an easy view to form because we see Socrates always leading his interlocutors to interrogate their knowledge of the virtues. He often is heard asking ‘what is X’, where X is a virtue.

Of the surviving Platonic dialogues, twenty-seven are generally agreed to be authentic works of Plato. These are the: *Apology*; *Charmides*; *Crito*; *Euthyphro*; *Gorgias*; *Hippias Minor*; *Ion*; *Laches*; *Protagoras*; *Euthydemus*; *Hippias Major*; *Cratylus*; *Phaedo*; *Symposium*; *Republic*; *Phaedrus*; *Parmenides*; *Theaetetus*; *Lysis*;

*Menexenus; Meno; Timaeus; Critias; Sophist; Politicus; Philebus;* and the *Laws*. Of these dialogues, twenty-two feature Socrates as the main speaker. Seventeen of these – 80% of all dialogues where Socrates leads the dialogue – are clearly concerned with ethical matters.

The *Charmides* discusses the meaning of *sophrosyne*. The *Crito* debates justice, injustice, and the appropriate response to injustice. The *Euthyphro* deals with defining piety and holiness; the *Laches* with courage; the *Protagoras* with whether virtue can be taught; the *Hippias Major* with the *καλόν*; the *Phaedo* with the soul's immortality – and it discusses also the ontological reality of the good. The *Hippias Minor* discusses the benefit of telling the truth rather than lying.

The *Symposium* discusses love; the *Republic* the definition of justice; the *Phaedrus* again deals with love; the *Lysis* with the meaning of friendship; the *Meno* with the definition of virtue (*aretē*) and whether it can be taught. The *Philebus* argues that knowledge is more precious than pleasure, on the basis that knowledge has a direct relationship to that which is good; the *Euthydemus* shows eristic to be inferior to philosophy by demonstrating that it does not care for the truth, as well as contain a discussion of knowledge and happiness; and similarly the *Gorgias* places philosophy as superior to rhetoric because of its morality and its attachment to truth.

The *Apology*, although its main point is not the discussion of an ethical question but the justification of Socrates' life and activity, offers this justification on the basis of ethical concerns. Socrates here argues that his life is devoted to assisting people to examine their lives making clear his beliefs that: (a) the unexamined life is not worth living; because (b) 'it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day'<sup>89</sup>.

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<sup>89</sup> 38a

Likewise, the remaining five dialogues, despite not being explicitly about ethical matters evolve nevertheless around the familiar Socratic concerns over ethical matters – what is true and what is good<sup>90</sup>.

Overwhelmingly Socrates' themes are about ethical matters. This fact has often inclined Plato's readers to think of Socrates as a teacher of virtue. Alongside this we furthermore have the testimony of Aristotle, which can be casually read as confirming the impression that Socrates would have been a teacher of virtue. Aristotle affirms, in Book I of his *Metaphysics*<sup>91</sup>, that Socrates primarily busied himself – was preoccupied with – ethical issues.

Together with this evidence we have the testimony of Socrates himself in the *Apology*, which easily lends itself to the interpretation that: if Socrates were a teacher of anything he was a teacher of virtue. This comes at 36c where Socrates describes himself as having the function in the city of an instigator to ethical reflection. He says: '...I went to each of you privately and conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit...' – to try to persuade you to be as good as possible. Again at 38 he says: that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day.

If we take this line of interpretation – that Socrates was a teacher of virtue – then we can draw on another example from the *Apology*: when Socrates refers to himself as a gadfly. At this point of the text he describes his own role in the Athenian society saying: 'I was attached to this city by the god... as upon a great and noble horse which was somehow sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind

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<sup>90</sup> I do not claim that the question 'what is true' is resolvedly a question of ethics. Claiming this would render all philosophy ethical. However, in the case of Socrates, what is true and what is ethical – as will be discussed at a later point of the thesis – coincides. Therefore, in studying Platonic texts where Socrates speaking, we assume that this question carries some ethical weight.

<sup>91</sup> 987a29-987b13

of gadfly'<sup>92</sup>. He then goes on to link this activity of his to the cultivation of virtue saying: 'I was always concerned with you, approaching each one of you like a father or an elder brother to persuade you to care for virtue'<sup>93</sup>.

Nevertheless, as natural as it might seem at first, a view of Socrates as a teacher of virtue is highly problematic.

A serious problem faced by this view is that Socrates himself appears to have argued that virtue cannot be taught. This is something that we see clearly in the *Meno*, at 89e, where having said that 'if... there are no teachers or learners of something, we should be right to assume that the subject cannot be taught', Socrates then goes on to explain that although he has made every effort to find teachers of virtue, he has never found one<sup>94</sup>.

Whether we take Socrates' arguments against the teachability of virtue in the *Meno* to be conclusive or not, we can nevertheless consider that the statements he makes, he considers to be true. Where Socrates says that he has never found a teacher of virtue, we can take this to have been said frankly, and we have no textual evidence for which to think that Socrates considered himself to be an exception to this. We can assume therefore that he did not consider himself to be a teacher of virtue either.

Furthermore, Socrates seems to be making this point again in the *Protagoras* at 319b. He tells Protagoras that he doubts whether one person can teach another how to be good, and his argument for this is the same – that he has never known anyone who has been a teacher of this. This repetition of the point can be taken as a confirmation of its seriousness.

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<sup>92</sup> 30e

<sup>93</sup> 31b

<sup>94</sup> The text used is translated by G.M.A. Grube, in Cooper (1997).

Indeed at a further point in the *Protagoras* it might appear that Socrates changed his view as to whether or not virtue could be taught. However – what is to the point – is that this does not alter Socrates’ frank proclamation that he has never met a teacher of virtue, including himself.

#### Devereux and the solution from the *Meno*

Devereux attempts to dissolve this problem and preserve the idea of Socrates as a teacher of virtue. In his paper ‘Nature and Teaching in Plato’s *Meno*’ he attempts to present the *Meno* in such a way that Socrates can have made his arguments and still be considered a teacher of virtue.

Devereux’s argument is as follows: that in the *Meno* Socrates makes the distinction between two types of teaching practice. The one, named Sophistical teaching - as it is associated with the Sophists – is when there occurs a transmission of knowledge from one person (the teacher) to another (the student). The second type, called the Socratic conception of teaching - as Devereux considers it to be the manner in which Socrates himself teaches – is when a person is assisted to gather knowledge from within themselves.

Devereux argues that the discussion of the theory of recollection, and the example of the slave-boy being guided by Socrates to correct knowledge, are intended to distinguish between the two sorts of teaching practice.

Having made a distinction between two conceptions of teaching, Devereux goes on to say that Socrates says to Meno that virtue cannot be taught *id est* in the Sophistical sense – it cannot be taught using the ‘wrong’ sort of teaching. He says:

Since Socrates uses “teaching” in the recollection passage to refer only to sophistical teaching, we must understand his claim that teaching is impossible to apply only to this kind of teaching. The basis of the claim is made clear by the theory of recollection. If what is learned is in all cases something which



comes from within the learner, then the idea that knowledge may be transmitted from one individual to another is simply a chimaera. Socrates' argument, understood in this way, leaves open the possibility of a kind of teaching which is based on a correct understanding of what is involved in learning<sup>95</sup>.

It can indeed be said that in the *Meno* Socrates distinguishes between teaching as the transmission from a knower to a learner, and teaching as recollection. Furthermore, Devereux is correct in saying that Socrates rejects the first sort of teaching, saying that it is impossible, and not teaching at all.

The distinction between two sorts of teaching is made between 81e-85d. At 81e Socrates makes the claim that what we call teaching is actually a process of recollection. At 82 he confirms that there is no 'teaching' – in the Sophistical sense as *Meno* means it – but only a process of recollection is possible. It is incorrect, he suggests, to think of teaching and learning in the Sophistical sense.

Again at 84c Socrates distinguishes between 'teaching' and asking questions saying: 'Look then how he will come out of his perplexity while searching along with me. I shall do nothing more than ask questions and not teach him. Watch whether you find me teaching and explaining things to him instead of asking for his opinion'. Then at 85d, summing up the process of education that he is employing on the slave-boy Socrates says: 'And he will know it without having been taught but only questioned, and find the knowledge within himself'.

However, the point that Devereux wants to make – that Socrates' claims leave open the possibility that virtue can be taught using the *Socratic* mode of teaching – cannot be supported. This is because in the *Meno* Socrates makes it clear that when he says that virtue cannot be taught, he is using the notion of teaching in *both* the Socratic and the Sophistical sense. Thus Devereux is not justified in claiming that only the teaching of virtue via the Sophistical mode is rejected as a possibility by Socrates.

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<sup>95</sup> 1978: 120

We can see this at 87b9-87c1. Before returning to the question of whether virtue can be taught – where he goes on to say that it is not – Socrates prefaces what follows with: ‘...is it teachable or not, or, as we were just saying, recollectable? Let it make no difference to us which term we use’. It is clear from this that Socrates does not intend, in the *Meno*, to claim that teaching of virtue in a Socratic manner is possible whereas not in the Sophistical manner.

Therefore, I conclude that Devereux’s attempt to save the idea of Socrates as a teacher of virtue from the devastating effect of Socrates’ own words is not textually valid. We are thus left with the difficulty that if we are to conceive of Socrates as a teacher of virtue we do so contrary to his own direct proclamation.

**II.I But doesn’t all this  
mean that Socrates was a  
teacher  
of virtue after all?**

**II.I**

We have arrived at what seems like a stalemate. We have said (A) that what Socrates did constitutes some form of education; (B) that he was not a teacher of virtue; and (C) that what he taught pertained to helping people lead a virtuous life. Our problem then that arises is how one can go about and teach virtue when they don’t teach virtue?

We want to say that Socrates had some form of educational project that was an act of care for the souls of his fellows. In chapter III we will go on to argue that the health of

the soul is the state of virtue<sup>96</sup>, and that to care for one's soul involves fleeing injustice and partaking of justice.

Socrates might not have posed himself as a teacher of virtue, giving knowledge of virtue to pupils, as perhaps some sophists may have claimed to do. Nevertheless, if with his approach he hoped to contribute to the wellbeing of his fellows, urging them and assisting them dialogically to seek virtue, then, can we not say that he was a teacher of at least an (primary) aspect of virtue? Have we not come back around on ourselves?

### **II.I.I**

One might object to this problem by saying that Socrates did not teach people how to behave virtuously (where to 'be virtuous' means to behave in such a manner), but rather, that he concerned himself with the epistemic aspects of virtue. Perhaps we can say that Socrates taught something about virtue in an abstracted sense, but that he did not teach one how to be virtuous (the act of 'doing virtue').

This distinction could be imagined as when a person learns something about music theory and musical appreciation but does not learn how to play an instrument, for *making* music is a skill of its own.

However, such an objection cannot dissolve the problem we have come to, because such a view does not correspond to what we know about Socrates from Plato's texts. There exist two difficulties for this view: the first is the link that Socrates saw between philosophy and action; and the second is the link he saw between virtue and enquiry.

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<sup>96</sup> Some scholars have noticed that Socrates speaks about virtue in the soul as the health of the soul and vice as its illness and have concluded that Socrates was a sort of physician. See Moes (2007:41)

The premise that philosophy and action are linked is basic to Socrates and underlines his belief that *no one errs willingly* and that *virtue is knowledge*. It is the backbone of Socratic intellectualism<sup>97</sup>.

Knowing the truth and being virtuous are linked for Socrates because, as is well known, knowing the truth is linked for him with avoiding vice and seeking virtue. As he says in the *Protagoras*: ‘...knowledge is a fine thing capable of ruling a person, and if someone were to know what is good and bad, then he would not be forced by anything to act otherwise than knowledge dictates, and intelligence would be sufficient to save a person’<sup>98</sup>.

We have no reason to think that Socrates held that contemplation -abstracted from its impacts on the whole person and upon action - is a virtuous aim in itself. In what Socrates says above, philosophizing and acting virtuously are coupled: they are part of the same movement towards good virtuous actions.

A brief reminder of Socratic intellectualism then shows us all the more that our problem of Socrates being a sort of teacher of virtue is a real one.

Secondly, Socrates is explicit that there exists a link between virtue and enquiry. Enquiry, Socrates tells us, equips the person to be virtuous.

This is seen in the *Euthyphro*. Here Socrates says to Euthyphro that having the definition of piety lets you make decisions about what constitutes a pious or an impious act. The thesis made here by Socrates is that studying universals allows one to understand the particular<sup>99</sup>. It is here suggested by Socrates that enquiry into the matter of piety – coming to understand what piety is – has a direct result of enabling

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<sup>97</sup> This is a standard view assumed for example by Evans (2010)

<sup>98</sup> 352c-352c7

<sup>99</sup> see *Euthyphro* 6e

people to act piously. Through enquiry they acquire a criterion for knowing which act is pious and is to be preferred.

Further on in the *Euthyphro*, at 15d Socrates exclaims:

‘so we must investigate again from the beginning what piety is...if you had no clear knowledge of piety and impiety you would never have ventured to prosecute your old father for murder...’

Here Socrates is making the point again, by saying that Euthyphro’s actions need to be informed by his knowledge of piety, the object of their enquiry. One’s actions ought not be done in ignorance. The matter of enquiring into ‘what is piety’ is therefore of practical importance. It ought to inform ones choices.

Socrates himself does not claim to know what piety is, and this lack of knowledge is reflected in his actions. Socrates, we are told, who does not know what piety is, does not conduct himself with the confidence of one who does consider that they know. He, we are led to believe, would never persecute another<sup>100</sup>.

Another dialogue where a link can be seen between enquiry and virtue is the *Crito*. In the *Crito* we learn something about Socrates. He is a man – as his friend points out – who ‘claims through out [his] life to care for virtue’<sup>101</sup>. He attends to virtue in all his acts: that is, he has sought to be virtuous in every aspect of his life.

Socrates accepts this characterization of himself and manifests it immediately. He demonstrates to us the manner in which he has strived to care for virtue in his response to Crito: ‘We must... examine whether we should act in this way or not, as

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<sup>100</sup> 2b

<sup>101</sup> *Crito* 45d. The Greek reads: ‘ταῦτα αἰρεῖσθαι, φάσκοντά γε δὴ ἀρετῆς διὰ παντός τοῦ βίου ἐπιμελεῖσθαι’

not only now but at all times I am the kind of man who listens to nothing within me but the argument that on reflection seems best to me'<sup>102</sup>.

Crito is trying to convince Socrates to act in a particular way: to escape from prison and to thus escape the death penalty. Socrates responds that they ought to enquire into what is just and what is appropriate, and then to act accordingly. Even at the threat of death, Socrates chooses to act in accordance with the principles which he holds, which he has secured through a life of enquiry.

Indeed it is so significant for Socrates that his acts are the result of principles developed in enquiry (philosophy) that he is willing to face any consequence, even death. He says: 'I cannot, now that this fate has come upon me, discard the arguments I used.... I value and respect the same principles as before, and if we have no better arguments to bring up at this moment, be sure that I shall not agree with you, not even if the power of the majority were to frighten us with more bogeys, as if we were children, with threats of incarcerations and executions and confiscation of property. How should we examine this matter most reasonably?'<sup>103</sup>

Let us also take another point of evidence from the *Crito*. Beginning a train of thought at 46e Socrates says that 'one should value some people's opinions, but not others.' This point was also made at 44d where Socrates tells *Crito* that they need not be concerned with the opinions of the majority, but only with the opinions of 'reasonable people'. It is the opinions of reasonable people that are worth taking into account – and these reasonable people are ones who 'will believe things were done as they were done.' The claim is that the majority – not having reasonable opinions – will not form a correct opinion but a false one; and that this need not be given any consideration<sup>104</sup>.

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<sup>102</sup> *Crito* 46b

<sup>103</sup> 46b6-c6

<sup>104</sup> see also 47a and 47b8

Socrates builds his argument concluding that: if you ignore the advise of the wise one who has a good opinion, and if you take bad advice from one who is ignorant, then you will be harmed. In the same way, Socrates says, that a man would be harmed if he took dietary advice from someone ignorant of the matter, one would be spiritually harmed if they act in accordance with foolish opinions about moral matters<sup>105</sup>.

The wise men of whom Socrates is speaking here are those who have enquired into the matter in question; and those who are foolish and give harmful advice referred to here are those who are ignorant of the matter.

Socrates is making the point that: the opinion of one who is ignorant is rendered useless. Being attentive to reality – seeing what things really are like – makes your opinion worthwhile. One single man who has an informed opinion – who knows what he is talking about – has an opinion that is worth more than that of all the others. The opinion of the ignorant is worth nothing, and is in fact harmful and should be avoided.

If you obey the opinion of the many who have no understanding, you will suffer evil. This reminds us of the introductory scenes of the *Protagoras* when Socrates chastises the young Hippocrates for being eager to subject himself to the influence of a sophist of whom he has not examined the moral worth<sup>106</sup>. Our actions, Socrates in effect says, should be guided by those who have developed an understanding of a matter – those who have enquired seriously into it. Then our actions can be correct and virtuous.

We can say then that philosophical enquiry and learning are for Socrates an important part of ‘being virtuous’. The two cannot be separated, and therefore our problem remains: that by urging people to philosophize, and by assisting them in the process, Socrates is using educational dialogue as a path to virtue. In this sense he is a teacher of virtue.

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<sup>105</sup> 47c-d

<sup>106</sup> *Protagoras* 313a-b

## II.I.II

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face-to-face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

- Paul's letter to the Corinthians, 13:12 -

In what follows it will be claimed that although Socrates was in a sense a teacher of virtue, the sense in which he was one can be qualified making him 'less than a teacher of virtue', and therefore justifying him in believing that there are no teachers of virtue, whilst all the while doing his best to benefit the souls of his fellows.

I will present my claim in eight parts. Firstly (i) I will draw attention to the fact that virtue for Socrates was a great thing: it was the nature of the divine. Then I will show (ii) that becoming akin to virtue (goodness) is the purpose of the examined life; since (iii) attaining to it was for Socrates the proper aim of human life. Naturally then (iv) Socrates aimed for this for himself and for others. Philosophy has this aim.

Sections (ii) – (iv) function to reaffirm that what Socrates did was bring people closer to virtue; but they also bring the matter of *philosophy* into the equation firmly.

Then, in an attempt to show that Socrates was humble-minded regarding this project I will present (v) Protagoras' definition of philosophy. I will say that (vi) Plato seems to have agreed with Protagoras' definition; and (vii) therefore philosophy, and the teaching of philosophy, can be seen as a humbler version of teaching virtue. Socrates' discussion of the sophists in the *Apology* will be given as evidence that Socrates held some such humble view of himself. Finally, it will be concluded that (viii) Socrates was a 'humbler version' of a teacher of virtue.

Since *philosophy* was Socrates' way of relating to virtue and divinity, and philosophy (I argue) is a humbler relationship than *being wise*; Socrates' approach to virtue (and



his way of teaching people to approach it) was something ‘lesser and more humble’ than what might be meant by being a teacher of virtue.

(i) Virtue was for Socrates the greatest possible human achievement. It was the source of success in life; and it was the nature of the divine.

There are many examples of occasions where Socrates expresses the view that success in life is linked to virtue. Let us consider the *Crito* as an example<sup>107</sup>.

Here Socrates speaks plainly about virtue and its necessity for one’s life. He tells the reader that a life is only successful in achieving any goodness if it is virtuous. At 47d he says that one needs to be careful to learn from, and subject himself to, the teachings of the virtuous – for, he says, following the lead of the ignorant man who cannot guide one in what is virtue can be very harmful.

Again, at 47e Socrates makes the strong claim that life is not worth living if one’s virtue is corrupted. He continues with this at 48b where he says that only a good life is worth living, where a good life means the virtuous life of justice. Again, along these same lines, at 48d Socrates says that it is better to die than to do wrong. At 49b, he concludes saying: that wrongdoing and injustice are in every way harmful and shameful to the wrongdoer.

Socrates leaves no space for doubt. There is no way, he says, in which a person can have a life without virtue that is anything more than dire wretchedness to which death is preferable.

Furthermore, as Socrates tells Theodorus in the digression of the *Theaetetus*, virtue is ‘divinely important’. It is the nature of the divine. He says this at 176e:

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<sup>107</sup> The *Crito* serves well as an example, because here Socrates speaks candidly and forthrightly about his own views – without any discernible irony. See 46c-d

‘My fiend, there are two patterns set up in reality. One is divine and supremely happy; the other has nothing of God in it, and is the pattern of the deepest unhappiness. This truth the evildoer does not see; blinded by folly and utter lack of understanding, he fails to perceive that the effect of his unjust practices is to make him grow more and more like the one, and less and less like the other.’

And at 176c:

‘In God there is no sort of wrong whatsoever; he is supremely just, and the thing most like him is the man who has become as just as it lies in human nature to be.’

(ii) Indeed, Socrates did seek virtue, through philosophy, both for himself and for others.

Notice that Socrates famously says that: ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’<sup>108</sup>. He does not say ‘the un-virtuous life is not worth living’ - as would have been an obvious thing for him to say and in direct accordance with his views expressed elsewhere – but the unexamined life.

Socrates can say this because for him the purpose of the examined life is to become akin to virtue, as also the divine is virtuous. He tells Theodorus this in the digression of the *Theaetetus*.

Socrates compares the philosopher, calling him a free man, to the un-philosophical man whom he likens to a slave; and concludes that the philosopher seeks with his way of being to become virtuous. He tells Theodorus that: the actions and state of being of the free man result in virtue, and contribute to peace and goodness in the world. Likewise, the actions and state of being of the slave are vices and lead to evil on earth.

By being un-philosophical, the enslaved man partakes in vice and evil. This ‘low’ condition of being is metaphorically described as being on earth, and its alternative -

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<sup>108</sup> *Apology* 38a6

being philosophical and mindful of essence and the divine - is described as being high up in heaven<sup>109</sup>. Socrates enjoins us, saying that each person needs, with urgency, to become free: to move from being aligned with vice to being partakers of the good: ‘to make all haste to escape from earth to heaven’<sup>110</sup>.

‘...and escape means becoming as like God as possible; and a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pious, with understanding’<sup>111</sup>. Restating this then Socrates says: ‘one should try to escape from wickedness and pursue virtue’<sup>112</sup>.

This view is similar to what we find in the *Apology*. From 29d8 to 30a5 Socrates explains to the jury that he urges his fellows to stop caring about wealth, honor and reputation as they are found in society, but to turn their attention to the proper care of their souls. In other words: to care rather for that which will actually benefit them. Caring for the soul, is seen to mean making it akin to virtue, and at 30b2 Socrates says that what he does is tell people about the value of virtue.

(iii) For Socrates, the unexamined life was not worth living; and the proper aim of human life was to attain to virtue. This would be its success.

(iv) With such a belief as is expounded by Socrates in the *Apology*, and the *Theaetetus* among other occasions, it was natural then, and most prudent, that Socrates aimed for this for himself and for others: to follow the *odos*<sup>113</sup> of philosophy, and to cultivate virtue. This was Socrates’ project of philosophy.

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<sup>109</sup> 176a; 174a; 175a; 175d

<sup>110</sup> 176b

<sup>111</sup> 176b2

<sup>112</sup> 176b5

<sup>113</sup> Greek word meaning ‘road’, ‘path’ or ‘way’. Methodos is composed of ‘meta’ and ‘odos’, meaning: to be on that particular path. See Μπαμπινιώτη (1998)

(v) In what sense then was Socrates the philosopher, who encouraged and assisted others in the ways of philosophy, not a teacher of virtue? Our answer comes in the way that we define philosophy, where to be a *lover of sophia* is a different condition than being a *sophos* (a possessor of wisdom).

According to Diogenes Laertius<sup>114</sup>: the first person to name himself a philo-sopher (that is: a lover of wisdom) was Pythagoras; and his reason for naming himself so was that: μηδένα γὰρ εἶναι σοφὸν [ἄνθρωπον] ἀλλ' ἢ θεόν. None is wise but god. The purpose of this compound word then was to achieve two concepts at once:

1. That the philosopher loves and longs for wisdom. This is compatible with pursuing sophia much like any lover pursues the object of their love, and
2. That being wise is a superior state, more exalted than what a human person can be – being a condition of the divine.

Being a *philosopher* then is an appropriate condition for a human person, but it is something more humble than being a *sophos*. A philosopher, does not need to possess wisdom the way a *sophos*<sup>115</sup> does, but they can love it and seek it nevertheless.

(vi) This definition of the term philosopher is found exactly the same in Plato's work. In the *Phaedrus* at 278d Plato has Socrates say: 'I think, Phaedrus, that the epithet *wise* is too great and befits God alone; but the name *philosopher*, that is, "lover of wisdom," or something of the sort would be more fitting and modest for such a man.'<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Lives of Eminent Philosophers: 12, see Hicks (1972)

<sup>115</sup> Leshner (1987: 284) makes the point that Socrates in the *Apology* is denying being a *sophos*.

<sup>116</sup> Translation by Fowler (1925)

In the Greek this is: τὸ μὲν σοφόν, ὃ Φαῖδρε, καλεῖν ἔμοιγε μέγα εἶναι δοκεῖ καὶ θεῶ μόνῳ πρέπειν: τὸ δὲ ἢ φιλόσοφον ἢ τοιοῦτόν τι μᾶλλον τε ἂν αὐτῶ καὶ ἀρμόττοι καὶ ἐμμελεστέρωσ ἔχοι.

The sort of man of whom they are speaking as deserving of the epithet *philosopher*, is one who has achieved more genuine value in his words precisely because, unlike his fellows, he: ‘has composed his writings with knowledge of the truth, and is able to support them by discussion of that which he has written, and has the power to show by his own speech that the written words are of little worth...’<sup>117</sup>

Socrates never says: ‘I am wise regarding virtue, let me teach you what I know’; but he does say something of the sort: ‘I am a lover of wisdom, I pursue it always, and so should you. Be like me in that I seek the truth about these matters.’

According to Lesher (1987: 286) the idea of human knowledge being limited in its capacity was common in Plato’s time: shared by Heraclitus, Xenophanes, and Democritus. Xenophon seems also to have attributed a distinction between human and divine knowledge to Socrates on these grounds.

(vii) Furthermore, Socrates often suggests that he can help someone in the path of philosophy. As he tells Theaetetus when he compares his own activity to that of a midwife of men’s souls: he has the skills to bring people into a better conceptual relationship with virtue.

To begin with, Socrates calls himself the son of Phaenarete<sup>118</sup> (Φαιναρέτης), a name which carries the literal meaning of ‘she who brings virtue to light’<sup>119</sup>. This notion, of bringing forth that which is good from amongst the intellectual activity of his interlocutors, is one that continues throughout this allegorical description of the

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<sup>117</sup> 278c, translation by Fowler (1925)

<sup>118</sup> *Theaetetus* 149a2

<sup>119</sup> see note by M. J. Levett, in Cooper (1997)

Socratic pedagogical art. This name Socrates gives to his mother prepares us for what is to follow: Socrates' claim that he has the skill of discerning that intellectual content of others which is 'good and worthwhile' - and worth bearing - and that he has the method that assists them to bring this good intellectual content forth<sup>120</sup>.

Socrates can teach philosophy<sup>121</sup>, and in this way bring people closer to virtue; but this is something humbler than claiming to be wise regarding virtue, and of being able to teach others what virtue is.

Let us consider what Socrates says in the *Apology* regarding the sophists before he eventually tells the jury that he lives the life of philosophy and urges his fellows to imitate him in this.

At 19d8-20c3 Socrates shows that the accusation brought against him by Meletus involves the assumption that Socrates is like the fee-earning sophist teachers of virtue<sup>122</sup>; the sort of men who claim to be 'expert in this kind of excellence, the human and social kind.'<sup>123</sup>

In response to this accusation, as Reeve (1989: 10) says, Socrates tries to explain how the sort of wisdom he possesses and utilizes differs from that of the sophists who claim to teach virtue. He says: that he has a sort of wisdom that can be rightly termed 'human wisdom'; whereas the sophists pretend to have a wisdom that is more than human<sup>124</sup>.

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<sup>120</sup> For example, see also *Theaetetus* 150e

<sup>121</sup> The claim that Socrates can teach philosophy is discussed further in chapter five.

<sup>122</sup> Reeve (1989: 10)

<sup>123</sup> *Apology* 20b3

<sup>124</sup> 20d6-20e2

Henry Teloh (1986:110) notices this distinction made by Socrates between his own human wisdom and the supra-human wisdom that he suggests the sophists might need to have for what they claim to teach. Teloh holds that Socrates distinguished between two sorts of wisdom: divine and human wisdom; and that in order to do what the sophists claim to do, one would need to have a divine sort of wisdom – a sort of wisdom that is beyond that which Socrates can claim to possess.

On this reading, Socrates is making the point that he is not a teacher – as his accusers had presented him at the trial – in the manner of sophists, since he does not possess the knowledge that would justify such a confident act.

By saying: that to be that which a sophist claims to be, one would need divine wisdom – wisdom that is greater than that which Socrates possesses – Socrates showed that he himself – having only human wisdom – was more humble regarding his knowledge.

According to Reeve (1989: 31) it was precisely for this knowledge that his wisdom was human that the oracle praised Socrates. He was wise in that he made no ‘hubristic claims to wisdom’ and the oracle made an example of him so as to ‘make a general deflationary point about human wisdom’.

(viii) What we are left with then is this: that Socrates was indeed some sort of a teacher who urged people, and assisted people in the process of philosophy, ultimately for the purpose of caring for his own soul and for theirs. Nevertheless, he viewed himself as somehow lesser than a teacher of virtue: he had a more humble understanding of what he did. He saw himself as a philosopher, not as a sophist, because being a philosopher was the best a person can do.

With these in mind then, let us continue having said: that in fact Socrates was a sort of teacher of virtue, though of a humbler sort than the sophists, and by his own estimation, a more authentic and realistic sort. He was then: a ‘humbler version’<sup>125</sup>.

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<sup>125</sup> Kuperus (2007: 196) has argued that in the Protagoras Socrates is making a distinction: that virtue cannot be taught by telling something to another, as the sophists speak to their pupils, but, that it can be learnt through praxis: through active involvement in Socratic question-and-answer (philosophical enquiry). This, according to Kuperus is because one needs to develop one’s knowledge of virtue by actively participating in dialogue. ‘...one actually has to do things in order to become good’.



**III. What sort of thing is the soul  
And, what sort of care does it  
need?**

**III.**

We have said so far that Socrates was an educator who cared for the souls of his fellows. The act with which Socrates actively cared was the philosophical dialogue.

Our aim in this thesis is to understand better this Socratic act. For the purpose then of developing a sense of how Socrates hoped to benefit the souls of his fellows through dialogue, we will now turn our attention to the root question of: what sort of thing is the soul, and consequently, what sort of care does it benefit from.

We will examine what view can be found in the dialogues termed as ‘early’ or ‘Socratic’<sup>126</sup>. Then, from an examination of the textual references to the soul we will be able to say what sort of care Socrates bestowed upon the soul of his fellows.

Let us now look at the text to describe what Socrates proposed regarding the soul:

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<sup>126</sup> A view that Gregory Vlastos (1991:55) saw as ‘symptomatic of the metaphysically reticent temper’ that Plato’s Socrates had regarding the soul; but that John Burnet (1916) saw as being an essentially new and controversial proposal made by Socrates. Berghash and Jillson (1998: 314) agree with Burnet that Socrates changed the concept of soul that existed before him.

### References to the soul in the ‘early’ dialogues

(1) In the *Charmides*, Socrates says that the soul is well when ‘it acquires and possesses temperance’<sup>127</sup>.

(2) In the *Laches* Socrates seems to be saying that the education of the young is an important matter and needs to be chosen with care<sup>128</sup>. His reason for this suggests that one’s soul can be benefited or harmed by the learning that a person acquires through education<sup>129</sup>. The dialogue concludes by stating that it is beneficial for the soul to seek to know the Good<sup>130</sup>. Without altering the content of this proposition made by Socrates, we can otherwise restate it as: ‘the soul of a person – and the reality that concerns people - is such that people benefit from seeking to know the good.’

(3) In the *Hippias Minor* Socrates gives the impression that the soul is such that it can have knowledge (or wisdom). At 364 he uses the phrase: ‘your soul’s wisdom’<sup>131</sup>. Likewise, at 372e he suggests that the soul is such that it is harmed by ignorance, stating: ‘you’d do me a much greater good if you give my soul relief from ignorance, than if you gave my body relief from disease’<sup>132</sup>. This phrase also gives us to understand that the soul is therefore more important in the bigger scheme of things than the body is.

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<sup>127</sup> *Charmides* 157, translation by Rosamond Kent Sprague, in Cooper (1997)

<sup>128</sup> See for example *Laches* 187d

<sup>129</sup> *Laches* 185e

<sup>130</sup> *Laches* 200-201c

<sup>131</sup> ‘τῆς ψυχῆς εἰς σοφίαν’. The translation used here is by Nicholas D. Smith in Cooper (1997)

<sup>132</sup> Translation by Nicholas D. Smith, in Cooper (1997)

(4) In the *Gorgias* at 453d Socrates talks about both persuasion and learning as being *in* the soul. Again, at 453a4, Socrates says: ‘ἡ πειθὼ τοῖς ἀκούουσιν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ποιεῖν’<sup>133</sup>.

(5) At 456c9-456d8 Socrates tells Gorgias that it is his belief that the soul is more capable of distinguishing that which is good for a person, and that it ought to govern over the body. The soul is the seat of a person’s ability to know things for what they are, and to not be governed merely by pleasure, but to be able to evaluate matters appropriately. Socrates claims that ‘if the soul didn’t govern the body but the body governed itself’ then there would be chaos – ‘the world according to Anaxagoras would prevail’.

(6) At 477a9 Socrates suggests that a person’s soul can be in a better or in a worse state in this lifetime. When the soul partakes in just acts then it is benefited, by somehow thus being more just itself. Likewise, we are to understand, that a soul that partakes of what is unjust is harmed. Therefore, Socrates tells us, since it is always beneficial for the soul to partake of justice and that which is good, it is beneficial for the soul that has partaken of injustice to be corrected. A person’s soul, Socrates tells us, undergoes improvement when it is justly disciplined<sup>134</sup>.

(7) The corrupt condition of the soul, Socrates tells us, is the condition of being unjust, ignorant, cowardly, lacking in discipline<sup>135</sup>, ‘and the like’<sup>136</sup>. At this point Socrates repeats what he had said in the *Hippias Minor*<sup>137</sup>, that it worse for one’s soul

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<sup>133</sup> Translated as ‘instilling persuasion in the souls of an audience’ by Smith, in Cooper (1997).

<sup>134</sup> Socrates is clear about this: Brickhouse and Smith (1992: 65), even though the role that Socrates saw for punishment is not clearly understood: Brickhouse and Smith (2007)

<sup>135</sup> See *Gorgias* 477e

<sup>136</sup> See *Gorgias* 477b

<sup>137</sup> *Hippias Minor* 373

to be in a bad way, than it is for one to be physically unwell, or even financially deprived. 'Badness in the soul' (injustice) is called the 'most serious kind of badness', and it is concluded that 'the happiest man, then, is the one who doesn't have any badness in his soul'<sup>138</sup>.

(8) At 493 Socrates tells of a description of the soul which is reminiscent of the description in the *Republic*. Socrates does not commit himself to this view, but retells it as he had 'heard one of the wise men say'. He distances himself even further from this position when he says that: 'this account is on the whole a bit strange'<sup>139</sup>.

However, he does let us know that the reason he has mentioned this description of the soul is because it carries the same conclusions regarding wellbeing that he himself is putting forth. At 493c5 he tells Callicles that this account of the soul 'does make clear what I want to persuade you to change your mind about if I can'. The account of the soul discussed is this: that the soul has parts; that there is a part of the soul where appetites reside; and it is this part of the soul which is open to persuasion and which 'shifts back and forth'.

(9) At 501b8 Socrates shows that the soul is such that it can get pleasure.

(10) Again, reminiscent somewhat of that discussion of the soul in the *Republic*, at 504b4 ff. Socrates claims that the soul can be in a healthy or an unhealthy state; and that to be healthy means that the soul is ordered and well-organized. He goes on to say that a soul is well ordered and organized when it has justice and self-control.

(11) Still speaking with Callicles, Socrates asks if it is not so that the soul is such that it can be organized and ordered, or disorganized, just like a household can be. We can assume that Socrates believed this assertion to be true, for when Callicles urged him to give his own opinion on this matter Socrates assented and went on to say that: just

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<sup>138</sup> *Gorgias* 478d11

<sup>139</sup> 493c4, translation by Donald J. Zeyl, in Cooper 1997

as ‘the name for the states of organization of the body is “healthy”, as a result of which health and the rest of bodily excellence comes into being in it’, the same can be said of the soul.

The state in the soul which is equivalent to health in the body is the state of being ‘lawful’, and it is this that ‘leads people to become law-abiding and orderly’. To be law-abiding and orderly, Socrates tells us, is to be just and having self-control<sup>140</sup>.

(12) Therefore, Socrates goes on to say, an orator who cared about the well-being of his listeners would ‘always give his attention to how justice may come to exist in the souls of his fellow citizens and injustice be gotten rid of, how self control may come to exist there and lack of discipline be gotten rid of’<sup>141</sup>.

(13) At 505b Socrates says regarding the soul: ‘as long as it’s corrupt, in that it’s foolish, undisciplined, unjust and impious, it should be kept away from its appetites and not be permitted to do anything other than what will make it better....for this is no doubt better for the soul itself.’

From 506c5 onwards the *Gorgias* takes an extraordinary turn. Socrates begins to speak himself about the matter that was being discussed with the group. Socrates begins the task of having a dialogue with himself, asking himself questions, and answering them as he himself thought to be correct. Socrates puts himself in the place of his interlocutor. We can assume therefore, that what Socrates says during this exercise is his honest opinion, since it is a criterion he sets to the people who answer his questions – that they answer truthfully stating what they believe to be the case.

This is what he goes on to say:

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<sup>140</sup> *Gorgias* 504c7-504d2, translation by Donald J. Zeyl, in Cooper 1997

<sup>141</sup> 504e

(14) At 506d he says: that it is ‘organization, correctness and craftsmanship’ that brings about excellence in the soul.

(15) At 506e: that ‘a soul which has its own order is better than a disordered one.’

(16) At 507: that ‘an orderly soul is a self-controlled one’. Therefore, ‘a self-controlled soul is a good one’.

(17) At 507a5: ‘I say that if the self-controlled soul is a good one, then a soul that’s been affected the opposite way of the self-controlled one is a bad one. And this, it’s turned out, is the foolish and undisciplined one’.

(18) At 511: that the soul of the unjust man is corrupt and mutilated.

(19) At 512: ‘if a man has many incurable diseases in what is more valuable than his body, his soul, life for that man is not worth living.... for a corrupt person it’s better not to be alive, for he necessarily lives badly.’

(20) At 522e Socrates speaks in a manner that shows that he believes that the soul continues to exist after physical death. He also shows that he believes that the soul of a dead person will be held accountable for all the just or unjust actions of that person during her lifetime. He says: ‘for no one who isn’t totally bereft of reason and courage is afraid to die; doing what’s unjust is what he’s afraid of. For to arrive in Hades with one’s soul stuffed full of unjust actions is the ultimate of all bad things.’

Socrates then goes on to give an account that he claims will show that this is true. He warns his interlocutor Callicles that this will not be a mere tale, but that what he is about to tell him is true<sup>142</sup>. His account contains the following:

- (21) ‘that when a man who has lived a just and pious life comes to his end, he goes to the Isle of the Blessed, to make his abode in complete happiness,

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<sup>142</sup> *Gorgias* 523

beyond the reach of evils, but when one who has lived in an unjust and godless way dies, he goes to the prison of payment and retribution, the one they call Tartarus.’<sup>143</sup>

- (22) That ‘death... is actually nothing but the separation of two things from each other, the soul and the body.’<sup>144</sup>
- (23) That after death a man’s soul will remain in the same condition that he had it during his lifetime<sup>145</sup>.
- (24) After death each person’s soul will be judge as to whether the man was just and good or not – with no regard to any of the things such as wealth and fame that we esteem in human societies<sup>146</sup>.
- (25) ‘Bad’ acts, such as perjury and injustice will leave their stamp on our souls and we will be judged for these after this life is over<sup>147</sup>.
- (26) When a soul is not nurtured on truth during this life, everything ‘warped as a result of deception and pretense, and nothing is strait’. Furthermore, souls will be ‘full of distortion and ugliness due to license and luxury, arrogance and incontinence in its actions.’<sup>148</sup>

Socrates concludes his account of the judgment of souls after death by saying: ‘For my part, Callicles, I’m convinced by these accounts, and I think about how I’ll reveal to the judge a soul that’s as healthy as it can be’<sup>149</sup>. Therefore, he insists, one should live a life which will ‘clearly turn out to be advantageous *in that world*, too’<sup>150</sup>.

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<sup>143</sup> *Gorgias* 523a7-523b4

<sup>144</sup> *Gorgias* 524b2

<sup>145</sup> 524d4

<sup>146</sup> 534e2

<sup>147</sup> 525a

<sup>148</sup> 525a

<sup>149</sup> 526d3

<sup>150</sup> 527b

That concludes the references to the soul made in the *Gorgias*, thus, let us now turn to see what references to the soul are made in the first book of the *Republic*.

(27) The philosophical content of the *Republic* begins the same way that the *Gorgias* ends: Cephalus makes reference to the ‘stories that we are told about Hades’ – about how a soul will be judged after death and that its fate will be determined by whether a man was just or unjust during his lifetime. Cephalus claims that if a man has lived a just and pious life then in old age he is calm and happy, having ‘sweet good hope’; otherwise, he becomes afraid for the fate of his soul<sup>151</sup>.

Socrates then, in apparent agreement with this claim<sup>152</sup>, turns the conversation to examining what it means to be just. He challenges the notion implicit in what Cephalus had been saying – that justice unconditionally is ‘speaking the truth and paying whatever debts one has incurred’<sup>153</sup>. This is in response to a claim that Cephalus had made, that the rich are better able to be just in this life since they are able to fund religious sacrifices and pay their debts to others.

The conversation then becomes an exploration of ‘what is justice’; and if we are to observe the continuity of theme between this dialogue and the *Gorgias*, then we

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<sup>151</sup> *Republic* 330d-331b

<sup>152</sup> It can be argued that the point presented here is attributable to Cephalus and not to Socrates. However, it is the opinion of the author that Socrates is not seen to disagree with the sentiment expressed by Cephalus, which he calls ‘admirable’ at 331b. Socrates does not seem to challenge anything about this view, but rather to question what constitutes the justice that the soul should aim at. This agreement of Socrates might be confirmed by the fact that Plato chooses to end the *Republic* similarly to how the dialogue is began here by Cephalus. At 614a Socrates speaks about the blessings that the just soul can hope to receive in the afterlife. This is followed by the Myth of Er, which makes much the same point of blessings and retributions in the afterlife.

<sup>153</sup> *Republic* 331c



can assume that the dialogue will concern itself with which inclinations, being just, will benefit one's soul, both in this life and in the next.

The same point that Socrates made in the *Gorgias* is to be defended again in the *Republic* – namely, that the life of a just person is better than the life of an unjust person<sup>154</sup>. In the *Gorgias* we were told that this is because the unjust man harms his soul through being unjust, and thus procures upon himself the worst possible harm<sup>155</sup>.

(28) The conclusion of the first book of the *Republic* is much the same as that of the *Gorgias*. At 353d, Socrates leads Thrasymachus to agree, that just as it is the function of the eyes to see, it is the function of the soul to take care of things, rule, deliberate, 'and the like'. It is also the function of the soul to impart life on the person. Furthermore, we are told that a 'bad soul rules and takes care of things badly and that a good soul does all these things well'<sup>156</sup>. This allows Socrates to draw the following conclusion:

(29) 'We agreed', Socrates says, 'that justice is a soul's virtue, and injustice its vice.... Then it follows that a just soul and a just man will live well, and an unjust one badly.... Therefore, a just person is happy, and an unjust one wretched.'<sup>157</sup>

That completes the references made to the soul in the first book of the *Republic* so let us now turn to look at the *Apology*.

(30) At *Apology* 29e2 Socrates speaks of the soul as that which it is most worthwhile for a person to care for during their lifetime. Two sentiments are clear from what he says: (a) that the soul is something that we need to care for and pay

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<sup>154</sup> *Republic* 347e2

<sup>155</sup> see for example *Gorgias* 525

<sup>156</sup> *Republic* 353e4, translated by G.M.A Grube and C.D.C Reeve, in Cooper 1997

<sup>157</sup> *Republic* 353e9 ff.

attention to keeping in a 'good state'; and (b) that one's soul is more important than other concerns, and that people ought not to neglect the care of their soul but prioritize it.

Socrates says: 'are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?'<sup>158</sup>

(31) Similarly, at 30b Socrates says: 'For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you "Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively"'.<sup>158</sup>

From this statement we can furthermore see the following: (a) that Socrates believes that excellence is achieved when one's soul is in a 'good state'; and (b) that when a person's soul is in a 'good state' he is then able to know and seek his own benefit. For a person whose soul is not in a good state cannot discriminate between what is beneficial and what is not, and therefore, even if they have health, status or wealth, they would not know how to use them properly nor how to derive benefit from them.

(32) Finally, at 40c Socrates refers to the belief that the soul does not die with the body but continues into another realm, saying that 'there is good hope' that death is 'a blessing, because it is either nothing or a change and a relocating of the soul from here to another place'.

Let us now look at how Socrates refers to the soul in the *Protagoras*.

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<sup>158</sup> translation by G.M.A. Grube, in Cooper (1997)

(33) At 313c Socrates talks about the soul as something which is nourished by teaching. At 314b Socrates tells Hippocrates that when a person learns something, or takes something to be true, they integrate that notion acquired into their soul. If then these notions that one puts into their soul, Socrates goes on to say, as true, then the soul is benefited. However, if the notions that one takes into their soul are not true, then a person is harmed by them.

(34) It is with this in mind that at 312c Socrates takes Hippocrates to task, for being willing to ‘hand over his soul for treatment’ to man of whom it has not been ascertained whether what he teaches is good and true. For as he says at 313e, some teaching is beneficial for the soul but some is detrimental, and one ought to be careful to acquire what is beneficial to their soul, as the soul is the most important element of a person.

(35) This same idea is expressed again at 329c2 when Socrates is speaking with Protagoras. Socrates challenges Protagoras, asking him if he can tell him the truth about a matter that Socrates wants to question. If Protagoras can answer him, Socrates says, then having learnt something true from him, Socrates’ soul will be ‘satisfied’.

(36) At 313b2 Socrates speaks of the soul again in a way that is in agreement with what we saw in the *Apology*. At 30b of the *Apology* Socrates had said that excellence in a person depends on whether or not their soul is in a good state.

This excellence in its turn is what determines how much a person is capable of benefiting from what they acquire in this life. In the same way now, Socrates tells Hippocrates that: ‘when it is something you value more than your body, namely your soul, and when everything concerning whether you do well or ill in your life depends on whether it becomes worthy or worthless, I don’t see you getting together with your father or brother or a single one of your friends to consider whether or not to entrust your soul to this recently arrived foreigner’.

Finally, let us end the enumeration of occasions in the ‘early dialogues’ where Socrates refers to the soul by pointing out a final point from the *Crito*.

(37) The *Crito* begins with some evidence that Socrates believes that the soul continues after death and goes on to another realm. At 44, Socrates tells Crito that he does not expect to die for two more days – despite the fact that news of the ship indicate otherwise – because of a dream he has had. In the dream, Socrates was told that he will arrive on ‘fertile Phthia’ on the third day. Socrates takes this dream-vision to mean that he will not die until the third day, for it is only then that his soul will make its way to Phthia.

(38) Notice that the reference to Phthia is taken from the *Iliad* where Achilles uses the term ‘fertile Phthia’ to refer to his home. The use of the quotation then by Socrates, on such an occasion as he finds himself in the *Crito* – where he is awaiting his death – can be read as suggesting that Socrates’ soul will be going to its home when it leaves his body.

This reference can be taken as suggestive of the idea that the soul leaves the body at death and continues to exist, but also, that the soul is more of a foreigner to this world than to the next. The status of the other world in that case is higher than is that of the living.

### The findings

The list we have made of the references to the soul in the ‘early’ ‘Socratic’ dialogues included thirty distinct statements regarding the soul. For the ease of the reader, these are enumerated here, and a table is made of them. For each I indicate in which dialogues these statements can be found. The numbers in the brackets

direct the reader to the parts of the above section where these statements are referenced<sup>159</sup>.

(i)	<b>The soul can acquire temperance.</b> In <i>Charmides</i> (see 1)
(ii)	<b>The soul can have knowledge and wisdom.</b> In <i>Hippias Minor</i> ; <i>Laches</i> ; <i>Protagoras</i> (see 2, 3, 33)
(iii)	<b>One's soul can be benefited or harmed through education.</b> In <i>Laches</i> ; <i>Gorgias</i> ; <i>Apology</i> ; <i>Protagoras</i> (see 2, 12, 33)
(iv)	<b>It is good for the soul to seek to know the good.</b> In <i>Laches</i> ; (see 2)
(v)	<b>The soul is harmed by ignorance.</b> In <i>Hippias Minor</i> ; <i>Apology</i> (see 3, 31)
(vi)	<b>The wellbeing of one's soul is more important than their physical health, financial prosperity or social standing.</b> In <i>Hippias Minor</i> ; <i>Gorgias</i> ; <i>Apology</i> (see 3, 7, 19, 30)
(vii)	<b>The soul is something we need to care for.</b> In <i>Laches</i> ; <i>Apology</i> ; <i>Protagoras</i> (see 2, 30, 34)
(viii)	<b>Persuasion and learning are in the soul.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> ; <i>Protagoras</i> (see 4, 8, 33)
(ix)	<b>The soul is the part of the person which is most capable of distinguishing what is good for us, and thus ought to govern over the body.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> ; <i>Republic I</i> (see 5, 28)
(x)	<b>The soul is the seat of our ability to know things for what they are.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> ; <i>Apology</i> ; <i>Protagoras</i> (see 3, 5, 36)
(xi)	<b>The soul has discernment.</b> In <i>Apology</i> (see 31)
(xii)	<b>The soul is such that it can get pleasure.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> (see 9)

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<sup>159</sup> These lists are not intended to be exhaustive but indicative.

(xiii)	<b>The soul can be in a better or worse state. What is good for the soul and what better it is to partake of justice, and to be unjust is what makes the soul worse. The soul benefits from just acts and it is harmed by unjust acts.</b> In <i>Gorgias; Republic I</i> (see 6, 7, 12, 13, 18, 20, 21, 24, 25, 29)
(xiv)	<b>The soul benefits from being justly disciplined.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> ; (see 6, 7)
(xv)	<b>The soul has parts.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> (see 8)
(xvi)	<b>The soul is healthy when it is well-organized and disciplined. A person who is self controlled has a healthy well-organized soul; self-discipline and order in the soul should be promoted, and lack of discipline gotten rid of.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> (see 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17)
(xvii)	<b>Discipline cures the soul of its vices. A soul that is corrupt and thus foolish should be controlled and not permitted to follow its appetites.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> (see 13)
(xviii)	<b>The soul has various appetites.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> (see 13)
(xix)	<b>Organization, correctness and craftsmanship brings about excellence in the soul.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> (see 14)
(xx)	<b>It is <i>better</i> to have a healthy ordered soul than to not have one.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> (see 15, 16, 17)
(xxi)	<b>The soul of the unjust man is corrupt and mutilated, therefore, its appetites do not pertain to what is actually good.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> (see 18)
(xxii)	<b>The soul continues to exist after physical death.</b> In <i>Gorgias; Republic I; Crito</i> (see 20, 21, 22, 27, 32, 37)
(xxiii)	<b>After death the soul will be judged and held accountable for extend to which a person was good and just during their lifetime. The fate of the soul will be determined by the just and unjust acts of the person whilst they lived.</b> In <i>Gorgias; Republic I</i> (see 20, 21, 24, 25, 27)

(xxiv)	<b>After death a good soul will go on to a blessed heavenly place – the Isle of the Blessed, but the bad soul will move into a prison-like state.</b> In <i>Gorgias; Republic I</i> (see 20, 21, 27)
(xxv)	<b>Death separates the soul from the body.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> (see 22)
(xxvi)	<b>From the time of death onwards, the soul remains in the condition (of health) in which it was at the time of death. All cleansing and care of the soul, all repentance and correction of the soul's ills, are only possible in this lifetime.</b> In <i>Gorgias</i> (23), but this is also implied in <i>Republic I</i> (27).
(xxvii)	<b>Truth nurtures the soul. Furthermore, it prevents the soul from being ugly, having license and luxury, arrogance and incontinence. These vices are the result of the soul living at a distance from the truth. Implied in this is the idea that the truth is good and it is the source of that which is good and health for the soul. Therefore, the soul benefits from seeking to know the truth and to emulate it.</b> In <i>Gorgias; Protagoras</i> (see 26, 33,35)
(xxviii)	<b>The soul is that which imparts life to a person.</b> In <i>Republic I</i> (see 28)
(xxix)	<b>Excellence is achieved when a person's soul is in a 'good state'.</b> In <i>Apology; Protagoras</i> (see 31, 36)
(xxx)	<b>The soul is more at home in the life after death than it is in this life.</b> In <i>Crito</i> (see 38)

Table 1: references to soul in 'early' dialogues, thematically categorized

### The act of caring for the soul

With such a view of the soul and what constitutes its benefit, we would expect that the care of the soul would entail: helping the soul to know the good; cleansing it of ignorance; turning one's attention towards the more important: the health of their soul

and away from the distraction of the lesser goods of society; governing one's body by applying one's souls to determining what is good and what is not; partaking of justice and fleeing from injustice; becoming self-disciplined; curtailing one's appetites; preparing the soul for the judgment of the afterlife (through making it akin to what is just); helping it to acquire truth.

To put it in the words of Werner Jaeger: 'Socrates defines the care of the soul more closely as the care of the knowledge of values and of truth, *phronésis* and *alétheia*.'<sup>160</sup>

If we accept that Socrates strived to bring his fellows to care for their souls, then we can expect that Socrates attempted, through dialogue, to assist his fellows in bringing about some or all of these effects.

One possibility could be that Socrates simply tried to urge and motivate his fellows to turn their attention to caring for their own souls. He might have acted merely as a sort of stimulant: like a gadfly might bother a sleepy horse and quicken it. If this is the case, then Socrates might rightly have claimed that he was not a teacher of anyone: if he did not teach them the methods and processes of 'caring for the soul' but simply reminded them that they ought to be concerned with the care of it.

This he certainly did. As Burnet (1916: 25) summarized it: 'What he did preach as the one thing needful for the soul was that it should strive after wisdom and goodness.'

However, as has been said in section I.I that Plato's Socrates had taken a more involved approach. In dialogue, he assisted his interlocutor practically in the processes, among other things, of cleansing their soul from ignorance; removing false beliefs that act as barriers in the pursuit of truth; and in helping them to acquire truth. We can say then that Socrates was involved both in motivating his fellows and in technically assisting the epistemic aspects of the care of the soul.

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<sup>160</sup> 1943: 39



This was Socrates' project of education: to help his fellows to achieve the care of their souls.

In section I.I we said that through a process of dialogue Socrates guided people to a more 'appropriate' or 'correct' epistemic state. We can now begin to see why this was, as Socrates understood it, a way to help others to care for their souls: a project he deemed as the most important task of life.

### III.I

The health of the soul according to Socrates was virtue, and the act of caring actively for the souls of others, as well as for his own, meant assisting them to attain to virtue. Socrates did this, as we have said, in the capacity of what can be called (by our terms today) a teacher: he engaged proactively with people's intellect. For Socrates, caring for one's soul was fundamentally an intellectual activity.

Some scholars however have seen Socrates' intellectualism as problematic for his act as a teacher of others.

George Grote, in 1867 complained that: '[Socrates made] the error...of dwelling exclusively on the intellectual conditions of human conduct, and omitting to give proper attention to the emotional and volitional.'

Nussbaum, in her analysis of the *Clouds*, finds that Aristophanes made this same criticism of Socrates, and she agrees, that this neglect on the part of Socrates led to his educational influence on his fellows being a negative one<sup>161</sup>.

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<sup>161</sup> Elsewhere, Nussbaum (1991: 34) say that Socrates' lack of [desired] effect on his fellows was 'uncanny'. However, in her book *Cultivating Humanity: a classical defense of reform in liberal education* Nussbaum presents Socrates' rationalism as an ideal. See (1997: 17-18)

Nussbaum finds, both in Aristophanes' and Plato's portrait, a Socrates who thought of theoretical knowledge of virtue as sufficient for an agent acting virtuously, and who gave no relevance to any habituation whatsoever. She considers that Socrates thought nothing of emotive and habitual aspects of virtuous behavior<sup>162</sup>.

In the Socratic paradox, that 'knowledge is sufficient for virtuous action' Nussbaum sees Socrates trying to establish 'the necessity *and* the sufficiency of a certain type of moral expertise – a skill in measuring pleasure and pain, both present and future – for the good of human life.'<sup>163</sup> Socrates 'assimilates morality to an expert craft or skill'<sup>164</sup>.

Socrates, Nussbaum argues, neglected 'the crucial importance of early habituation and the training of the desires'<sup>165</sup>. He taught anyone and everyone how to use negative dialogue, without concerning himself to find out first if his pupils were emotionally mature enough to use this skill appropriately<sup>166</sup>; and through this neglect he allowed for many of his followers to misuse the skill to the detriment of themselves and society<sup>167</sup>.

Socrates' mistake was to train the intellectual aspects of a person, whilst neglecting the role of non-rational desires; and Nussbaum concludes, this was both 'unjustified and dangerous'<sup>168</sup>.

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<sup>162</sup> 1981: 81

<sup>163</sup> *ibid*: 83

<sup>164</sup> *ibid*: 84. Nussbaum agrees with Irwin (1974: 756) that 'Socrates believes that moral knowledge is a craft which produces a final good...*eudaimonia*'

<sup>165</sup> *ibid*: 84

<sup>166</sup> *ibid*: 85

<sup>167</sup> *ibid*: 86

<sup>168</sup> *ibid*: 89

Nehamas (1992) agreed with Nussbaum's analysis and argued that Socrates' intellectualism, and the manner in which he affected his fellows because of it, opens him up to severe criticism<sup>169</sup>.

The problematic element Nehamas, following Nussbaum, found in Socrates was: 'his unshakeable faith in reason, in the power of understanding to secure goodness, and in the power of goodness to provide us with happiness'<sup>170</sup>. Due to these faults, Nehamas argued, 'Socrates' direct, immediate effect on his contemporaries' morality was minimal'<sup>171</sup>.

Nehamas felt that these shortcomings in Socrates were so detrimental to his role as a teacher that he concluded that Socrates could not have been a teacher of virtue at all. He says that in order to diffuse these charges against Socrates he: 'tried on a number of earlier occasions to construct an interpretation of his character...according to which Socrates...is totally unconcerned with the moral improvement of others....if Socrates was not a teacher; if he did not have, even in its most rudimentary form, he sort of program for moral education that Plato and Aristotle developed after him... then...the charge of intellectualism...would lose much of its point.'

'I still believe that this hypothesis is true....I still believe that he was not...a teacher of *aretē*.'<sup>172</sup>

Nehamas described Socrates' 'intellectualism' as having three problematic elements:

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<sup>169</sup> 1992: 279-280

<sup>170</sup> *ibid*: 279

<sup>171</sup> *ibid*: 296

<sup>172</sup> *ibid*: 283-284

1. That Socrates identifies virtue with knowledge. From this, Nehamas claims, it appears that Socrates considered ‘the affective side of our nature irrelevant to our virtue, to what counts as a good human life.’<sup>173</sup>
2. That virtue is considered necessary and *sufficient* ‘for the good life’ and for happiness’.
3. That ‘only knowledge and argument, not the whole nature of one’s personality, can lead us to virtue’<sup>174</sup>.

Nehamas argued that intellectual dialogue is limited in its capacity to make people virtuous; other ‘non-cognitive’ elements to one’s personality, aside from their intellect, play a role in developing virtue.

Regarding aspect (1) of Socratic intellectualism Nehamas addressed the criticism that no heed is paid to the ‘necessity of socialization and habituation’, nor to the ‘importance of the careful, long-term attention to our non-cognitive side’. These, Nehamas claimed, are at least as necessary for becoming good ‘as is the knowledge of the nature of goodness’<sup>175</sup>. The accusation here is that Socrates believed that the only thing a person needs in order to become good is a cognitive grasp – a knowledge of – the nature of goodness. On this reading Socrates was failing to notice that the cultivation of the affective side of our nature is just as vital in the achievement of virtue.

Regarding the second aspect of Socratic intellectualism, (2), Nehamas raised the following point: if we take Socrates’ point that ‘being good, in some way, is the essence of being happy’, then ‘nothing else matters’. The criticism of this point is that perhaps it is not appropriate to ignore – as Socrates’ is deemed to ignore – the other, material aspects of human welfare.

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<sup>173</sup> *ibid*: 280

<sup>174</sup> *ibid*: 281

<sup>175</sup> *ibid*: 280

As for the third element, (3), Nehamas made the point that: since Socrates believed that (a) knowledge and argument alone can make a person virtuous; and (b) Socrates did not think that the ‘whole nature of one’s personality’ is important in making one virtuous; then (c) ‘he made it his business to address his questions to everyone indiscriminately<sup>176</sup>.’<sup>177</sup>

Nehamas claimed that Socrates may have harmed some of his interlocutors by encouraging them to engage in philosophy. The accusation being made is that Socrates did not take into account – as would have been appropriate for a teacher of virtue to have done – the overall nature of his interlocutor’s personality. Therefore, he gave dialogical tools to persons who were not capable of using them well. The example of Critias, Charmides and Alcibiades are given of such persons.

This ‘lack of discrimination’ on the part of Socrates – which is attributed to his overestimation of intellect and to his ignoring other non-cognitive elements of a person’s character – Nehamas says, was harmful. ‘Not caring whether those he engaged in discussion, particularly the young among them, had the character appropriate for philosophy’, Nehamas accuses, ‘he encouraged the wrong people... to engage in philosophy to the detriment both of the youths and of philosophy.’<sup>178</sup>

Nehamas summarises the accusations that can be levied on Socrates due to his intellectualism as such:

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<sup>176</sup> *ibid*: 281

<sup>177</sup> Notice here that Nehamas does not himself assert that Socrates went about Athens addressing his questions to everyone indiscriminately. Indeed Nehamas is of the view that Socrates addressed his questions to an elite group of society. However, Nehamas is here describing Socrates as other scholars have read him, in order to show that these three elements together result in a catastrophic personality.

<sup>178</sup> 1992: 281

Socrates then, wrongly equates knowledge with virtue, inhumanly identifies virtue with happiness, and imprudently encourages everyone, whatever their moral fiber, to become well versed in the sort of argument that can easily destroy as establish moral value.<sup>179</sup>

### III.I.I

Let us deal first with the concern raised by Nehamas: that Socrates' intellectualism was not well suited to a person who cared about helping others to grow towards virtue; and that an intellectualist of the sort that Socrates was, was not likely to have posed as a teacher of others.

In order to defuse the seriousness of the charge against Socrates – the charge that his intellectualism rendered him a dire specimen of a teacher if in fact he was one – Nehamas concluded that we must see Socrates as someone who was entirely unconcerned about the souls of others, and who had no intent of helping his fellows through any form of education<sup>180</sup>.

A look at how Socrates understood the soul of man informs us that this concern is inappropriate, since, the soul was such that it requires 'intellectual care'. Given Socrates' belief that the soul needs wisdom to prosper, and virtue to flourish (where virtue is knowledge), then we can expect that Socrates would have deemed the sort of intellectual 'care' that he provided to be most appropriate.

Since he thought that the soul was healthy when it was rid of falsehood, and when it matured in knowledge of the good<sup>181</sup>, then reasonably he would have considered his work of bringing this about in the person to be beneficial, and he had no reason to be concerned with the problem raised by Nehamas.

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<sup>179</sup> *ibid*: 281

<sup>180</sup> 1992: 283

<sup>181</sup> See points (ii) – (v), (viii), (x) and (xxvii) of Table 1 of this chapter.

Socrates cared for others intellectually, since this is the type of care he thought that they needed. The fact that Socrates himself was thoroughly intellectualist was not, in his mind a barrier for caring for others, but more likely, it constituted his special ability to do so.

Concerning Nehamas' first point: that Socrates considered the 'affective side of our nature' as irrelevant to our wellbeing and concentrated merely on the intellectual aspect, this was not a problem for Socrates himself. Since for Socrates, the affective and intellectual aspects of our nature were not differentiated in this manner. Socrates considered rather that the affective side of our personality was shaped by our virtue and our knowledge.

What made a person happy, according to Socrates, was the actual real state of their being (their condition). A person who was virtuous was blessed, well off and happy, and one who was unjust was wretched and miserable. Everyone sought this blessed life of happiness, but not everyone could find it.

Having knowledge of virtue meant that a person understood how to acquire the good for themselves, and how to make their life better. They could recognize what was good and discriminate what was bad, they could desire the good, and they understood how to acquire it.

According to Socrates, those who did not know virtue could not get at happiness. In the same way that a person who knows where the jar of honey is will be able to eat something sweet, whereas one who does not know, and who has false opinions about what jar has honey, will not be able to acquire its sweetness.

Therefore we can say that, as far Socrates was concerned, in his system of thought, he did not overlook the affective side of people's personalities. Rather, through his intellectualist approach, he catered to it. The cognitive side of virtue was, for Socrates, the knowledge of how to accomplish the joy of being aligned with the good.

For this reason, Socrates considered that he could help a person to satisfy the real needs of their affective side and to become truly happy. As Socrates told Callicles at the end of the *Gorgias*: ‘So, listen to me and follow me to where I am, and when you’ve come here you’ll be happy both during life and at its end.’<sup>182</sup>

Regarding Nehamas’ second point we can say the following: that Socrates considered virtue to be a necessary element without which no one can be well off. What Socrates says is that one is better off being virtuous in every case – and they are never, under any circumstances better off not being virtuous.

This is what it means for something to be a necessary element: you cannot achieve your purpose without it under any circumstances. Thus, Socrates emphasizes that a virtuous man in prison is better off than an unjust king<sup>183</sup>.

This does not mean to say that a person will always feel pleasure if they are virtuous and feel discomfort if they are unjust. Indeed Socrates acknowledges that a virtuous person can suffer pain and ill fate. In the *Gorgias* for example, Socrates argues that a person benefits from undergoing reprimanding and discipline, even though this disciplining can be painful both physically and emotionally<sup>184</sup>.

This is so much in the same way that an ill person might undergo painful treatment or take medication that has a bad taste. The process is unpleasant but they are better off for it.

We can make sense of this if we understand it in context. Socrates says that being virtuous is the necessary and sufficient characteristic of living well, because, this is in accord with his definition of the good life. Socrates believed that the good life was

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<sup>182</sup> *Gorgias* 527c

<sup>183</sup> *Gorgias* 470e

<sup>184</sup> See conversation with Polus 476-479



one where the person came closer to the divine and became akin to it through coming to resemble it by being virtuous<sup>185</sup>. If the goal of life is, as Socrates believed that it was, to imitate the divine by being virtuous, then of course, it is only logical to consider that being virtuous is the necessary and sufficient element of living well.

Regarding Nehamas' third point, I find that Plato's presentation of Socrates does not support Nehamas' claim. Nehamas finds that: 'only knowledge and argument, not the whole nature of one's personality, can lead us to virtue'<sup>186</sup>.

However, a different reading of the texts shows that Socrates believed that one's personality plays a role in their ability to engage with knowledge and argument. As I argue in III.I.II for example, in the *Gorgias* we can see the following: that indeed argument and reason can bring us to know the truth and give us the information we need in order to identify and distinguish virtue. We can come to know what things are by argument. However, in order to engage in proper genuine enquiry, the sort that does make us more familiar with virtue, the 'nature of our personality' needs to be that way inclined also.

Our will, our interest and our desires need to be focused on seeking out truth. It is a process that we need to be dedicated to, and being dedicated means that one loves truth more than they do other things. Certainly they need to love truth more than they love their reputation and their wealth.

People need to be willing to be proven wrong, which means that their emotive intents need to be turned towards seeking the truth, and away from preserving the ego or from acquiring other social benefits. In order to enquire genuinely and become involved with argument and knowledge, the whole nature of one's personality needs to be involved<sup>187</sup>.

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<sup>185</sup> Please refer to section II.I.II for a discussion of this claim.

<sup>186</sup> 1992: 281

<sup>187</sup> Please refer to section III.I.II for a discussion of this.

It cannot be properly said that Socrates concentrated on the cognitive element and ignored the other aspects of our personality. For Socrates, ‘turning’ the cognitive aspect is key to assisting people to seek virtue. Socrates tried to show people the value of truth and virtue so that they might turn to it with their entire being, and embrace it with the whole nature of their personalities.

We have been arguing that, even though Nehamas was disinclined to, Socrates can easily be imagined both as an intellectualist and as one who actively cared for the souls of others, making an effort to assist them in some cognitive process to that end.

Nehamas is welcome to disagree with Socrates as to the purpose of life. However, it needs to be acknowledged that within Socrates’ own system of thought, Socrates would not have seen his intellectualist practices as harmful for his fellows.

Having such an ‘intellectualist’ belief – that being virtuous is the sum of living well and being happy – would not have prevented Socrates from being one who actively cared for the souls of others.

Nehamas, if he wishes to disagree with Socrates about the purpose of life may well accuse him of failing to understand what people need, and conclude that he was a bad teacher. But it cannot be argued, as Nehamas has tried to argue, that Socrates himself could not have pretended to care for the souls and behaved as he did. It is very compatible with Socrates’ belief system that he care about the souls of others through this ‘intellectualist’ route of pointing out that virtue is needed in order to live well.

Socrates, because he cared for the souls of his fellows, assisted their cognitive states (their relationship to truth). He did so because he believed that this education – learning the process of how to enquire philosophically – made their life worth living. The examined life, for Socrates, was one worth living.

To care means to try to do good for others. For Socrates the worthwhile life is the examined life. Doing good to someone would have meant prompting them and otherwise assisting them to examine.

One might disagree with Socrates' premises, and say that he was not a pedagogue of the sort we would like but one cannot say that Socrates did not make every effort to assist people in the processes that he valued above all else.

As Socrates said himself in the *Apology*, he gave his life to 'persuading [us] to care for' virtue and to examine our life, making them thus more worthwhile with every step<sup>188</sup>.

### III.I.II

Having said that, let us say further that the manner in which Nehamas and Nussbaum have understood Socratic intellectualism is controversial. Many of the elements of Socratic intellectualism that they find incompatible with teaching are not accepted by other scholars.

Socratic intellectualism has been interpreted in a variety of ways and there is no agreement regarding it. The sort of 'intellectualism' that is assumed by Nehamas in his criticism of it is one where rational thought is responsible for all of our choices, and there is no role in decision-making for non-rational motives.

Gould (1987: 265) describes this reading of intellectualism as the most common reading and defines it as the view attributed to Socrates that: all decisions are made rationally and that there is no place for... 'any faculty other than the intellect'<sup>189</sup>.

As Segvic (2005: 171) points out, this line of criticism sees Socrates as either overlooking entirely or vastly underestimating the importance of the emotional; the

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<sup>188</sup> *Apology* 31b

<sup>189</sup> Dreyfus (1988) for example assumes this view.

desiderative; and volitional sides of human nature<sup>190</sup>. However, Segvic argues that this is an incorrect reading of Socratic intellectualism and makes the case that emotions, volitions and desires do indeed play a greater role than Nehamas' criticism permits.

She argues that Socrates, far from ignoring these 'other' aspects of our being, rather attempts to 'to build them into his account of virtue as knowledge'<sup>191</sup>. 'Socratic wanting', according to Segvic, is both a volitional and cognitive state. She finds this demonstrated in the *Gorgias*<sup>192</sup>.

As she points out, Socrates supports that people desire that which they deem to be good<sup>193</sup>. For him then, wanting is both volitional and cognitive. The emotive and desiderative aspects of our decisions therefore are not ignored by Socrates. He does not claim that these do not play a role in decision-making. Socrates, on this reading of intellectualism can acknowledge the force of desire and its importance in decision-making, since his intellectualism lies not in the denial of the existence of desires but rather in how he analyses these desires. If we understand desires as something defined by our rational views, then these can be accommodated within an intellectualist account.

Indeed, this is the way in which some stoics understood Socratic intellectualism. Chrysippus, influenced by Socrates, thought of emotions as a type of judgment, and in light of this accepted intellectualism. 'Emotions can be regulated by knowledge and argument because they are types of judgments themselves.'<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> See also Kamtekar (2012: 256)

<sup>191</sup> 2005: 172

<sup>192</sup> *ibid*: 175

<sup>193</sup> *ibid*: 177

<sup>194</sup> Coplan (2010: 134)

Coplan (2010: 133) describes the way scholars understand Socratic intellectualism in a manner that resembles a battle: ‘reason is all powerful’ and ‘either emotion is no match for reason, which will always overrule it, or it is a species of reason and can be regulated by reasoned argument’.

Scholars often separate the emotions from the intellect and therefore set them in opposition to one another, understanding Socrates’ intellectualism as the claim that: ‘knowledge cannot be overcome by desire, pleasure, pain, fear, or love and is therefore sufficient to motivate action and sufficient for virtue.’

On Segvic’s reading, where the emotions are not independent of reason or opposed to it, but rather are formed by it, this dichotomy between the two does not exist.

The view that it is too simplistic a reading to think of Socratic intellectualism as ignoring or undervaluing non-rational aspects of the person has been developed by several scholars. Even though these scholars disagree about the specifics, they share the opinion that Socrates took non-rational elements into consideration in his intellectualist analysis of decision-making.

Bowery (2007: 92) argues against seeing Socrates as having a narrow ‘rationalistic’ view because she finds him focusing as much on the emotional states of his interlocutors as he does on the logical argumentation used. She notes that on occasions when a dialogue is narrated by Socrates to another, as is the *Lysis*; *Republic*; *Charmides*; *Protagoras*; and the *Euthydemus*, Socrates gives a report with great detail about the eroticism between the characters, instances of blushing and occurrences of laughter<sup>195</sup>.

Socrates, according to Bower, does so because he wants his audience to hear about the philosophical exchange as it took place within the context of these emotive

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<sup>195</sup> Bowery (2007: 92)

environments<sup>196</sup>. Emotional expressions, such as blushing, are a part of the exchange that takes place during the philosophical discussion. Blushing for example, says Bower, among other things might be indicated in order to show the experience of having ones ‘secret personal allegiance brought to light’<sup>197</sup>.

Bower argues that these signals written into the narrative offer insight into why Socrates treats his interlocutors the way that he does. He responds to them, not purely based on the flow of the argument, but according to their experience of the philosophical exchange. Socrates uses his ‘emotional acuity to guide the philosophical conversation’.... Socrates’ motivation for philosophical conversation arises from his attunement with the emotions and motivations of his interlocutors and not simply from his commitment to finding truth through philosophical refutation.’<sup>198</sup>

Bower finds that Plato makes such emphases in his writings because he wants to give us an insight into the process of acquiring self-knowledge through the practice of philosophy, both by representing to us the experience of Socrates the paradigmatic philosopher and his various interlocutors. We see from this that ‘Socratic self-knowledge is not simply a rational process of examination turned inward but one infused with a remarkable degree of passion, sensitivity to feeling, and reflection on the emotional dimension of human experience<sup>199</sup>. We are often in dialogues given the opportunity to see how Socrates responds to a situation and how his emotional responses differ from those of others<sup>200</sup>.

I agree with Bower that Socrates’ ‘intellectual’ approach to self-knowledge and virtue, and his cultivation of it through the ‘rational process’ of philosophical discussion is

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<sup>196</sup> *ibid*: 93

<sup>197</sup> *ibid*: 94

<sup>198</sup> *ibid*: 95

<sup>199</sup> *ibid*: 96-97

<sup>200</sup> *ibid*: 98

deeply responsive to emotive aspects of human personality. Emotions and non-rational motivations are treated as a critical part of practicing philosophy. I find this clearly demonstrated in the *Gorgias*.

The *Gorgias* is a dialogue abounding with information regarding how Socrates thought about the education of learners. Socrates here describes to his interlocutors what is involved in doing philosophy, and in what manner a person ought to proceed in their thought processes if they are to achieve any worthwhile benefit.

Here Socrates speaks plainly about the attitudinal approach of successful philosophers. He makes thirteen points.

From the start of the dialogue we can see that Socrates wants the following characteristics from a learner who is to be effective:

1. That they be attentive; that they concentrate on the issue at hand; that they focus on what is being said<sup>201</sup>.
2. A part of this is that Socrates cared about clear precise thinking and precise speaking. To a large extent, for Socrates, thinking and speaking correctly was a matter of doing so with exactitude and a care for detail.
3. That they be persistent in their enquiry and follow trains of thought to their end,
4. and that they be serious about seeking the truth. One ought not to merely *pretend* that they care about the matter or that they are speaking about it, but Socrates requires them to actually care and make a genuine effort when speaking about it.

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<sup>201</sup> A view shared by Giblin (1953: 204)

These elements might seem self-evident to us, however, it is not always the case that people's thought processes or their speech acts are characterized by these. Socrates seems to have found the lack of these a problem and he made the point of requiring these from his interlocutors. Socrates often asks his interlocutor to concentrate on the matter at hand, to focus on their argument, and to stop trying to use the act of speech for the purpose of making some impression.

Element one is exemplified in section 448d-e. Here Socrates criticizes Polus for giving an accomplished answer which is nevertheless irrelevant to the question being discussed. Polus made a point, but his point was not focused on the issue. It did not answer the question. Socrates tells Polus that if the enquiry is to proceed he must answer the question and not merely give the semblance of having answered.

The second and third elements are seen in section 450a-453a. Gorgias had claimed that the skill of oratory is the knowledge of making speeches. Socrates then shows Gorgias that this is a characterization that can be applied to several arts, and that therefore it does not sufficiently serve to identify what oratory is. Gorgias is prompted to give a more precise, and a more exact description. Such as answer at the one he had given is too general and it does not help them to think critically about oratory.

Socrates wants a definition of oratory that is exact enough so that it will enable one to understand the true nature of oratory. It is only after Gorgias had made his definition more precise that Socrates is willing to proceed with the enquiry and evaluate oratory. He says:

*'Now I think you've come closest to making clear what craft you take oratory to be, Gorgias.*

*If I follow you at all, you're saying that oratory is a producer of persuasion. Its whole business comes to that, and that's the long and short of it.'*

The fourth element is exemplified at 453b where Socrates says: 'You should know that... I'm one of those people who in a discussion with someone else really wants to



have knowledge of the subject the discussion's about. And I consider you one of them too.'

Here a further point is also found:

5. That one ought to have a good will towards their interlocutor.

Socrates begins his conversation with Gorgias by telling him that he regards him as being a genuine philosopher – one who demonstrates a love for truth in their thought processes and speech acts. The philosophical attitude is the one that Socrates respects, it is the one he has himself, and it is what he now expects from Gorgias. The implication is that their dialogue ought not to deteriorate into some sort of competition where each is trying to get the better of the other, but that both will work instead together towards the truth.

Socrates is known for leading a dialogue through asking questions. At points it might seem as though he is leading the discussion by asking questions to which he already knows the answer. At 453b he acknowledges this and explains his motives. Here again he reaffirms what we have said regarding one's attitude in a discussion. Socrates explains that this is something he does in order to assist the discussion by keeping it focused.

Socrates might perhaps be able to anticipate what his interlocutor thinks about a topic and proceed to deconstruct this. However, such behavior is likely to cause confusion. Socrates asks the other to state what they think as explicitly as possible so that they may also become aware of the content of their thought. Socrates wants concepts to be made explicit and clarified, so that they may then be critically examined. He requires the belief which is to be critically examined to be 'put on the table' so to speak.

Socrates wants unambiguous and precise thinking. He wants everyone to be clear as to the concept that is being discussed. He says:

‘You can know for sure that I don’t know what this persuasion derived from oratory that you’re talking about is, or what subjects it’s persuasion about. Even though I do have my suspicions about which persuasion I think you mean and what it’s about, I’ll still ask you just the same what you say this persuasion produced by oratory is, and what it’s about. And why, when I have my suspicions, do I ask you and refrain from expressing them myself? It’s not you I am after, it’s our discussion, to have it proceed in such a way as to make the thing we’re talking about most clear to us.’<sup>202</sup>

When a person is asked to give a lucid statement of a belief that they hold it ensures that they will be able to conduct a more clear and exact examination of it afterwards. The less vague our belief is, the more accurately we can evaluate it. Socrates repeats this point at 454b saying:

‘Yes Gorgias, I suspected that this was the persuasion you meant, and that these are the matters it’s persuasion about. But so you won’t be surprised if in a moment I ask you again another question like this, about what seems to be clear, and yet I go on with my questioning – as I say, I am asking questions so that we can conduct an orderly discussion. It’s not you I am after; it’s to prevent our getting in the habit of second-guessing and snatching each other’s statements away ahead of time. It’s to allow you to work out your assumption in any way you want to.’

For Socrates, reaching a clear and precise understanding of a matter is what it means to learn about it. Learning for Socrates is seeing the truth about matters. This is why focusing, concentrating and persevering in the study of a matter is what is desirable in the learner – it is the way to ‘see’ the truth about a matter. In the same way that I will come to see what something is if I focus my sight on it, observe it and identify its characteristics, a person can come to learn about the truth by looking persistently at a concept and seeking to understand its nature<sup>203</sup>.

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<sup>202</sup> Jowett translates 453c5 as: ‘Not for your sake, but in order that the argument may proceed in such a manner as is most likely to set forth the truth’

<sup>203</sup> This claim is discussed again in chapter VI.

At 457c4 Socrates says: ‘Gorgias, I take it that you, like me, have experienced many discussions and that you’ve observed this sort of thing about them: it’s not easy for the participants to define jointly what they’re undertaking to discuss, and so, having learnt from and taught each other, to conclude their session’.

Socrates is here making a complaint to Gorgias, but notice what he says: that when the participants of a discussion come to agree and define jointly that concept which they are undertaking to discuss, they will have learnt from and taught each other.

There are barriers to this however. Unfortunately, Socrates notes, people do not show such dedication to truth in their enquiries. They are not committed to and concentrated on examining how things are. They are not focused on seeing what things are.

People are inhibited from having substantial thought processes or truthful speech acts by certain attitudes. Socrates identifies these as attitudinal barriers to philo-sophising, and he makes it clear that a learner and lover of truth ought not to have these attitudes.

Any reaction which distracts the person from focusing purely on the task at hand – from concentrating on the investigation being conducted – is destructive for philosophy. A learner who wishes to pursue truth needs to be focused on the aim of examining how things are. When they are distracted from this, they forfeit the ability to enquire genuinely.

He says<sup>204</sup>: ‘Instead, if they’re disputing some point and one maintains that the other isn’t right or isn’t clear, they get irritated, each thinking the other is speaking out of spite. They become eager to win instead of investigating the subject under discussion. In fact, in the end some have a most shameful parting of the ways, abuse heaped upon them, having given and gotten to hear such things that make even bystanders upset with themselves for having thought it worthwhile to come to listen to such people.’

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<sup>204</sup> *Gorgias* 457d

A person who reacts and feels the need to protect their ego can never, according to Socrates participate in genuine enquiry. A discussion requires that both people have good will towards the other. A discussion ought not to be a battle between them nor an opportunity to compete, but together the interlocutors ought to help one another to think more clearly.

Their common aim is to think clearly and to understand precisely. Their task is to search together, to enquire together into the truth of how things are. The interlocutors, having this common aim uniting them, are to help one another by critically examining together the views and opinions that are being expressed.

Each person ought not to hold on to their own opinion as if it is something that they need to protect and defend. The opinions that each person has ought only to be the material which the discussants will examine together. Both should seek to attain truth, and not to maintain the views they have already presented. Each then needs to be willing to undergo a critical analysis of their views, and each should contribute by criticizing the opinions that are being discussed, if they can.

Socrates considered that he was doing someone a favor by criticizing their views, if he was able to identify any false idea entertained by the other. He acted as a kind of intellectual editor, helping people to sort through their beliefs. Likewise, he says, he would appreciate any person that can show me his own misconception, because by making them clear, he would help Socrates to become freed of these.

This brings us to the sixth attitudinal element that Socrates says is characteristic of one who can be a philosopher:

6. That they need to be *willing* to have their views criticized, deconstructed and even disproved.

He says to Gorgias<sup>205</sup>:

‘What’s my point in saying this? It’s that I think you are now saying things that aren’t very consistent or compatible with what you were first saying about oratory. So, I’m afraid to pursue my examination of you, for fear that you should take me to be speaking with eagerness to win against you, rather than to have our subject become clear. For my part, I’d be pleased to continue questioning you if you’re the same kind of man I am, otherwise I would drop it.

And what kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue; one who, however, wouldn’t be any less pleased to be refuted than to refute. For I count being refuted a greater good, insofar as it is a greater good to oneself to be delivered from the worst thing there is than to deliver someone else from it. I don’t suppose there’s anything quite so bad for a person as having false belief about the things we’re discussing right now. So if you say you’re this kind of man, too, let’s continue the discussion, but if you think we should drop it, let’s be done with it and break it off.’

Dialogical enquiry for Socrates is not a competition, it is a shared search. It offers the benefit of two minds working together on the same question instead of one. For it to be genuine successful enquiry however, the interlocutors need to have the attitude described above. They need to be dedicated to their aim of seeking to see the truth about a matter. They need to be focused on this and not allow themselves to be distracted from this task.

According to Socrates, one needs to follow the arguments that are being made. Focusing and keeping to the point of discussion is necessary for one to reach any real conclusion, much in the same way that staying on the road will get you to your destination. If you are driving to Glasgow, but you keep turning off into the fields, you will never get there.

The sequence of the thought process is important. This is why Socrates tells Polus off at 466a for forgetting what he had said earlier and for misquoting what had been said.

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<sup>205</sup> 457e-458b2

Socrates expects his interlocutor to follow the entire thought process through, from its start to its conclusion.

One form of distraction in the search of truth that Socrates often noted and criticized is what we might call 'emotionalism'. That is, when a person is motivated by their emotions to hold a belief, rather than by a reasonable assessment of that belief.

Socrates felt that many of his fellows were affected by emotionalism. Socrates, we might say, considered that many people were vulnerable to their reason being made hostage through emotional manipulation. Instead of using reason to examine the truth about a matter, people use speech acts to suggest to others, through emotional manipulation, what they ought to believe.

Socrates tells as much to Callicles at the end of their discussion in the *Gorgias*. At 513c Callicles admits to Socrates that he sees that what has been said is good, but that nevertheless, he cannot agree with him for some reason. Socrates explains to him that this is because he has a love for the demos. Callicles' concern with the opinions of the demos interferes with his better judgment. He can see the reason in what Socrates is saying but is emotionally unwilling to accept it. Socrates here makes the point that a person must:

#### 7. Love truth above all else in order to appreciate it

Furthermore we can see this for example in the *Apology*. Socrates points out to his jurors that he is speaking the truth to them and telling them how things actually are. But he complains that they will not respond well to this. He tells them that they would have given him a more favorable verdict had he used emotionalist tactics on them, the way other accused persons do. Socrates lets his distaste for such methods be felt.

He says that a man who: ‘begged and implored the jurymen with many tears, [who] brought his children and many of his friends and family into court to arouse as much pity as he could’ brings shame upon the city, and behaves ‘no better than women’<sup>206</sup>.

Socrates tells the jury that despite the shameful nature of such behavior he often sees his fellow Athenians behaving in this manner at court. He tells the jury that this ought not to be allowed, and that in fact, if a man does plead in such a shameful manner, they ought to be more willing to persecute him.

He says:

‘I do not think it is right to supplicate the jury and to be acquitted because of this, but to teach and persuade them. It is not the purpose of a jurymen’s office to give justice as a favor to whoever seems good to him, but to judge according to law.’<sup>207</sup>

In the same way, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates tells us that a person ought not to be persuaded by any form of peer pressure or other emotional blackmail, but that they ought instead to form their opinions through a reasonable process of enquiry (of seeking the truth about something).

At 471e Socrates tells Polus that appealing to authority does not offer proof. Socrates is not interested in the reputation of the witness, but in the truth of their statements. Refutation by appeal to authority, and to the awe that one might feel for the reputable witness, ‘is worthless as far as truth is concerned’, Socrates says.

Again at 473d Socrates tells Polus that trying to scare him into accepting an opinion is also unacceptable and cannot lead one to truth. You are spooking me, he tells Polus, but you are not refuting me.

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<sup>206</sup> *Apology* 34b-35b

<sup>207</sup> *Apology* 35c

The only thing that Socrates cares about in the process of enquiry is the correctness of what is being said. He explains to Polus that he will only be persuaded by their reasonable discussion and not by any emotional bullying. This is why he quickly tries to refocus Polus on what they have been arguing and return his attention to their argument saying: ‘refresh my memory on just a small point: if the man plots to set himself up as a tyrant *unjustly*, you said?’

Socrates then proceeds to draw some logical conclusions from what they have been saying, at which point Polus laughs at him. Socrates immediately identifies this as another attempt to convince him emotionally that Polus is in the right. Socrates points this out, and tells Polus that laughing at him is not a form of refutation. He chastises Polus and wants to bring him back to the reasonable argument that they had been conducting. Socrates lets Polus know that he will not be persuaded by any emotional pressure to accept a view that is not concluded through reasonable enquiry<sup>208</sup>.

Again at 473e7 Polus tells Socrates that he must admit that he has been refuted on the basis that most people would disagree with what had said. Polus says: ‘Don’t you think you’ve been refuted already, Socrates, when you’re saying things the likes of which no human being would maintain?’

Socrates makes it clear that he does not consider this a form of refutation at all. Socrates states clearly that he does not think that the number of people that believe an opinion does anything to support that opinion. He does not care, neither for the view of the many on the question addressed, nor of what the many think of him.

Socrates tells Polus that he is not a politician, he does not aim to please the people. He does not care what the crowd feels. This reminds us of the *Crito* 44c where Socrates tells Crito that he does not care about the opinions of the majority.

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<sup>208</sup> See *Gorgias* 473e



This brings us to the eighth element that according to Socrates characterizes the attitude of philosophical enquirers:

8. To not be influenced by opinions and emotional pressure, but to remain reasonable and focused on the arguments. Discipline is needed<sup>209</sup>.

Socrates believes that the reasonable logical examination of reality is what will bring one to truth. With an interlocutor he can follow a line of reasoning considering the parts of reality and how they relate to one another, and much like a mathematical equation, this will bring them to conclusions that can be taken seriously; for as he says, it is impossible to refute the truth<sup>210</sup>.

All the other emotive ways in which people form opinions, usually in order to become acceptable to the majority of people, can only ever distract the philosopher from his actual aim: the truth.

At 474a Socrates says: ‘...try the kind of refutation I think is called for. For I do know how to produce one witness to whatever I’m saying, and that’s the man I am having a discussion with. The majority I disregard. And I do know how to call for a vote from one man, but I don’t even discuss things with the majority. See if you’ll be willing to give me a refutation, then, by answering the questions you’re asked.’

In other words, Socrates is saying that an enquiry need to not be influenced by opinion, but by reasons.

Notice here that Socrates is not against persons, he is against the mob. The person whom he is speaking with who can be brought to agreement can be anyone: he need not be anyone special. This was seen in the *Meno* especially, where Socrates had a

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<sup>209</sup> Very much related to point three.

<sup>210</sup> *Gorgias* 473b

discussion with an entirely uneducated slave-boy. According to Socrates, it is the mob that cannot think, not the people.

A mob is a crowd of people who influence one another and decide together – a decision making force in Athenian democracy. Socrates seems here to be saying that he is not able to engage a crowd in substantial dialogue. However, Socrates seems to accept to discuss seriously with any person who is willing to apply himself to the discussion.

We come not to the ninth attitudinal element that is characteristic of one who enquires philosophically:

9. That they be courageous and pursue truth without fear<sup>211</sup>.

We can see this in the exchange between Polus and Socrates at 475d. Socrates had been trying to examine a question with Polus. Polus had tried to win the argument with the emotive tactics discussed above. Socrates addressed these by pointing them out, calling them by their name and forcing Polus to keep to the argument. Despite his best efforts then, Polus is compelled by Socrates to keep focused on an argument that is most likely going to prove him wrong.

He is on a dialogical path, together with Socrates, which will probably lead to the conclusion that everything he had been stating with such confidence in public is incorrect. He is hesitant to proceed. He feels perhaps threatened by the process.

Socrates assures him that one who seeks to learn about the truth ought not to be afraid of such things, but ought to proceed courageously. He assures him that no actual harm will come to him, despite the discomfort he might be feeling.

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<sup>211</sup> Very related to point seven.

He says: ‘Answer Polus, and fear not. For you will come to no harm if you nobly resign yourself into the healing hand of the argument as to a physician without shrinking and either say yes or no to me.’<sup>212</sup>

As we have said already in fact, not only does Socrates believe that his interlocutor will not be harmed by the process, but he is certain that he will be helped by it, as he will be released from the prison of false belief. This he comforts Polus with confidence.

By 480d Polus has followed the argument with Socrates and has come to see that what Socrates says appears to be correct. However, he admits to Socrates that what they have just now agreed on feels very strange to him. Socrates then makes a tenth point:

10. That being consistent in one’s thoughts is necessary in enquiry and is needed when seeking truth.

Polus says: ‘to me Socrates what you are saying appears very strange. Though, probably in agreement with your premises’. To which Socrates answers: ‘is this not the conclusion, if the premises are not disproven?’, ‘yes it certainly is’. On these grounds then, Socrates convinces Polus, they must agree that their conclusion is correct.

This process of consistently following a precise and clear examination of how things are Socrates names philosophy. Carrying out an enquiry of a matter where a person is concentrated on what is being said and persists with each strand of thought, and follows each line of argument to its logical conclusion, without being distracted in any way from this process, Socrates says, is what brings one to truth.

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<sup>212</sup> translation by Benjamin Jowett

It is a reliable and consistent process and it leads to something more than fickle opinions. The beliefs produced by philosophy are stable and serious. A person who wants to reject the conclusions of philosophical enquiry, as Socrates conducts it, needs to address them on the terms of philosophy and show why they cannot be supported by logical reasoning.

At 481e he says that if someone bases their beliefs on the opinions of other people, then their beliefs will be fickle, as it is in the nature of opinions to be. If the basis of some belief is prone to flimsy change, then so is that belief flimsy. However, if one's opinions are based on reason and examination, as Socrates proposes that they ought to be, then, since their base is stable and secure, they also are well supported.

He says: '...instead of being surprised at my saying them, you must stop my beloved, philosophy, from saying them. For she always says what you now hear me say, my dear friend, and she's by far less fickle than my other beloved. As for the son of Clinias what he says differs from the one time to the next, but what philosophy says always stays the same, and she's saying things that now astound you, although you were present when they were said.

So, either refute her and show that doing what's unjust without paying what is due for it is *not* the ultimate of all bad...or else, if you leave this unrefuted, then by the Dog... Callicles will not agree with you, Callicles, but will be dissonant with you all your life long. And yet for my part, my good man, I think it's better to have my lyre or a chorus that I might lead out of tune and dissonant, and have the vast majority of men disagree with me and contradict me, than to be out of harmony with myself, to contradict myself, though I am only one person.'<sup>213</sup>

Socrates is here speaking with Callicles and he is making a statement which is at the very heart of his dialogical method. In simple words what Socrates is saying here is: 'you don't really think that. You cannot honestly hold such a view if you think about

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<sup>213</sup> *Gorgias* 482a-482c

it. If you examine it, the truth will become known to you, and your false beliefs will be destroyed. That is because only truth can stand the test of refutation. Only truth cannot be refuted. You do not really think what you are saying, but you believe this false belief because you are influenced by the opinions of others. You are wrong to let opinion shape what you believe. Think about it and you will see.’

This is the heart of Socrates’ dialogical method: he compels people to think about what they believe, and by examining their beliefs their falsehood is made obvious. They are then invited to enquire into reality even further so that they may replace their opinions with correct ideas.

That which is required for this process is frankness. Socrates is saying: ‘if you really actually think about it you will see that you do not believe what you are saying’. This is why Socrates is always requiring his interlocutor to speak frankly. We see this also in what follows in the *Gorgias*.

This brings us to the eleventh element characteristic of one doing philosophical enquiry:

#### 11. They need to carry out their investigation frankly

Socrates main point method is to bring the interlocutor to realize that they do not actually think that which they believe. If they look honestly at their beliefs they will see their fault. But this needs to be done frankly. Socrates proposes this criterion to Callicles at 487e saying:

‘If there’s any point in our discussions on which you agree with me, then that point will have been adequately put to the test by you and me, and it will not be necessary to put it to any further test, for you’d never have conceded the point through lack of wisdom or excess of shame, and you wouldn’t do so by lying to me either...So, our mutual agreement will really lay hold of the truth in the end’.

If the criterion of truthfulness is met, the outcome is ascertained.

Socrates then tells Callicles that:

12. the philosopher needs to live in accordance with their philosophy

The results of enquiry, Socrates says, should be applied to life and taken seriously. This places enquiry in the greater context of being the process that helps the lover of truth to live well.

As Socrates tells Callicles, the reason he seeks and desires to be genuinely criticized by his interlocutor is because by correcting his opinions Socrates will be in a better position to know the truth. His purpose is to live in accordance with the truth, and thus, being refuted is a great benefit for him. He says:

‘...if I engage in anything that’s improper in my own life, please know well that I do not make this mistake intentionally but out of my ignorance. So don’t leave off lecturing me the way you began, but show me clearly what it is I’m to devote myself to, and in what way I might come by it; if you catch me agreeing with you now but at a later time not doing the very things I’ve agreed upon, then take me for a very stupid fellow and don’t bother ever afterwards with lecturing me, on the ground that I am a worthless fellow.’<sup>214</sup>

The dialogue with Callicles then begins to take off and Socrates again points out to Callicles all the mistakes that he is making in his reasoning, and in this manner shows that Callicles’ stated opinion is not in accordance with philosophy. It cannot withstand philo-sophical examination. When one looks closely at its premises one finds that these are not well supported. They are not true.

One criticism is that Callicles’ opinion is not consistent, as it can be shown under questioning. He tells Callicles that he is not committed to what he is saying, and his statement is not stable. He says: ‘I...claim that you never say the same things about the same subjects. At one time you were defining the better and the superior as the

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<sup>214</sup> 488a

stronger, then again as the more intelligent, and now you've come up with something else again.... But tell me... once and for all, whom you mean...'<sup>215</sup>

Socrates then tells Callicles that he needs to be both consistent and frank if he is to enquire genuinely into truth. One should not just say things to make their point or support their argument. You do not just construct a consistent argument for your point, but you need also to do so honestly. In dialogue with Socrates they must answer truthfully in the pursuit of truth.

This is because Socrates' dialogical method of enquiry is not a purely logical proof for something. Logic and argument are used indeed, but what Socrates is proving as such is that: 'if you are honest, you will not believe what you are saying. If you enquire truthfully, you will find that you agree with me'.

Socrates is not as such proving that this or that view are the only logically possible truths. What he is arguing for is that: as far as he can see, these are the most truthful views to hold. These truths that Socrates directs others towards are the opinions which are concluded when one is truthful.

Socrates does not claim to have a full-proof method mathematically deducing the only possibility. He claims rather that when one thinks truthfully they will reach the same conclusions as he. The lover of truth thinks truthfully.

He tells this to Callicles at 495a. Callicles is in the process of being refuted by Socrates. He tries to support his point by sustaining an argument for it. He says: '...to keep my argument from being inconsistent if I say that they are different, I say they're the same'. Socrates does not allow this saying: 'You're wrecking your earlier statements, Callicles, and you'd no longer be adequately enquiring into the truth of the matter with me if you speak contrary to what you think.'

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<sup>215</sup> 491b

Callicles however is obstinate and continues to maintain ‘funny things’ he does not frankly believe, in order to argue for his case. Socrates points out that if Callicles were truthful, he would agree with him.

At 495e Socrates tells the audience that he does not agree with a point and adds: ‘and I believe that Callicles doesn’t either when he comes to see himself rightly’.

At 500b Socrates tells Callicles that frankness must also be combined with seriousness. Philosophy for Socrates is something to be taken seriously. He says: ‘... Callicles, please don’t think that you should jest with me either, or answering anything that comes to mind, contrary to what you really think, and please don’t accept what you get from me as though I’m jesting! For you see, don’t you, that our discussion’s about... The way we’re supposed to live.’

Then at 505e Socrates tells Callicles that the philosophical enquirer needs to be:

### 13. Dedicated to truth<sup>216</sup>

This is a general description and involves all of the elements discussed already. Socrates says: ‘...all of us ought to be contentiously eager to know what’s true and what’s false about the things we are talking about. That is should become clear is a good common to all.’

At 506a Socrates clarifies that one needs to be dedicated to truth, not to the preservation of their own opinions. They need to be willing to have their views refuted for the sake of learning about the truth. They need to be willing to let go of false beliefs. Dialogue is not a competition where each tries to make their case, but a co-enquiry into the truth which can occur only when the participants are dedicated

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<sup>216</sup> Notice that many of these points are related, and perhaps all can be included in the final point (13). We felt however the need to go into each point separately since these are fundamental to how we see Socrates’ educative act in the agora and we want to emphasize them.



and concerned with the truth. Socrates says: 'I'm searching together with you so that if my opponent clearly has a point, I'll be the first to concede it.'

Again at 506c, Socrates tells Callicles that if he is refuted, he will be much indebted for it. Being refuted, for Socrates, is a blessing. It is so because it would mean that he held a false belief from which he is now set free. It will be an improvement to Socrates' life. This is the attitude to refutation that Socrates expects from all philosophical enquirers.

At 506b he repeats that philosophical enquirers need to be persistent, thorough, and dedicated to following the lead of philosophy. They should follow the trails of a true argument to the end with courage and not abandon it midway.

All of these thirteen attitudinal characteristics of a philosopher can also be called the appropriate emotional reactions that make one apt in the process of acquiring self-knowledge and pursuing virtue through the process of philosophical analysis. Socrates regularly claims to be characterized by these emotional responses and urges other people to be also. It is a part of his teaching others how to conduct philosophical enquiry.

We have been making the point, in agreement with Bower (2007) that the rational and 'intellectualist' aspects of Socratic enquiry are intertwined with the attitudinal and emotional aspects of a person. The two are not separate.

We are discussing the question of whether Socratic intellectualism overlooks the non-rational aspects of an interlocutor's personality. Other scholars have taken a different approach towards the same aim: of criticizing an analysis of Socratic intellectualism as 'dry intellectualism' that neglects non-rational aspects.

Brickhouse and Smith (2007: 342) take issue with what they refer to as the 'standard view' of intellectualism where all decisions are purely cognitive in the sense of

computational as opposed to conative. They find that Socrates requires the philosopher to discipline the appetites and passions within their soul<sup>217</sup>.

Brickhouse and Smith see Socratic intellectualism as holding that the rational aspect of a person makes the final decision about what a person does, but that the rational element is in contact with, and influenced by, the non-rational conative aspects of personality.

It is the responsibility of the rational element to assess information and make a decision. The conative aspect of a person tries to ‘provide information’ and persuade the person to act in a certain way. Conative aspects of our nature do this by presenting the object of desire as something good. The philosophical person is one who develops the ability to not be overrun by their sentiments in decision-making<sup>218</sup>.

The purpose of their account is to explain that Socratic intellectualism does not overlook non-rational aspects of personality but rather takes them into account. Christopher Rowe makes the same point, even though his account of how Socratic intellectualism is best described differs from that of Brickhouse and Smith.

Brickhouse and Smith try to explain that we desire that which we think is good, and that the process of deciding takes into consideration a variety of elements including conative ones. In this case conative elements are not overlooked by Socrates, but rather he is of the opinion that these need to be disciplined and made appropriate for philosophy. Rowe (2012: 306) on the other hand interprets Socratic intellectualism as a process where we desire the good fundamentally, and we intellectualise about how to achieve it.

A person always desires the good. However a desire that is relevant for action is a *desire to do* something. This, according to Rowe and Penner (2005) is a more

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<sup>217</sup> 2007: 349

<sup>218</sup> *ibid*: 350

complex state. A desire to act is a blend that involves beliefs. As Penner writes: 'desires only become desires 'to do something' when they are combined with beliefs, i.e., about what is best for the agent; and that is also the moment at which they become 'rational' desires.'

As people we invariably desire goodness. We then have beliefs and thoughts about what this desire amounts to, what is good, and how we can achieve it for ourselves. For example, I might feel the need to be benefited, and believing that being wealthy will make me happy (because perhaps my society has given me this belief) I seek to acquire wealth. Depending on how correct my views are regarding goodness, my actions and my desires to act will be to my benefit or to my detriment.

On this account again, desires and rational assessment cannot be contrasted and it cannot be said that Socrates prioritizes the one over the other, because, Socrates sees desires as rational. They are the result of what we believe. Socratic intellectualism then does not ignore the desiderative element of personality and 'over-intellectualize' character development (becoming virtuous) as Nehamas suggests. Rather, Socratic intellectualism is a position that offers an analysis of desire whereby it is linked to rationality.

The assumptions that Nehamas makes of Socratic intellectualism in his criticism of it are not necessary, and in my view, in light of all the emphasis given to conative elements of philosophical enquiry in Platonic writings, the assumptions oversimplify Socratic intellectualism to the point of misconstruing it.

**IV. Can a man who  
embraces  
ignorance be the  
prototype  
*lover of wisdom?***

**IV.**

‘what result do we get from our statements? Is it not precisely that... wisdom is good and ignorance is bad?’<sup>219</sup>

There is a common view among scholars that the total of what Socrates did through dialogue was to reveal to people that they were in fact ignorant of matters in which they had thought themselves wise: that he showed to them that their opinions were in fact false.

Leigh (2007: 318) for example considers the Socratic method to be entirely negative, offering no positive learning but merely causing the negation of beliefs: ‘designed to leave the hapless interlocutor refuted by a contradiction and acutely aware of her

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<sup>219</sup> *Euthydemus* 281e4, translation by W.R.M. Lamb (1967).

confusion and ignorance'. Several scholars have held views of the Socratic method as essentially destructive, including Hugh Benson<sup>220</sup>; Roland Hall (1967); Richard Robinson (1971)<sup>221</sup> and George Grote (1867, 1906).

Gregory Vlastos supported this negative view in 1956 and 1958 arguing that: the object of elenctic arguments was 'simply to reveal to his interlocutor confusions and muddles within themselves, jarring their adherence to some confident dogma by bringing to their awareness its collision with other, no less confident, presumptions of theirs'. With this in mind he had concluded that Socrates' service to his interlocutors was simply therapeutic (purgative)<sup>222</sup>.

Benson (1990) labels Socrates as a sort of skeptic whose aim in dialogue is to show to the interlocutor that they are wrong in thinking that they know that premise which Socrates elenctically disputes. Benson aligns himself with White (1976) who described Socrates 'skeptical act' as a 'first step towards ridding oneself of a false conceit of knowledge so that genuine knowledge might, somehow, be put in its place'<sup>223</sup>. As to how that knowledge might be acquired, both scholars agree was developed by Plato and not Socrates<sup>224</sup>.

The views of these scholars differ, however, for our purposes, what they have in common is that for them the aim of the Socratic method is to reveal that Socrates' interlocutor is inappropriately holding a belief<sup>225</sup>. Talisse (2002: 51) for example, who

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<sup>220</sup> See Woodruff (2010: URL)

<sup>221</sup> See pages 84-86

<sup>222</sup> Vlastos (1994: 17). Vlastos has since completely rejected this view and had developed a more positive view of the elenchus as a search for truth and able to establish truths. Nevertheless, several scholars still maintain some such position.

<sup>223</sup> White (1976: 3)

<sup>224</sup> Benson also traces this view in Lutoslawski (1897), Robinson (1953), Guthrie (1975), Thomas (1980) and Sharples (1985).

<sup>225</sup> For a popular summary of this view see Morrison (2006: 108)

does not hold that Socrates proves false the premises believed by the other to be true, nevertheless sees the purpose of the method as proving that the interlocutor does not *know* what they are claiming to know. In either case, the belief of the interlocutor is taken from them by Socrates<sup>226</sup>.

Indeed for many Socrates himself has come to be known as the reticent Questioner who steers well away from dogmas, and who primarily acts as a disputant. Nehamas (1992) for example admits to having held some such view. Matthews (2009: 439) speaks about Socrates as: ‘a gadfly questioner.... a relentless questioner’ who does not advocate for his own position but who provokes others; ‘a philosophical provocateur’ who knew nothing worthwhile and thus contributed no positive doctrine to discussions. Similarly, Arcesilaus in c.a 260BC tried to present Socrates as an ‘uncommitted enquirer rather than as a dogmatic moralist’<sup>227</sup>.

This ‘negative’ view of Socrates method of engagement seems natural if we understand Socrates in the *Apology* to be saying that the role given to him by the god was to investigate whether or not people truly had the wisdom which they thought they had. Such a view can be formed from the passage at 22a3, where Socrates says that he investigated the wisdom of his fellows at the behest of the god; and at 23b4 where Socrates tells the jury that he is still carrying out the investigation of his fellows (which he began in order to understand the oracle saying that he was wiser than others), and that this is ‘his service to the god’.

Indeed Benson (1990: 152) expresses this view. In arguing that Socrates was a skeptic whose method was purely negative he says:

‘...in the early dialogues Socrates puts forth no substantive view about how such knowledge is to be acquired. His contribution is limited to seeking out those who profess to care about these things, questioning them, examining them, and testing them, learning from them if they

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<sup>226</sup> Matson and Leite (1991: 146) even argue that Socrates was trying to show his fellows that explicit verbal definitions of moral terms were impossible.

<sup>227</sup> Annas (1992: 310)

know (unfortunately no one he meets does), and persuading them of their ignorance if and when they do not. Socrates had the support of the Delphic oracle (and perhaps even of his deimon) to sustain his faith that this was enough.'

Burnet (1916: 9) assigns such a view generally to the English scholarship of his time saying: 'The god must really mean that all men alike were ignorant, but that Socrates was wiser in this one respect, that he knew he was ignorant, while other men thought they were wise. Having discovered the meaning of the oracle, he now felt it his duty to champion the veracity of the god by devoting the rest of his life to the exposure of other men's ignorance.'

Scholars like Leigh (2007) have described Socrates' aporetic conclusions as 'negative', and as having the aim of revealing one's ignorance. Other scholars, among them Scott (2007:xvii) and Doyle (2012: 43), have tried to explain Socrates' act in more positive terms, and have described it as propaedeutic.

They have made the case that this state of coming to terms with one's ignorance (occasionally named *aporia*) is positive in its negativity because, it makes one teachable. It removes the barrier of false knowledge and the learner then becomes free to desire or seek true knowledge. Nevertheless, even with these more 'positive' accounts of the Socratic act, we see a Socrates who in fact does nothing further than bring his interlocutors to acknowledge their ignorance: whether one ascribes 'positive' motives to this achievement or not.

However, Burnet (1916: 11) suggests that this reading of what we learn regarding Socrates' task from the *Apology* is too limited, and that something more constitutes Socrates' role: the task of urging people to care for their souls.

Indeed, if we look at the texts of the *Apology* we see that the view of Socrates as merely disputative is a very impoverished one. The way that Socrates describes his 'god given role in the city' is far broader and richer than that.

It is interesting to notice that in the *Apology* whist Socrates is speaking about his ‘god-given’ role amongst his fellows he uses a rich selection of verbs and nouns to describe what he does. As scholarship has rightly noticed, he says<sup>228</sup>: ‘I proceeded to investigate’ (ἐπὶ ζήτησιν)<sup>229</sup>; ‘examining myself and others’ (ἐξετάζοντα)<sup>230</sup>; ‘in this investigation or in philosophy’ (ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ ζητήσει διατρίβειν μηδὲ φιλοσοφεῖν)<sup>231</sup>. Together with these however Socrates also said: ‘...stop exhorting you, pointing out’ (οὐ μὴ παύσωμαι φιλοσοφῶν καὶ ὑμῖν παρακελευόμενός τε καὶ ἐνδεικνύμενος ὅτῳ ἄν)<sup>232</sup>; ‘saying in my accustomed way’ (λέγων οἷάπερ εἶωθα, ὅτι)<sup>233</sup>; ‘I shall rebuke him’ (ὀνειδιῶ)<sup>234</sup>; ‘I urge you’ (πείθων ὑμῶν)<sup>235</sup>; and again, ‘I tell you’ (λέγων ὅτι)<sup>236</sup>.

In his own description of what he does, Socrates clearly states that, alongside investigating and examining himself and others, he also: exhorts his fellows to do something; points something out to them; says some things to them; urges them or persuades them, and tells them something.

Regarding what this *something* is, the text is clear. He speaks to them openly about the importance of caring for their souls, urging them to live the examined life. He urges them to not waste their time caring for the insignificant ‘goods’ of society, but

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<sup>228</sup> all of the following translation is taken from Fowler (1966)

<sup>229</sup> 21b8, this can otherwise be translated as ‘I sought to find out’.

<sup>230</sup> 28e5

<sup>231</sup> 29c8

<sup>232</sup> 29d4

<sup>233</sup> 29d5

<sup>234</sup> 29e6

<sup>235</sup> 30ab, could otherwise be translated as ‘persuade’

<sup>236</sup> 30b2



to seek rather the wellbeing of their souls<sup>237</sup>; and he tells them: about the value of virtue, both for the state and for the individual<sup>238</sup>.

These things, Socrates says at 30a4, are what the God commands him to do. Much the same way as he had said at 23b4 and 28e5 that the god has ordained him to examine himself and others. Socrates himself draws no distinction between his two tasks in the *Apology*, and likewise, we do not need to separate the two in what Socrates does.

Roughly speaking then, we can say that Socrates did not just act *against* misconception, but also *actively for* the seeking of virtue.

Both of these tasks are compatible with caring for the souls of others, when one has an understanding of soul as can be traced in the 'early' dialogues. Cleansing the souls of his fellows of ignorance; turning their attention towards the more important task of caring for the health of their soul and away from the distraction of lesser goods; rebuking them so that they might be corrected; and urging them to flee injustice and to partake of justice; would all constitute acts of care, and therefore, it is not surprising that in the *Apology* Socrates tells the jury that he does these.

The fact that Socrates tells us earnestly in the *Apology* that he does something more complex than just reveal ignorance in others is a good enough reason interpret the aporetic dialogues in light of this insight. An analysis of Socratic dialogue that concludes merely that Socrates is bringing others to the acknowledgement of their ignorance takes no account of what Plato has Socrates say of himself.

There is a further reason that makes the view of *Socrates as one who merely reveals ignorance* unconvincing. As we have said already, Socrates was a person who was dedicated to the care of his own soul and of the souls of his fellows. Indeed he went as far as to give his life to this act of care, spending his years in poverty and disrepute because of it; as well as his death. We can say that Socrates was a person who cared

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<sup>237</sup> see 30a5

<sup>238</sup> 30b2

much, and who was devoted to caring. We expect then that he did as much as he could for others.

It is clear that Socrates brought other people to the awareness of their ignorance; that he deemed this as a necessary step; and that he believed that it was good for the interlocutor to break from his conceit as one who knows. However, we can expect that Socrates, who cared so much, did more than just leave people in their ignorance. I contend that he must have made an effort also to bring them forward from the state of ignorance towards knowledge and virtue.

If we remember the simile of the midwife, we are told there that Socrates did more than just take away the phantom child (the lie from one's mind). He is presented to us as someone who could see others through a successful intellectual pregnancy and help them to bear the fruit of philosophy<sup>239</sup>.

Let us remember that in the *Hippias Minor* at 372e Socrates suggests that the soul is such that it is harmed by ignorance, stating: 'you'd do me a much greater good if you give my soul relief from ignorance, than if you gave my body relief from disease'<sup>240</sup>. We also see in this same dialogue<sup>241</sup> that Socrates saw the soul as something that can attain to wisdom<sup>242</sup>.

We might otherwise have said that Socrates saw ignorance as a state less than ideal, but as a necessary evil. We might have concluded that Socrates brought people to ignorance and left them there because he believed that that was the best a person can hope to achieve (the self-awareness of their ignorance). However, Socrates' belief that the soul can attain to wisdom makes this an unreasonable assumption.

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<sup>239</sup> *Theaetetus* 150d

<sup>240</sup> Translation by Nicholas D. Smith, in Cooper (1997)

<sup>241</sup> See point (3) of section II

<sup>242</sup> 'τῆς ψυχῆς εἰς σοφίαν'. The translation used here is by Nicholas D. Smith in Cooper (1997)

As for being any sort of a skeptic, this would require that Socrates saw being in a state of acknowledged ignorance as something profitable in itself. Many skeptics today, as the Hellenistic skeptics, see the acknowledgement of their ignorance as providing intellectual integrity. Knowledge, or belief<sup>243</sup>, is not certain and at least they are aware of this.

Indeed Socrates did not value the state of being ignorant, even when the person was self-aware regarding this. Socrates does say that it is better to have true self-knowledge and to acknowledge that you are lacking in wisdom rather than to have the false belief that you are more knowledgeable than you are; nevertheless he considered the state of being ignorant to be evil and we can expect that he made every effort to bring people further forward than this.

Socrates considered ignorance to be a harmful state and refers to it as an evil. It is problematic to think that, being one who cared for the souls of others, he would leave them in a state of ignorance and do nothing more to bring them out of it<sup>244</sup>.

Consider the disapprobation with which Socrates speaks about ignorance:

In the *Crito* Socrates claimed that ignorance leads people to behave inappropriately. When the ignorance is concerning moral matters it then leads one to behave unvirtuously and thus: ‘harm and corrupt that part of ourselves that is improved by just actions and destroyed by unjust actions’<sup>245 246</sup>.

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<sup>243</sup> Vogt (2014: URL)

<sup>244</sup> This is the view of Socrates that Martha Nussbaum finds in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. See Nussbaum (1981: 74)

<sup>245</sup> *Crito* 47d

<sup>246</sup> We disagree with Leshner (1987:286) on his point that virtue had very little to do with the performance of actions in the Socratic model.

Again in the digression of the *Theaetetus* Socrates tells Theodorus that ignorance in the realm of moral matters has the most detrimental effects imaginable: it becomes a source of vice and evil<sup>247</sup>. He says<sup>248</sup>:

‘...This truth the evildoer does not see; blinded by folly and utter lack of understanding, he fails to perceive that the effect of his unjust practices is to make him grow more and more like the one, and less and less like the other.’

Again at 176c Socrates connects any success in life with proper awareness regarding moral matters. Ignorance regarding them is perceived as detrimental. He says:

‘And it is here that we see whether a man is truly able, or truly a weakling and a nonentity; for it is the realization of this that is genuine wisdom and goodness. While the failure to realize it is manifest folly and wickedness. Everything else that passes for ability and wisdom has a sort of commonness...’

As we discussed earlier, the richness of how Socrates describes his work in the *Apology* makes it difficult for us to think that he would have done *only so little* for his fellows: as to bring them to a sense of ignorance, which itself is not an end point, and do nothing more to assist them in the act of care for the soul when this care requires them to have some understanding of virtue.

We have been saying that Socrates was a humble sort of teacher of virtue. Being virtuous, as we have also said, involves behaving virtuously. It involves having discernment and making appropriate choices. It thus involves some kind of understanding of what is the right and wrong thing to do in the circumstances of our lives. We often hear Socrates telling people that there are better ways to behave: for example that it is best to be just; to suffer wrong rather than to inflict it on others; to be temperate; and self controlled.

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<sup>247</sup> Brown (2006: 279) sees ignorant as a source of vice as integral to Socrates’ thought.

<sup>248</sup> *Theaetetus* 176e

To put it otherwise, if Socrates was an exemplar lover of wisdom (a philosopher) it does not seem appropriate that he was satisfied to stop at an acknowledgement of ignorance (or a disavowal of knowledge); and indeed we see that the good life requires examination and virtue; and that there is evidence to support the view that Socrates regarded ignorance regarding moral matters to be very damaging for the person.

#### IV.I

Regarding his own person, it is sometimes said that Socrates was wise in that he disavowed knowledge: that is, he was a sort of agnostic (or skeptic) regarding moral matters, and that this agnosticism accorded him intellectual dignity.

To borrow Nehamas' words: 'precisely in disavowing ethical knowledge and the ability to supply it to others, [Socrates] succeeded in living as moral (if not necessarily as perfectly human) a life as anyone ever did who belonged in a tradition he himself initiated'<sup>249</sup>.

There exists a popular view that Socrates was a sort of agnostic, or skeptic. This view has been based on Socrates' statement in the *Apology* at 21d where he tells the jury that he is wise in that he knows that he does not know<sup>250</sup>. He says:

'I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.'<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> 1992: 296

<sup>250</sup> See for example Sakezles (2008)

<sup>251</sup> *Apology* 21d

Here we see Socrates placing value on the acknowledgement of one's ignorance: of being aware that one does not know. The fact that Socrates does 'not know' does not appear to be a problem. In fact, the oracle of Delphi – a divine authority – outright says that there is no one wiser than Socrates<sup>252</sup>, although, by his own admittance, he does not know anything<sup>253</sup>. It would seem that by embracing his ignorance – by having self-knowledge regarding it – Socrates achieves something admirable.

The 'skeptical' reading of this text places value on the acceptance by Socrates of his own unknowing. It presents him as embracing (knowingly accepting) that he lacks knowledge of moral matters. Some scholars have thought of Socrates as a proto-skeptic<sup>254</sup> who did not think that knowledge was possible and who therefore, whether proudly or regrettably, accepted his *self-aware lack of knowing* as the best possible condition for man<sup>255</sup>.

Both ancient and modern readers have understood Socrates' statement in the *Apology* to be that he is one who knows nothing<sup>256</sup>, and have assumed the Delphic attribution of *wisdom* to this awareness to mean that Socrates somehow knows that: knowledge is not possible, or, is necessarily limited.

Wertheimer (1993: 346-7) for example argues that Socrates was a skeptic who in the *Apology* was making the point that humans lack knowledge about the content of our concepts, that we understand much less than we think. He shows that human knowing is imperfect.

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<sup>252</sup> 21a

<sup>253</sup> 21b

<sup>254</sup> See Shields (1994) and Woodruff (1986)

<sup>255</sup> Thorsrud (URL)

<sup>256</sup> Vogt (2014: URL)

However, if we accept an interpretation of this text where value is placed on the fact that Socrates disavows knowledge we come up against the problem of how it is then sensible to understand Socrates' character and his behavior.

It would be reasonable to ask the following: if Socrates embraces ignorance and is satisfied with it, then why is he an intellectual? Why does he make the efforts that he is famous for making enquiring into matters? Why does he urge others to examine themselves and to enquire into matters as eagerly as he does? Why is the unexamined life not worth living? Is all this because Socrates wants others to also come to a realization of their own ignorance?

Perhaps we might say that it is the case that Socrates merely wants others to come face to face with their own ignorance. Perhaps he urges people to examine the nature of virtue – to ‘give thought to wisdom or truth’<sup>257</sup> – so that they can realize that they do not know anything about it, since what they think they know does not actually correspond to the reality they are examining.

However, this cannot be a satisfactory explanation of what Socrates aims to do, if only for the reason that we see him engage in enquiry himself. If it were the case that the purpose of enquiry is to become convinced of your own ignorance, then, enquiry would have been redundant for Socrates himself. Since as he tells us in the *Apology* Socrates is already aware of his own ignorance, he would not need the process of dialogue to constantly remind him.

Nevertheless we see Socrates engaging in enquiry also for his own sake, and not merely for the sake of his interlocutors. Consider for example the opening scenes of the *Symposium*<sup>258</sup>. Socrates is on his way to a party. Furthermore, he is taking with

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<sup>257</sup> *Apology* 29e

<sup>258</sup> Please notice that I am here using the frame of the *Symposium* as evidence. Although many scholars would hold that the content of the *Symposium* is not characteristic of Socrates, the frame is generally accepted as Socratic. See for example Nails (2014: URL)

him a man (Aristodemus) who had not been invited to the party, but who was to be justified to appear at the party as Socrates' guest<sup>259</sup>. Despite these social obligations, Socrates becomes so involved in his thought, that he neglects what is expected of him and lags behind:

'But as they were walking, Socrates began to think about something, lost himself in thought, and kept lagging behind. Whenever Aristodemus stopped to wait for him, Socrates would urge him to go ahead. When he arrived at Agathon's he found the gate wide open, and that Aristodemus said, caused him to find himself in a very embarrassing situation'<sup>260</sup>

The embarrassing situation in which Aristodemus found himself was arriving at the party without Socrates on whom he depended on to justify his presence, uninvited, to a house<sup>261</sup>. Socrates however, was so enwrapped in his intellectual activity that he overlooked this.

'So I turned around (Aristodemus said), and Socrates was nowhere to be seen'<sup>262</sup>

A slave was then sent out to find Socrates, as the party was ready to eat, and the host was eager to have his guest Socrates join them. The report from the slaves however came back as such:

'Socrates is here, but he's gone off to the neighbor's porch. He's standing there and won't come in even though I called him several times.'<sup>263</sup>

Such behavior struck the host as strange, and he instructed the slave to go and bring Socrates in. Aristodemus then stopped him, saying that this absorption in thought was

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<sup>259</sup> *Symposium* 174b-c

<sup>260</sup> 174d-e

<sup>261</sup> 174e

<sup>262</sup> 174e12

<sup>263</sup> 175



something characteristic of Socrates. ‘It’s one of his habits: every now and then he just goes off like that and stands motionless, wherever he happens to be’<sup>264</sup>.

If Socrates were a skeptic then we would expect to see him shunning attempts to seek knowledge. However, during such times as the scenes of the *Symposium* described, we are given reason to believe that Socrates is involved in deep thought and is seeking wisdom.

Socrates is not a person who is nonchalant about thought. He does not embrace ignorance in the sense that he does not carry out dedicated thought. Indeed as we can see from this example, Socrates is so dedicated to his thought processes, and prioritizes them to such a degree, that he can become socially awkward.

On this occasion in the *Symposium* we see that Socrates is committed to being systematic in his thought processes, and in completing them. As we can see, he ignored social etiquette and does not join the party, until his thought was complete. It is said:

‘So they went ahead and started eating, but there was still no sign of Socrates. Agathon wanted to send for him many times, but Aristodemus wouldn’t let him. And in fact Socrates came in shortly afterwards.... Agathon... called: “Socrates, come lie down next to me. Who knows, if I touch you, I may catch a bit of the wisdom that came to you under my neighbor’s porch. It’s clear *you’ve* seen the light. If you hadn’t you’d still be standing there.”’<sup>265</sup>

Again the same thing can be seen in the speech that Alcibiades makes about Socrates. He says:

‘Immersed in some problem at dawn, he stood in the same spot considering it; and when he found it a tough one, he would not give it up but stood there trying. The time drew on to midday, and the men began to notice him, and said to one another in wonder: ‘Socrates has

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<sup>264</sup> 175b

<sup>265</sup> 175c3-175d3

been standing there in a study ever since dawn!’.... thus they waited to see if he would go on standing all night too. He stood till dawn came and the sun rose; then walked away...’<sup>266</sup>

Such dedication to thought on the part of Socrates does not sit well with the impression that he took ignorance lightly. Enquiry was something that he valued deeply, both for himself and for others. A further declaration of this his estimation of enquiry is found also in the *Meno*.

Indeed, the statement made in the *Meno* clearly denounces any attitude that embraces ignorance. Socrates says: ‘...I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it.’<sup>267</sup>

Finally, the clearest example that reveals Socrates’ personal dedication to enquiry comes in the *Charmides* as Socrates speaks with Critias. At a point after Critias has put forth the definition of piety that he holds, and Socrates is in a process of deconstructing and examining this view, Critias accuses Socrates: that he is intent on disproving his point and showing him up to be wrong. He says: ‘you are trying to refute me and ignoring the real question at issue’<sup>268</sup>.

Socrates answers this accusation earnestly. He emphasizes that his interest is not in merely disputing the other or showing up his ignorance. He has a sincere interest in the conversation and the topic. He examines the issue at hand genuinely because he considers the recognition of truth to be significant. His attitude is that of a philosopher (a lover of truth).

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<sup>266</sup> *Symposium* 220c-220d

<sup>267</sup> *Meno* 86b7-86c2

<sup>268</sup> *Charmides* 166c5

Furthermore, Socrates explains, that the process to which he is subjecting Critias is homologous to the ‘thorough investigation’ he applies to his own statements. From this we can see clearly Socrates own personal relationship to enquiry, namely, that he subjected himself to thorough enquiry, seeking for himself the same benefit that he hoped for others. He says:

‘Oh come...how could you possibly think that even if I were to refute everything you say, I would be doing it for any other reason than the one I would give for a thorough investigation of my own statements – the fear of unconsciously thinking I know something when I do not. And this is what I claim to be doing now, examining the argument for my own sake primarily, but perhaps also for the sake of my friends. Or don’t you believe it to be for the common good, or for that of most men, that the state of each existing thing should become clear?’<sup>269</sup>

The above example texts show that Socrates would not have been a person who would have been content to be ignorant. This being the case, we might then wonder why he seems to urge others to embrace ignorance, and why at instances, as we have seen earlier, he speaks of the realization and the acknowledgement of the state of being ignorant as if it is a perfectly good state to be in.

Furthermore, interpreters face another problem if they understand Socrates in the *Apology* to be claiming that he is the wisest in that he is aware of his ignorance. Namely, there are several occasions in Plato’s dialogues where Socrates claims that he does know something of significant relevance to the topic being therein discussed.

If we are to understand Socrates in the *Apology* as setting up the attitude of non-commitment on the grounds a self-awareness of ignorance as an ideal, then, occasions where Socrates commits himself to a position with any certainty would be problematic. This is because on such occasions, Socrates would be expressing an epistemic commitment that is less than his proclaimed ideal.

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<sup>269</sup> 166c-d

However, there exist occasions in Plato's dialogues when Socrates undeniably claims to know certain things<sup>270</sup>. On these occasions he does not seem to be proud of any intellectually reticent attitude, but confirms that he has significant beliefs – ones, we might add, which contribute significantly to the debate of the dialogue where they occur.

The point that is being made is that Socrates' statement in the *Apology* - that seems to place the embracement of ignorance as the condition that makes you the wisest - cannot be taken to mean that Socrates actually believed that being in a state of ignorance (and being self-aware regarding this) is ideal.

There appears to be a discord in what Socrates supports. At times, as he told Theaetetus, Socrates says that having the clarity to be mindful of your own ignorance makes you a better person<sup>271</sup>. You are epistemically in a better state than if you had harbored false knowledge. In fact, in the *Apology* Socrates even says that one is better off having no knowledge - and being aware of this - than having some knowledge mixed with the conceited appraisal that one has more knowledge than they do<sup>272</sup>.

At other times however, as we have seen in the *Symposium* and in the *Meno* Socrates behaves in ways uncharacteristic of the ignorant: pursuing enquiry and seeking wisdom.

Rather than taking a skeptical attitude to knowledge, we see in Plato's works a Socrates who does all of the following:

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<sup>270</sup> For example: *Apology* 29b6; *Gorgias* 486e5. This of course is problematic because there are occasions when Socrates seems to say that he knows nothing (as mentioned in the *Apology*). If one reads such passages as meant universally, then a contradiction is found in what Socrates says. Vlastos (1985) has a good discussion and solution for this problem. We do not have the capacity here to take an exact stance to Vlastos' view: but we agree with him that: when understood properly, Socrates can make both claims sincerely.

<sup>271</sup> *Theaetetus* 210c

<sup>272</sup> *Apology* 22e

- (a) actually claims knowledge
- (b) pursues knowledge (enquires into it)
- (c) makes positive claims and has positive commitments

If then Socrates in his famous statement in the *Apology* is not presenting the state of being aware of one's ignorance as the most ideal condition achievable by man, then we need to interpret the relevant passage differently.

### Intellectual humility

'Furthermore it is noteworthy that Socrates' statement of his ignorance occurs almost always only when ethical problems are under consideration.'

- Homer H. Dubs<sup>273</sup> -

Vogt (2012: 3) understood Socratic skepticism to be 'about the stepping back from belief-formation and counteracting one's tendencies to be quick to judge'. This understanding of what has been labeled Socratic skepticism is closer to what I will call Socratic intellectual humility<sup>274</sup>.

Homer H. Dubs spoke of Socrates saying: 'It is the greatest scientists who are most humble. It is the man who has achieved most in the advancement of human knowledge who recognizes most keenly what is lacking and is most conscious of his ignorance. It is a mark of Socrates' greatness that he too recognized his own limitations, and that much as he had accomplished, he saw that he had not attained the goal which he had set up for himself. He too confessed his failure'<sup>275</sup>.

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<sup>273</sup> 1927: 300

<sup>274</sup> Schmid (1983: 345) also characterized what he saw as the aim of the Socratic process as 'philosophic humility'.

<sup>275</sup> Dubs 1927: 300

We will not consider here the full meaning of Dubs' analysis of Socratic ignorance, but we can agree with him that Socrates was characteristically humble, even though he was such an accomplished intellectual.

I propose the idea that Socrates was advocating instead – not the embracing of ignorance – but intellectual humility. In the *Apology* Socrates says the following:

‘...they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, men of Athens, the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: each of them because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had, so that I asked myself...whether I should prefer to be as I am, with neither their wisdom or their ignorance, or to have both. The answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was my advantage to be as I am.’<sup>276</sup>

The emphasis does not lie in Socrates being ignorant. In fact, he does admit that, as far as the craftsmen knew something about their art, they were wiser than he. What Socrates is emphasizing, and objecting to, is the craftsmen's epistemic conceit: which led them to feel confident that they had knowledge which they in fact did not have.

Socrates is claiming here in the *Apology* that one ought to know their limits. They need to be humble and realistic, and have the self-awareness to know when they are lacking some knowledge. They should be humble, and not think that they know about matters which they do not know. It is not any general acceptance of the inevitability of our ignorance that is being encouraged by Socrates but intellectual humility. You are better off, he is saying, being aware of your humble position – that you do not have knowledge regarding important matters – than if you have the false impression that you do know when indeed you do not.

When Socrates disavows knowledge and says that he does not know, perhaps we can understand him like this: he is not saying that he has no opinions or beliefs, or even

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<sup>276</sup> *Apology* 22d-e

knowledge about some things – indeed on occasions he clearly does – but that he is humble about his epistemic state, and he is aware that he does not know ‘enough’. He is aware that he has more to learn, that he should search and enquire; that his understanding is not complete, but incomplete, and that studying matters is needful<sup>277</sup>.

This fact, that Socrates wanted to express the significance of intellectual humility, has been noticed by several scholars; though, they each constructed a different explanation of this. I will now mention two such scholars.

Gregory Vlastos tried to capture this sentiment somewhat in his paper ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge’<sup>278</sup>. Vlastos expressed this intellectual humility on the part of Socrates by contrasting two sorts of knowledge: knowledge in the strong sense and knowledge in the weaker sense of the word. He claimed that Socrates attributed to himself the weaker sense of knowledge, but that admitted to not having knowledge in the stronger, absolute sense. He argued:

‘...he [Socrates] is making a dual use of his words for knowing. When declaring that he knows absolutely nothing he is referring to that very strong sense in which philosophers had used them before and would go on using them long after – where one says one knows only when one is claiming certainty. This would leave him free to admit that he does have a moral knowledge in a radically weaker sense...’

Henry Teloh expressed a similar sentiment in his book *Socratic Education in Plato’s Early Dialogues*. His analysis differs however from Vlastos’. Teloh instead makes his point by contrasting two sorts of wisdom: human wisdom and divine wisdom.

Teloh points out that Socrates challenges other people’s attitude to knowledge. In the *Apology*, contrasting himself to sophists and as a manner of criticism of them,

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<sup>277</sup> See Vogt (2012) chapter one

<sup>278</sup> Vlastos (1985) republished in Vlastos (1994: 49)

Socrates says: that he has ‘human wisdom perhaps. It may be that I really possess this, while those whom I mention just now are wise with a wisdom more than human.’<sup>279</sup>

As we have discussed earlier, the distinction that is being made at this section of the *Apology* by Socrates is between himself and sophistic teachers. The suggestion being made is that in order to do what the sophists claim to do, one would need to have a divine sort of wisdom – a sort of wisdom that is beyond that which Socrates can claim to possess. Socrates is here making the point that he is not a teacher – as his accusers had presented him at the trial – in the manner of sophists, since he does not possess the knowledge that would justify such a confident act.

By saying: that to be that which a sophist claims to be, one would need divine wisdom – wisdom that is greater than that which Socrates possesses – Socrates shows that he himself – having only human wisdom – is more humble regarding his knowledge. He is intellectually humble. He knows that he does not have the knowledge that would have been required to justify him setting himself up as a sophist – a knowledge so complete that it can be called divine.

According to Teloh, Socrates is not here claiming that he has no knowledge. He is claiming that his knowledge is human. He is expressing some humility regarding it.

Consider what ‘human wisdom’ is. Teloh explains it by contrasting it to divine wisdom: ‘divine wisdom is absolute, closed, and unquestionable. One does not question... a dream from a god. Divine knowledge is dogmatic. Human knowledge, by contrast, is revisable; no matter how strong the arguments in favor of some belief, that belief can never be closed to further inquiry. It is always open to further evidence, and more dialectical investigation. Socrates knows in the sense “revisable knowledge” that he does not possess absolute knowledge.’<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> *Apology* 20e

<sup>280</sup> Teloh 1986: 110



Without committing myself to the particular interpretation of Vlastos or Teloh on this matter, I want simply to bring out that both of their understandings of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge capture a sentiment of intellectual humility on the part of Socrates.

Let us turn now back to the *Apology*. When one reads the text looking out for occasions where Socrates expresses his intellectual humility, they find that it is on such grounds that Socrates contrasts himself to his fellow Athenians.

Beginning with a comparison between himself and a politician Socrates says: 'I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.'<sup>281</sup>

Socrates does not say here anything to show that he is proud of his own lack of knowledge – of his ignorance. He is not pointing out that he takes a reticent epistemic stance. Rather, his emphasis lies in this: the politician is criticized for being arrogant and lacking self-awareness. He thinks he knows what he does not know. He is presumptuous and conceited in that. Socrates in contrast is humble. He knows his own limits. He has a realistic self-awareness regarding his knowledge. He knows what he knows and what he does not know. He is aware that he is lacking. Socrates is not epistemically presumptuous.

After the politicians, Socrates presents his experience of the poets and says that he came across the same adverse attitude in them. He says: '...because of their poetry, they thought themselves very wise men in other respects, which they were not. So there again I withdrew, thinking that I had the same advantage over them as I had over the politicians.'<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> *Apology* 21d

<sup>282</sup> 22c

Following this contrast between himself and the poets Socrates continues to make his point by contrasting himself to craftsmen. What he says next is very interesting, because it makes clear the point regarding the value of intellectual humility. Notice the way in which Socrates first attributes wisdom to the craftsmen and then to himself. He says:

‘...they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, men of Athens, the good craftsmen seemed to have the same fault as the poets: each of them, because of his success in his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had, so that I asked myself... whether I should prefer to be as I am, with neither their wisdom nor their ignorance.... The answer I gave myself... was that it was to my advantage to be as I am.’<sup>283</sup>

We agree with Giblin (1953: 205) that Socrates’ statement that he is wise in knowing that he does not know is not what a skeptic may want it to be<sup>284</sup>. It is not being claimed by Socrates that it is his sustaining a state of awareness of his own ignorance that makes him wise. It is not his acceptance that he does not know – his skepticism – that makes him wise<sup>285</sup>.

It is the having of correct knowledge; the self-awareness; the truthful perception of the fact that Socrates has actual reason to be intellectually humble that makes him wise. Socrates is wise, we see in the above passage, because he knows that the most appropriate condition for him – the most truthful – is to be intellectually humble.

One might ask: what is the difference between being intellectually humble and acknowledging your ignorance? I want to highlight two differences. The first is that the

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<sup>283</sup> 22d-e

<sup>284</sup> Morrison (2006: 110)

<sup>285</sup> Furthermore, as Leshner (1987: 281) points out: Socrates never claims complete skepticism; and his comment in the *Apology* that he does not think he knows that which he does not in fact know refers very specifically to knowledge of particular matters.

skeptic is more likely to be *content* with an awareness of their ignorance. They see it as the best epistemic state that can be maintained; whereas the intellectually humble can believe in the possibility of knowledge and seek it wholeheartedly. There is possibly a difference in attitude between the humble and the skeptical.

In addition to this the intellectually humble person can (like Socrates) hold some knowledge as certain whilst being aware that they do not know everything.

Intellectual humility is an attitude appropriate for learning. It is a willingness to acquire knowledge. Where as, a skeptic who thinks that nothing can be decidedly known (and who thus views the realization of this fact as the most ‘correct awareness’) faces a logical problem in accepting anything as known. Skepticism thus is an attitude that makes learning problematic.

#### A positive result for aporia

We have been saying that Socrates was a type of teacher of virtue. Virtue and philosophy were found to be connected to behaving virtuously and thus involving some kind of understanding of what is right and wrong in the circumstances of our lives. We have also said that Socrates often told people that there are better ways to behave. These better ways of behaving can be summarized under the heading of ‘it is always better to be just even if you need to suffer for it’.

His act of teaching then on the part of Socrates involves some form of moralism as well as of confidence of knowledge. We have agreed with those scholars who have acknowledged that these are present in Socrates<sup>286</sup>.

We have also been arguing that the view that confines what Socrates does with his interlocutors to bringing them to an awareness of their ignorance is incorrect, even if this ignorance has the potential of helping the production of knowledge at a later

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<sup>286</sup> See for example Vlastos (1985) and Vlastos (1990)

date<sup>287</sup>. We have in other words rejected the view that what Socrates does equates to seeking to divest himself and others of false beliefs.

Instead we agree with Kidd (1967: 483) that the ‘continual self-criticism’ to which Socrates subjected himself and others in dialogue was productive of knowledge rather than ignorance; and therefore we can agree with Vlastos (1985) and Giblin (1953: 205)<sup>288</sup> that Socrates could reasonably continue to seek knowledge through dialogue, even though his exchanges with others often come to an end in aporia.

A question arises. How can we say that Socrates sought knowledge through dialogue when: his dialogue was regarding ethical matters and therefore any knowledge accomplished would have been knowledge of virtue; and, we have said that he considered knowledge of virtue to be attributable properly only to the gods.

We can say that Socrates sought knowledge, as much of it as he could approach through dialogue, if we understand knowledge of virtue to be as Reeve (1989: 53) characterized it: as being elenchus-resistant. He has defined knowledge as elenchus-proof when: ‘nothing in the universal set of [one’s] beliefs, to which [one’s] commitment is greater than it is to P itself, entails a proposition inconsistent with P.’<sup>289</sup>

In other words, knowledge becomes elenchus-proof when one’s set of beliefs is consistent. To the extent therefore that we can say that Socrates attempted to achieve consistency in his beliefs and to eradicate contradictory beliefs, then we can say that he was seeking clear elenchus-resistant knowledge about the matters discussed.

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<sup>287</sup> Another example of a scholar who held this view is Myles Burnyeat who has claimed that ‘earlier dialogues had valued perplexity merely as a necessary step towards disencumbering someone of the conceit of knowledge’. Burnyeat (1977: 58)

<sup>288</sup> Brown (2006: 279) also expresses this view.

<sup>289</sup> 1989: 41

We need to say though that Socrates was seeking human knowledge through the elenchus and not divine knowledge. The reason is that, if Socrates was confident enough that he can achieve expert knowledge so as to seek it, then the distinction between expert knowledge (the property of the gods) and human knowledge would blur. The distinction between the two sorts of knowledge would not be properly called human and expert (of the gods) but would merely be a distinction between higher and lower knowledge, and Socrates would have no basis for denying that he has higher knowledge.

It must be then that Socrates was seeking human knowledge. This fact draws our attention to another point. Namely: that human knowledge can be completely correct. Human knowledge is not lesser than expert knowledge because it is somehow less precise or correct. Rather, the difference between the two sorts lies in the way that the knower knows: in the epistemic relationship of the knower to the knowledge.

Reeve (1989: 53) captures this when he characterizes human knowledge saying: that one has human wisdom ‘only if he recognizes that he has no explanatory, teachable, luck-independent, elenchus-proof, certain knowledge of virtue but that he does have some knowledge, of the sort (implicitly) possessed by all human beings, which, though elenchus-resistant, is non-explanatory, unteachable, luck-dependent, and uncertain.’

All of these above characteristics, which Reeve has found to be attributable to human knowledge, refer to the *manner* in which the knower has a grasp on the knowledge. We accept that this must be the meaning of the distinction which Socrates makes between the two sorts of knowledge for the simple reason: that Socrates is so very motivated to seek the (human) knowledge of which he is able. If this knowledge had been somehow imprecise and thus to a degree untrue belief about virtue, then Socrates would not have been as interested in it.

Having said then that Socrates sought knowledge, let us return to the matter of why he is seen as bringing his interlocutors to a state of aporia. Many of Socrates' platonic dialogue end in aporia, which is defined as 'a mental state of perplexity and being at a loss about some ethical subject'<sup>290</sup>. However, we find that this aporia was a positive result. Several other scholars, including Scott (2007) and Politis (2006) have given their own reasons for considering aporia to be a positive conclusion to dialogue. We want to add our new reason. Namely, we consider that the achievement of aporia by Socrates' interlocutor was a success (also<sup>291</sup>) in the sense that it was a form of knowledge.

Realizing that you do not have knowledge of matters in which you incorrectly thought that you did have knowledge, brings one to the awareness of the limits of their knowledge. It is therefore a part of self-knowledge. By helping people to realize the limit of their knowledge, Socrates brings them closer to the desired aim of 'knowing thyself'. He has produced in them some self-knowledge.

This is no small achievement. Knowing one's self is an important form of knowledge and in later dialogues Plato's Socrates can be seen at points to give priority to it over other forms of knowledge<sup>292</sup>.

In the *Phaedrus* 229e Socrates tells Phaedrus that he hasn't the leisure to be concerned with other topics since he must first and foremost devote himself to the primary task of knowing himself. Again in the *Philebus* at 48c Socrates tells Protarchus that not knowing one's self is a kind of vice.

In other dialogues we find that the task of the philosopher is to know things as they really are; to know the truth about matter and to avoid entertaining false impressions.

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<sup>290</sup> Politis (2006: 88)

<sup>291</sup> We say 'also' because as will be discussed in chapter V, we agree with the positive result of aporia found by Politis (2006)

<sup>292</sup> Nussbaum (1981: 72) assumes that this is what Socrates is doing in the *Apology*.

Knowing the truth about yourself and your epistemic state falls into this same category. To know the reality about your epistemic limits is more truthful and more appropriate for the philosopher than having a false impression about oneself, thinking they know things that they in fact do not know.

The *Theaetetus* gives us an outline of this view. In its Digression, when Socrates describes the philosopher and compares him to the un-philosophical man, he tells Theodorus: that the philosopher wants to know what things are. He is deeply curious about the world, and applies his mind to seeing things in their essence<sup>293</sup>.

The philosopher lives in a different realm from others. His is on a higher level. He is not concerned with appearances – with the hypocritical nature of things – but with their real essences<sup>294</sup>. Socrates suggests that the love of truth and a curiosity for the essential gives the philosopher a nobility that is not to be had otherwise<sup>295</sup>.

For Socrates intellectual humility and self-knowledge are accompaniments. Intellectual humility includes the realization of our ignorance where appropriate, but does not commit us to this ignorance. It is the self-awareness of our limits and can include several beliefs as well as some degree of knowing.

Again one might ask what the difference is between a skeptic and one who has self-knowledge regarding their imperfect epistemic state. The difference I would draw is this: a skeptic is one who does not see how it is possible for them to transcend the noetic realm of uncertainty. Where as a person who has self-knowledge is someone who can assess correctly their epistemic state. They can be aware of that which they know together with that which they lack. They can know some things and still have a sense of what more they need to learn.

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<sup>293</sup> 174b

<sup>294</sup> 175c

<sup>295</sup> 175e

The intellectually humble learner can identify the gaps in their knowledge and thus can formulate the questions needed to guide an enquiry<sup>296</sup>.

**V. But if he doesn't know  
what virtue is then how does  
he  
teach it?**

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<sup>296</sup> See our discussion of Politis (2006) for more on this point.



## V.

We have been saying that: Socrates' awareness that he does not know 'anything fine and good' and that *what he did not know he did not think he knew either*<sup>297</sup>, was Socrates self-knowledge. It was his achievement that rendered him wise: he knew himself in that he knew his own lack. This reflection of his furthermore expressed his perception of reality and the divine as being something related to, but grander than, what he can know about it.

Some scholars then have asked: how can Socrates teach virtue to anyone when he, at his own admission does not know what it is? Nehamas (1992: 284) says that he is 'quite sure that Socrates was not a teacher'<sup>298</sup> of *aretē*. A main reason he has given for this is that Socrates, by his own admittance did not have enough knowledge about the matter of virtue to act as a teacher to others<sup>299</sup>. 'Having some moral views about the world' says Nehamas, 'is not sufficient to qualify one as a teacher of *aretē*...' <sup>300</sup>.

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<sup>297</sup> *Apology* 21d

<sup>298</sup> Please notice that even though in the paper discussed here Nehamas declares that he has been wrong about some of his previous view and he withdraws them here, he still confirms the view that Socrates was not a teacher. He says: 'the question whether Socrates was or was not a teacher. I still believe that he was not – that he was not, that it, a teacher of *aretē*; I will argue for the claim in what follows.

<sup>299</sup> Nehamas' text is not entirely clear. Another possible reading of the relevant essay is that: Socrates was not a teacher (because he explicitly disclaims it), and that Nehamas offers the lack of expert knowledge as an *explanation* of this. We do not have sufficient evidence to commit to either of these two readings of Nehamas' text. Nevertheless, for our purposes, it is sufficient to say that Nehamas considered that Socrates lacked the necessary sort of knowledge required of a teacher of virtue.

<sup>300</sup> 1992: 286

Nehamas claims that Socrates had himself set a high standard for the sort of knowledge that is required by a person in order to act as a teacher to others, and that Socrates did not meet his own criteria with regards to moral knowledge. He says:

‘What Socrates considers necessary for being able to claim that role is a very specific kind of knowledge, not simply the conviction that some moral positions, which may in fact be very important to him, have so far survived all dialectical attack. To be a teacher you need not only this conviction, which is compatible with the possibility of your ideas turning out to be false upon their next examination, but also a certainty that the views you are claiming to teach are true.... In addition you must be in a position to explain the truth of these ideas: if not to all and sundry, at least to those who, like apprentices to a master craftsman, gradually become habituated into a craft. This is just the sort of knowledge which, all scholars agree, Socrates lacks, and, moreover, believes he lacks.’<sup>301</sup>

My response to Nehamas is two-pronged. I argue first that Socrates does not claim to be a teacher *of virtue*, in the sense of one who actually imparts knowledge of it, so does not need expert knowledge of virtue but rather of philosophical method; and secondly that he is not in any case committed to the view that teaching requires expert knowledge.

We agree with Nehamas that Socrates genuinely denies having the absolute sort of knowledge of virtue which in the *Apology* he labeled as *divine*, and which he contrasted with his own *human* wisdom. However, if we think of Socrates as we have been describing him: as a humbler sort of teacher of virtue who was a *philosopher* rather than a *sophos* then the fact that he did not have super-human knowledge of virtue is not a problem for us.

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<sup>301</sup> 1992: 286-287

Socrates was a philosopher – a lover of wisdom – and he taught others how to live the life of philosophy: to enquire, and to seek to know virtue. If we think of Socrates as a teacher of philosophy, then we can notice that although he does not claim to have expert knowledge of virtue, he does seem confident that he has expertise in the skills of philosophy.

We do see Socrates denying that he has any dogmas about virtue to pass on to others, but we never see him claiming that he cannot train a person in the ways of philosophy. He neither denies that he is an able philosopher himself, nor that he can help others to follow the path of philosophy.

I will now make the case that Socrates speaks of himself as an expert teacher of philosophy; and if we think that philosophy was, in Socrates' mind, the best a human person can do to approach virtue, then we are showing in what way he claimed to have the expertise needed to be a *humble sort of* teacher of virtue. We will have gone some way to respond to Nehamas' claim that Socrates by his own admittance did not have the necessary expertise to be a teacher of virtue.

#### The case that Socrates was an expert teacher of philosophy

Socrates' pedagogy<sup>302</sup> was an apprenticeship in philosophy. That is, it was the practical processes of the love of truth. Let us consider what is postulated about his pedagogical art using the simile of the midwife in the *Theaetetus*. Here Socrates speaks of himself as a midwife attending to the souls of men<sup>303</sup>.

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<sup>302</sup> The term pedagogy is used in the modern sense meaning: the science and art of education. Notice that we are not using the term in its original sense of 'leading children'.

<sup>303</sup> 150b8

In the section 148e7-151d of the *Theaetetus* Socrates likens himself to a midwife, and his pedagogical methods to the art of midwifery. It begins when Socrates uses a simile to describe Theaetetus' intellectual worries, likening them to the pains of labor. He tells him that it is because he is pregnant and not barren that he is preoccupied with the question they are considering. Socrates then presents himself to Theaetetus as a midwife – telling him that if he were to submit himself to his (Socrates') art, then Socrates could carry out the process of appropriately handling Theaetetus' intellectual pregnancy<sup>304</sup>.

Let us look closely at the elements of the art of midwifery to see what expertise is ascribed to the intellectual midwife<sup>305</sup>.

Socrates tells Theaetetus that he (Socrates) is the appropriate person to help him with the philosophical concerns that he has been having. From this very introduction to the section we can see several propositions being made by Socrates regarding his own pedagogic art. Firstly, we learn that he is one who expertly deals with the intellectual condition of others. He has the art of dealing with the content of people's intellect: that is, their thoughts and concepts.

To start with, he is able to diagnose whether Theaetetus is barren or pregnant, where Theaetetus himself admits that he 'does not know about that' regarding his own state<sup>306</sup>. We can see from this that Socrates claims to have the expert ability to diagnose the intellectual state of a person better than that person can diagnose themselves.

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<sup>304</sup> See 149a

<sup>305</sup> The main points I find as characteristic of the intellectual midwife agree with the ones found by MacDowell (1973: 116) and Chappell (2004: 42).

<sup>306</sup> 148e8

Furthermore, as has been said already, Socrates tells Theaetetus that he is the son of Phaenarete<sup>307</sup> (Φαινάρητης). His mother's name literally means: 'she who brings virtue to light'<sup>308</sup>.

The name introduces the notion of bringing forth that which is good from amongst the intellectual activity of others, and this notion continues throughout the allegorical description of the intellectual midwife. Describing himself as a midwife (like his mother was) Socrates' claim that he has the skill of discerning that intellectual content in others which is 'good and worthwhile' - and worth bearing - and that he has the method that assists them to bring this good intellectual content forth.

#### A sort of Socratic unknowing

Next Socrates tells Theaetetus that although he has this practical ability of dealing with the intellectual children of others, he himself does not bear children of his own. His activity – or his pedagogical art – does not involve him developing his own theories. His art is not characterized by his developing his own ideas, but it is instead a purely facilitative activity: where he, using skill and expert knowledge in the art of bringing forth the children of the intellect, directs others in the process of bringing forth their *own* thoughts<sup>309</sup>.

Of his barrenness Socrates says:

'The common reproach against me is that I am always asking questions of other people but never express my own views about anything, because there is no wisdom in me; and that is true enough.... God compels me to attend the travails of others, but has forbidden me to procreate. So that I am not in any sense a wise man; I cannot claim as the child of my own

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<sup>307</sup> 149a2

<sup>308</sup> See note by M. J. Levett, in Cooper (1997)

<sup>309</sup> 149c and 150c5

soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom. But with those who associate with me it is different.<sup>310</sup>

Besides the point that Socrates' pedagogical art is facilitative and practical in kind, we are also here told that Socrates does not educate his interlocutors by teaching them some discovery that he has made. He does not know something that he passes on to others through his teaching, but rather, having no content of his own to pass on, he directs his interlocutors to bring forth that which is already within them.

Notice an important distinction. At this point Socrates does not say that he knows nothing regarding the various subject matters that he discusses with others<sup>311</sup>. What he does say is that he does not have any discovery of his own regarding them. For example, Anaxagoras, Protagoras and Pythagoras would have been unlike Socrates in this sense. They, unlike Socrates had developed their own theories about reality. They then taught these theories of theirs – their pioneering worldviews – to their disciples. They initiated their disciples in a new way of thinking about a matter, which they had developed themselves.

Socrates denies that he has any such ideas of his own to give to anyone. Instead, he tells Theaetetus, that his own art is that of enabling others to think properly and to complete their thought processes in a correct manner. This is why Socrates says the following: that those who undergo the application of his art on them make progress, 'not due to anything they have learned from me; it is that they discover within themselves a multitude of beautiful things which they bring forth into the light. But it is I, with God's help, who deliver them of this offspring.'<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> 150c5-150d2

<sup>311</sup> or like Lesher (1987: 280) argued: we should not think that Socrates denied having any knowledge at all.

<sup>312</sup> 150d

However, notice that there is no reason here to take this negative statement that Socrates makes about himself as a disavowal of all – or for that matter of *any* – knowledge. Socrates does not give us any reason to think that he is ignorant regarding the matters which he discusses with his interlocutors.

It would be perfectly compatible with the statement that Socrates makes here of himself, if he were very well read, and if he had thoroughly and systematically thought about the subject matter, and even if he had strong opinions of his own regarding these matters.

He might even be well acquainted with ‘knowledge’ on the matter which is not his own brainchild – in the same way that a mathematician might know geometry without having made any of his own discoveries. Socrates does not deny this. The only thing that he does deny is that he ‘is forbidden to procreate’ and that he does not have any intellectual children of his own. Let us notice that this is not the same thing as not having informed opinions about the concepts and the theories that already exist roundabout you.

We might for example even think that Socrates has a unique talent of thinking clearly and systematically about a matter at hand. Given this, he might be more able than others to make sense of matters and to thus have a more correct view of how things are. He might have the skill of ‘thinking about matters in a better way’ and so he might be in a good position to assess whether an idea or an ideology is true or false. He might even be able to point out to others what is correct or incorrect about an idea. None of this is incompatible with the negative statement that Socrates makes about himself here. He may, as I personally think he did, have these abilities, and still, be ‘barren’ and not know anything of his own that he can teach to others.

Consider for example the relationship between a professor of philosophy and a first year undergraduate student. The professor might not claim that they know the answers to the epistemological problems that they present to their students. They might not be

able to say what knowledge is exactly. As we can see, most professional epistemologists are aware that they do not have all the answers, even though they might have opinions.

Nevertheless, the professor might appear to an undergraduate student as if they do know. This is because the professor has experience in thinking about these matters. They can easily identify the shortcomings of an answer proposed by the undergraduate, who just came up with this idea during the lecture, as they were being stimulated by the professor's presentation. The professor could point out in what ways the undergraduate is not thinking about the matter correctly, and they can even give direction to the student as to how to proceed.

These abilities to know the shortcomings of the undergraduate's thoughts are the result of experience. The professor has persisted in thinking about these same matters for many years. They might then legitimately say that they do not themselves have the answers to today's epistemological puzzles, however, they are nevertheless more than qualified to lead an undergraduate in enquiring about these.

There is nothing in the text to suggest to us that Socrates is denying having any knowledge. Here he is merely denying that he has developed any novel ideas of his own to impart to others. Nevertheless, scholars have tended to read into this passage a disavowal of knowledge regarding the matters which Socrates discussed with his interlocutors. They have read this as a claim of ignorance.

Dominic Scott, for example, makes this assumption in his book *Plato's Meno*. He says that 'when Socrates claims the role of midwife in the *Theaetetus*...he is clear that he has no knowledge himself'. We need to ask, he goes on, whether someone can make someone else knowledgeable, without having knowledge themselves. And he wonders, how could the maieutic teacher know which are the correct questions to ask their interlocutor if they are themselves ignorant<sup>313</sup>.

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<sup>313</sup> 2006: 144



However, there is nothing in the text to justify any such assumption as the one made here by Scott. It might even be argued that Scott's reading is contrary to the text, where Socrates has emphasized that he has the expert ability of guiding others in the direction of correct and true thought.

### Socratic skill

Having noticed this point, let us return to see what more Socrates tells Theaetetus regarding his pedagogical art of midwifery. He continues telling Theaetetus that a midwife can tell better than anyone else whether a woman is pregnant or not<sup>314</sup>. By likening himself to the midwife here, Socrates is claiming for himself the ability of diagnosing the intellectual state of others, as we saw him do to Theaetetus at the start of this section.

Socrates then says of midwives: that it is they 'who have the power to bring on the pains, and also, if they think fit, to relieve them.... In difficult cases, too, they can bring about a birth; or, if they consider it advisable, they can promote a miscarriage.'<sup>315</sup>

This text describes various elements of the Socratic pedagogical art. Perhaps it is here that it is most clear that Socrates is claiming to have an expert knowledge in managing the thought processes of others. At this point we can see clearly that he considers himself to have the skills for dealing with the intellectual content and the intellectual processes of his interlocutors, by which he can achieve accomplishments that they could not have achieved on their own.

Socrates tells Theaetetus as much plainly at 150e:

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<sup>314</sup> 149c

<sup>315</sup> 149d

‘But it is I, with God’s help that deliver them of their offspring. And a proof of this may be seen in the many cases where people who did not realize this fact took all the credit to themselves and thought that I was no good. They have then proceeded to leave me sooner than they should, either of their own accord or through the influence of others. And after they have gone away from me they have resorted to harmful company, with the result that what remained within them has miscarried; while they have neglected the children I helped them to bring forth, and lost them, because they set more value upon lies and phantoms than upon the truth; finally they have been set down for ignorant fools, both by themselves and by everybody else.... Sometimes they come back, wanting my company again.... And then they begin again to make progress.’

Furthermore, by likening himself to midwives at this point Socrates tells Theaetetus that he has a skill – a method – of bringing to the surface important notions that are contained within a person’s intellect. Some of these notions, if they are good ones, Socrates can bring to the forefront and help the person to acknowledge them for what they are. In other words, Socrates here claims that there might be good content buried within a general confusion in a person’s mind, and that he can put order to this conceptual mess, and bring out those ideas which are important, and which perhaps the thinker himself had overlooked.

As we can see from the quote at 150e, a person may have the wrong impression about the notions which are contained within them. One may have correct notions within them but might be unable on their own to recognize this. Socrates here claims that he is able to identify these good notions and bring them to the forefront. Thus, according to this statement, Socrates believes that a person can know something – have the notion contained within themselves – and not know that they know this. They might even entertain other, incorrect views, despite having such true correct notions within themselves.

Socrates claims to have the following skill: of identifying what is true within a persons thought and bringing it to light. He can recognize whether a belief is true or false, even when the believer himself does not know how to correctly evaluate their

laden or explicit belief<sup>316</sup>. Socrates therefore has the ability, through engaging the other in dialogue, to show them what it is to think truthfully.

A related claim is made in the *Gorgias*<sup>317</sup> where Socrates is discussing with Polus. Here Socrates shows a belief that he can bring out universal ideas from within people, even if the person is not aware that they have these ideas in them.

The case discussed in the *Theaetetus* differs from what is claimed in the *Gorgias* in that: in the first Socrates is bringing out new ideas from within people, while in the second he is bringing out things which everyone believes. Nevertheless, the skilled required on the part of Socrates is arguably the same for both cases. In both cases he is uncovering and bringing forth truthful ideas from within the interlocutor.

Polus had made a claim that is in direct opposition to the alternative claim made by Socrates. Socrates has claimed that a person who is punished for his injustice is better off than a person who remains unpunished for an unjust act. Polus disagreed with Plato and has put forth the opposite view, that a person who has managed to procure benefits for himself though unjust actions, and who has remained unpunished for his injustice, is far happier than a person who is punished.

After a short exchange, Polus shows that he has no intention of accepting what Socrates is saying, and that he does not agree with it at all. In fact, he makes it clear that he considers Socrates' claims to be ridiculous and outrageous. He says: 'Don't you think you have been refuted already, Socrates, when your saying things the likes of which no human being would maintain? Just ask anyone of these people.'<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> David Sedley (2004: 30) refers to Socrates' attitude to learning in the *Theaetetus* saying: '...Socrates the midwife's diagnosis of learning as the realization of latent understanding...'

<sup>317</sup> 473e

<sup>318</sup> 473e

To this Socrates responds unshaken by Polus' confidence and his certainty in his own disagreement with Socrates. Socrates is himself confident, that Polus actually agrees with him, even though he does not know it yet. Even though Polus is convinced otherwise. He answers him saying: 'For I do believe that you and I and everybody else consider doing what's unjust worse than suffering it, and not paying what is due worse than paying it.'<sup>319</sup>

Polus again affirms his certainty that he does not agree with Socrates, saying: 'And I do believe that I don't, and that no other person does either. So you'd take suffering what's unjust over doing it would you?'

Socrates then responds, demonstrating once again this deep-rooted belief of his: that he knows that within the content of Polus' beliefs he will be able to extract this idea for which he is arguing, despite the fact that Polus is clearly unaware that he believes any such thing. In fact, Socrates holds this certainty in the face of Polus rather brutally denying that he agrees in the least bit with the idea proposed by Socrates. Socrates' response is this: 'Yes, and so would you and everyone else.'<sup>320</sup>

Polus denies this once again saying: 'Far from it! I wouldn't, you wouldn't, and nobody else would either.'

At this point we can see that Socrates has full faith in his method of questioning in bringing forth the true beliefs from within his interlocutors. This is why he goes on to challenge Polus. In disregard of Polus' confidence that he will never be brought to be aligned with Socrates' expounded beliefs, Socrates invites him to undergo Socratic questioning. Socrates' answer was in effect to say 'well we shall see about that!'. Having made the assertion that Polus will be brought to agree with Socrates' claims, Socrates then challenges Polus' denial saying: 'won't you answer then?'

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<sup>319</sup> 474b

<sup>320</sup> 474b

Let us now return to the simile of the midwife in the *Theaetetus* and make a final point. At 149d Socrates tells Theaetetus that he can find, and dig out any correct notions that a person might have within them. He then makes the further claim that if it is appropriate he can promote a miscarriage. By this Socrates means that if he finds it to be the case that a person is entertaining not a true opinion but a piece of nonsense, then he has the expert ability of showing up this notion for what it is. He can destroy a false notion that the beholder had thought was a true notion.

Socrates believes that this is a very important part of his art: the act of ridding people of false ideas and incorrect conceptions. He calls it the noblest function that a midwife could have had ‘to distinguish the true from the false offspring’<sup>321</sup>. He describes it as a sort of ‘surgical’ act and considers it most beneficial for his interlocutors<sup>322</sup>.

Finally, the digression of the *Theaetetus* has occasion when Socrates expresses his belief that he has the expert skill to lead people on the path of philosophy, towards truth and virtue. At 177b Socrates makes explicit a further idea. He tells Theodorus that through dialogue he has the ability to bring an un-philosophical man, if that man cooperates, to the realization that he is lacking in the wisdom that he believes himself to have. He can bring him to the self-awareness that he is not wise regarding matters of virtue.

We have been showing that Socrates was an expert in the method of philosophy, that he considered himself one, and that he guided others in the processes of philosophy. Nehamas’ claim that Socrates could not have been a teacher of virtue because he lacked the relevant expert knowledge can be solved, if we think of Socrates instead as a teacher of philosophy: since Socrates would have considered himself to have the relevant ‘expert knowledge’ to be one who guides others in the pursuit of truth. He was, we can say, an expert of enquiry.

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<sup>321</sup> 150b

<sup>322</sup> 151c

Discussing the simile of midwifery as found in the *Theaetetus*, and the *Gorgias* we have shown that: Socrates knew the ‘mechanics of enquiry’ and he was able to make ‘correct choices’ regarding it. By Reeves’ definition Socrates was an expert of enquiry; and by Nehamas’ own criteria, this qualifies Socrates for teaching it.

In conclusion then, let us say the following: that Socrates was a teacher ‘who knew’. He knew how to do philosophy. At *Gorgias* 487a of the same dialogue Socrates says: ‘I realize that a person who is going to put a soul to an adequate test to see whether it lives rightly or not must have three qualities...: knowledge, good will, and frankness.’

These three Socrates must have, for he never denies, nor is it an easy task for anyone else to deny, that Socrates is one who puts ‘souls to the test’. He does not deny it in the *Laches* when Nicias describes him as doing just that<sup>323</sup>. Indeed, Socrates tells us that he does this in the *Apology*.

At 38a he says: ‘...and the other things about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others...’

Or as he says at 29e: ‘And if any of you argues the point, and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once, nor shall I go away, but I shall question and examine and cross-examine him, and if I find that he does not possess virtue, but says he does, I shall rebuke him for scorning the things that are of most importance and caring more for what is of less worth.’

Let us conclude then by saying that Socrates does consider himself to have the ‘expert knowledge’ to show people in what manner they ought to do philosophy. He is the expert midwife that can bring forth intellectual children. He knows how to enquire. He tells us this clearly in the *Theaetetus*, he tells us it in the *Apology*. Finally, he tells it to Charmnides. He tells him that he knows a charm that will heal his soul.

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<sup>323</sup> 187e

He says: ‘the treatment of the soul... my wonderful friend, is by means of certain charms, and these charms are words of the right sort: by the use of such words is temperance engendered in our souls, and as soon as it is engendered and present we may easily secure health to the head and to the rest of the body also.’

This is the cure that Socrates knows. He knows how to ‘tune words’ to praise the gods, and he knows how to bring the healing of philosophy to others as well, if only they be willing to follow him.

## **V.I**

Nevertheless, we have also said that being a teacher of philosophy was Socrates’ humbler version of being a teacher of virtue. Therefore, if Nehamas (1992: 286)<sup>324</sup> is correct in claiming that Socrates had set up a high standard of knowledge regarding the subject matter of virtue as a criterion for anyone who would act as a teacher of virtue, then a problem remains.

To solve this problem we need to make the important distinction between expertise in the sense of mastery of a method and in the sense of mastery of some corpus of positive knowledge<sup>325</sup>.

A teacher who uses the method of teaching of which Socrates approves in the *Meno* – that of using questions to guide the learner through a process of recollection rather than giving them pre-formulated bits of knowledge – can engage pedagogically with a learner without already themselves ‘knowing’ everything in an ‘expert’ way.

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<sup>324</sup> Nussbaum (1981: 47) can be understood as sharing Nehamas’ view

<sup>325</sup> This distinction was suggested by Professor Broadie in a private report of corrections for this thesis, 2013.

If a teacher is skilled in the ability of asking the right questions that will bring out knowledge from the interlocutor; and if the teacher has the ability to navigate with discernment through the responses given by the interlocutor; and is thus able to identify problematic and false answers and distinguish them from correct true answers; then, the teacher can play a role in a pedagogical process without possessing expert knowledge of the subject matter. The teacher need only be an experienced and an able ‘questioner’(or, enquirer).

This is indeed what Socrates says of himself in the *Theaetetus* when he tells us that he himself is barren. He claims that he has no new knowledge of his own to pass on to others, but that he can nevertheless help them to ‘give birth’ to what is already inside them – with what they are pregnant. He says: ‘God compels me to attend the travail of others, but has forbidden me to procreate. So I am not in any sense a wise man; I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom.’<sup>326</sup>

Socrates also explains to Theaetetus that people who engage with him in dialogue are seen to make progress: ‘...yet it is clear that it is not due to anything they have learnt from me; it is that they discover within themselves a multitude of beautiful things, which they bring forth into the light.’<sup>327</sup>

Furthermore, in line with the point I have made above, Socrates tells Theaetetus that one of his most important abilities is to distinguish between a truth and a lie, to bring forth the one and to discard the other. When one is not able to properly evaluate and distinguish between ‘lies and phantoms’ and the ‘truth’, then, Socrates tells Theaetetus, they become ignorant fools<sup>328</sup>.

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<sup>326</sup> 150c-d

<sup>327</sup> 150d

<sup>328</sup> 150e



I contend that nowhere in Socrates' description of the teacher, neither in the *Meno* nor in the *Theaetetus* can we find the idea that the teacher needs to have 'expert knowledge' which they can then pass on to a learner. Rather what we find is a teacher who is able to direct others in the processes of philosophy.

Nehamas has claimed that 'Socrates considers necessary for being able to claim that role' of teacher of virtue 'a very specific kind of knowledge'<sup>329</sup>: expert knowledge. lacking this knowledge, and being aware that he lacks it, Socrates, Nehamas tells us, 'seems to lack just the sort of confidence that would allow him to present himself as a teacher...'<sup>330</sup>. Nehamas goes on to say that: far from having 'expert knowledge' Socrates is 'light and tentative' in his beliefs; and that he [Socrates] 'does not believe that such tentativeness is compatible with teaching'.

This knowledge which Socrates considered necessary for teaching but denied having, Nehamas tells us, is the 'expert' knowledge claimed (according to Socrates) by the Sophist with whom he contrasts himself in the *Apology*. 'More accurately put, [Socrates] says he lacks the knowledge he believes these people must lay claim to if they can be teachers of anything'<sup>331</sup>.

Nehamas borrows his notion of 'expert knowledge from Reeve (1989) and insists that 'Socrates is convinced... that if some people can teach virtue... then they must possess what he would consider technical knowledge and he interprets their claim in this manner'<sup>332</sup>.

Reeve (1989: 53) also presents a thesis that supports the view of Nehamas. He argues that Socrates had human knowledge of virtue, and that this virtue is (according to what Socrates says of it in Plato's texts) 'unteachable'.

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<sup>329</sup> Nehamas (1992: 286)

<sup>330</sup> *ibid*: 288

<sup>331</sup> *ibid*: 293

<sup>332</sup> *ibid*: 294

The connection between Nehamas' claim and Reeve's description of the notion is thus twofold: (a) Nehamas uses the distinction made by Reeve; and (b) by labeling the sort of knowledge that Socrates would have had once we distinguish it from the expert knowledge he speaks of in relation to the sophists as 'unteachable', his distinction lends itself to the interpretation that Socrates' knowledge did not meet the criteria that would have allowed him to be a teacher. We believe that this is how Nehamas might have felt confirmed in his conclusions by Reeve's work<sup>333</sup>.

I will argue that Socrates makes no such claim. He did not consider that in order to act as a teacher of anyone he would require the sort of knowledge he speaks about in relation to the sophists.

What Socrates does say is that sophists presented themselves as teachers of virtue who had this expert knowledge, and that doing so was inappropriate on their part. He attacked sophists for claiming to teach virtue in the sense of implying that they were experts in the science of virtue. However, Socrates could nevertheless have seen himself in some sense a teacher of the philosophical approach to virtue without claiming expertise in some supposed virtue-science. Socrates does not say, I contend, that expert knowledge is necessarily needed by anyone who leads others on the life of virtue.

### Expert knowledge

First, let us give a brief description of the 'expert knowledge' which some scholars believe, and we deny, Socrates considered necessary.

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<sup>333</sup> Admittedly this is an assumption on our part and we cannot offer better proof for it.

Nehamas tells us that what Socrates would have considered necessary for claiming the role of teacher of *aretē* is a ‘very specific kind of knowledge, not simply the conviction that some moral positions...have so far survived all dialectical attacks. To be a teacher, you need not only this conviction, which is compatible with the possibility of your ideas turning out to be false upon their next examination, but also a certainty that the views you are claiming to teach are true.’<sup>334</sup> The high criterion of epistemic certainty is established.

Nehamas calls the knowledge required of a teacher: ‘technical or expert knowledge’ of the subject matter; characterized by the ability to ‘explain that which one knows’<sup>335</sup>. ‘Socrates is convinced’, Nehamas tells us, ‘that if some people can teach virtue (or any other subject), then they must possess what he would consider technical knowledge’<sup>336</sup>.

Nehamas borrows this concept of technical knowledge from C. D. C. Reeve (1989). According to Reeve, Socrates’ notion of expert knowledge is such:

What Socrates thinks of as expert knowledge is a reapplication of the notion of ‘craft-knowledge’ as it existed in Athens at his time. It has the following elements: it is *explanatory*, *teachable*, *luck-independent*, *elenchus-proof*, and *infallible certain knowledge*.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> 1992: 286-7

<sup>335</sup> 1992: 287

<sup>336</sup> 1992: 294

<sup>337</sup> Reeve (1989: 45)

This knowledge is teachable<sup>338</sup>. Furthermore it is explanatory in the sense that the expert can ‘adequately explain what it is their products...say or mean’<sup>339</sup>. A poet for example, says Reeve, does not compose with expertise but rather through divine inspiration, since Socrates found poets lacking the ability to answer questions regarding the content of their poems<sup>340</sup>.

Reeve also says that expert knowledge as used by Socrates is ‘elenchus-proof’, since: ‘Socrates presupposes throughout the *Apology* that those who cannot successfully defend themselves against the elenchus do not have expert knowledge of virtue’.

These three features are found by Reeve within the Socratic dialogues. The final two elements – that expert knowledge is infallible certain knowledge and luck-independent are deduced by him in the following manner: he first establishes a link between the notion of ‘expert knowledge’ as used by Socrates and the notion of ‘craft knowledge’ as it existed at the time. In virtue of this link, Reeve then goes on to extrapolate these two as elements of craft knowledge, which one can assume to also be elements of expert knowledge.

We can understand that by expert knowledge being ‘luck-independent’ Reeve means the following: that one who is an expert on a matter has acquired an understanding of the matter and can make informed choices regarding it. Therefore, the moves that an expert makes in treating her subject are not successful because of luck. Rather, they are successful because the expert, knowing the *mechanics* of their subject matter, has made the correct choice. Reeve expresses this position by quoting the following:

‘They [the sick] did not want to look on barefaced luck, so they entrusted themselves to craft instead’

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<sup>338</sup> 1989: 37

<sup>339</sup> Dreyfus (1988: 106) claims that according to Socrates an expert can explain what they know precisely because *techné* is the understanding of rules and principles that govern processes.

<sup>340</sup> 1989: 38

and,

‘Experience made craft, as Polus says, inexperience luck.’<sup>341</sup>

As for saying that expert knowledge is ‘infallible’ and ‘absolutely certain knowledge’ we can understand Reeve to mean the following: it is the knowledge we have of P when ‘the evidence we have for P does entail P, does preclude the possibility that P is false.’<sup>342</sup>

#### Socrates as a teacher who does not require expert knowledge

Even if we accept Reeves analysis that (a) ‘expert’ or ‘technical’ knowledge enables its possessor to teach that knowledge to others, we need not think that (b) expert knowing is necessary for one to be a teacher.

(b) does not follow from (a). It might for example be the case that my pen enables me to write a letter, but that pen is not necessary for my writing the letter. In lack of a pen, I could write using a pencil, or even a laptop.

We will argue that Plato’s text does not offer sufficient reason for thinking that Socrates considered it necessary. This interpretation is controversial because through a balanced and fair reading of the text a different reading is more plausible.

By way of evidence let us consider some of the key texts, as indicated by Reeve (1989: 37), where Socrates speaks about expert knowledge in association with the sophists. These are texts where Socrates is criticizing sophists for failing to teach what they promise.

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<sup>341</sup> 1989: 39

<sup>342</sup> 1989: 43

The texts discussed here are the obvious point where Nehamas might find Socrates saying that expert knowledge (of the sort that the sophists would need to have) is necessary for being a teacher, since these are the passages where the issue of the knowledge of sophists is discussed.

However, I contend that the particular passages can be interpreted in another way. It is my considered opinion that an alternative reading is more consistent with what is found in the text. It will be argued that these texts lend themselves to a different reading: Socrates had identified that sophists claim to be able to pass on their knowledge of virtue to others through teaching. In these texts he challenged them regarding this asking something of the sort: ‘but do you even know what virtue is actually?’. In this way Socrates deconstructed the sophistic claim showing it to be deficient in that: the sophists did not have *the relevant knowledge* to do *that which they claimed to do*.

Such a sort of disputation would not be unfamiliar to Socrates. However, there is no logical necessity for us to proceed from this and assume that Socrates would have been convinced of the sophists’ claim, had he found them to have the ‘expert knowledge’ that they claimed to have. There is no necessity to deduce from this that Socrates held ‘expert knowledge of virtue’ as an element (necessary or not) of the teaching of virtue.

### Gorgias 519c3-d1

‘For Sophists...do this absurd thing: while they claim to be teachers of excellence<sup>343</sup>, they frequently accuse their students of doing them wrong, depriving them of their fees and withholding other forms of thanks from them, even though the students have been well served by them. Yet what could be more illogical business than this statement, that people who’ve become good and just, whose injustice has been removed by their teacher and who have come to possess justice, should wrong him – something they can’t do?’<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> ‘φάσκοντες γὰρ ἀρετῆς διδάσκαλοι εἶναι’

<sup>344</sup> trans. by Zeyl, D., J., in Cooper (1997)

The claim that is made here by Socrates is that: a person who is teaching virtue ought to be expected to have an effect on his students whereby he makes them more virtuous. This is an almost tautological statement that can be restated as such: if one is successfully teaching virtue to pupils, then, it ought to be the case that their pupils are becoming more virtuous as a result of the teaching.

Notice that nothing is said of the qualifications and the abilities that such a teacher would need in order to accomplish their aim. It does not necessarily follow, by any stretch of the imagination: that the teacher can only make the learner virtuous if they possess the 'expert knowledge' of what virtue is, which they are then able to pass on to their students because they themselves possess it.

Socrates, in this passage, gives us no reason to assume that the having of expert knowledge by the teacher is decisive in whether the teaching process is successful. In fact, if we call to mind the notion of the 'Socratic teacher' who uses the *Meno* method of teaching by assisting recollection, or who uses the maieutic method described in the *Theaetetus*, then, it becomes apparent that it would have been out of character were it the case that Socrates was here making any such suggestion.

This passage does not indicate that the sophists fail in their job precisely because they do not have the expert knowledge that they would need to have. It merely says that the sophists cannot possibly present themselves as successful teachers of virtue and at the same time complain about non-virtuous behavior on the part of their students, since, the failure of their students reflects badly upon them and their methods.

In other words, Socrates is here saying that 'we can judge a tree by the fruit that it bears'. He is pointing out the following point: that the sophists are not successful in doing what they claim to be doing.

With this argument Socrates wished to show that the sophists are not capable of delivering that which they promise. This is why he uses the verb φάσκοντες<sup>345</sup> in the sentence ‘φάσκοντες γὰρ ἀρετῆς διδάσκαλοι εἶναι’: because his intended meaning was that the Sophists are not that which they claim to be.

My proposed reading of the text is suggested by the context from which it is taken. At this point Socrates is speaking with Callicles saying that politicians are harming citizens because they attend to the appetites of people, rather than to their actual wellbeing: like a baker who feeds you sweet cakes but does not care at all about the health of your body<sup>346</sup>.

He then turns to say that, since by their actions politicians are creating a city that is *not* good and just, then, those same politicians have no right to complain if this same city they have made sick in turn treats them unjustly. Socrates is here saying that politicians have caused the problem – the sick state – and that therefore, they have only themselves to blame if this state mistreats them. Such a state, as they have created, Socrates suggests, can only ever be expected to mistreat people<sup>347</sup>.

Socrates calls the complaint of the politicians that they were unfairly treated ‘a foolish business’<sup>348</sup> and ‘completely false’<sup>349</sup>. He then adds: ‘It looks like those who profess to be politicians are just like those who profess to be sophists’<sup>350</sup>. It is so that our text is introduced.

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<sup>345</sup> φάσκοντες is translated by Middle Liddell as ‘to say, affirm, assert, often with the notion of alleging or pretending...’

<sup>346</sup> see 518e

<sup>347</sup> see 519c

<sup>348</sup> 519b4

<sup>349</sup> 519c2

<sup>350</sup> 519c4



My proposed reading of the text is furthermore supported when we consider the way in which Socrates himself summarises his argument at 519e saying: ‘...don’t you think it’s illogical that someone who says he’s made someone else good should find fault with that person, charging that he, whom he himself made to become and to be good, is after all wicked?’

Consider the second text:

*Hippias Major 283c2*

‘Hippias...isn’t the wisdom you have the sort that makes those who study and learn it stronger in virtue?’<sup>351</sup>

Again, in this passage Socrates is questioning whether the sophist Hippias accomplishes that which he claims. Socrates is making the following point: (a) you Hippias claim that you have a sort of knowledge that you can pass on to others and thereby make them more virtuous; (b) but I have good reason to doubt that it is as you say.

Socrates’ given reason for doubting Hippias’ claim is that if it were so, then any reasonable person who wants to be as virtuous as possible would hold Hippias in great esteem for this talent of his. They would seek out his services and show their appreciation for him by paying him generously. Socrates then points out that this is not what we see happening. Is it not the case, he asks Hippias, that you frequent Sparta? And is it not also the case, he further asks, that Spartans do not pay you for your services?<sup>352</sup>

In this passage Socrates is casting doubt on Hippias’ claim that he is able to teach virtue. This passage is very compatible with the statements made by Socrates in the

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<sup>351</sup> Translated by Woodruff, P., in Cooper (1997)

<sup>352</sup> See 283c

*Meno* where we have seen him arguing that he has never met anyone who actually teaches virtue. It was in the *Meno* also where Socrates mentions the sophists as possible candidates for teachers of virtue. Speaking to Anytus he says that of all men it is the sophists who ‘profess to be teachers of virtue and have shown themselves to be available to any Greek who wishes to learn...’<sup>353</sup>. This dialogue then concludes in a manner that fully rejects the claim of the sophists to teach virtue: with Socrates emphasizing that he has never met a teacher of virtue.<sup>354</sup>

What we take from this text is that Socrates noticed that the sophists were claiming to have a content of knowledge about virtue which they could impart to their students, thereby making them more virtuous. Socrates doubts that this is a credible claim on their part. However, this text, like the previous one, gives us no reason to think that Socrates held the belief that a teacher of virtue would be required to have expert knowledge of virtue that they can impart.

Let us now consider the third piece of evidence Reeve indicates:

*Laches* 186c2-5

‘...the Sophists, who were the only ones who professed to be able to make a cultivated man of me...’<sup>355</sup>

This is another occasion when Socrates is developing the point that as far as he knows there are no teachers of virtue. He says: ‘...I have had no teacher in this subject. And yet I have longed after it from my youth up.’<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> *Meno* 91b

<sup>354</sup> 98c3

<sup>355</sup> trans. by Sprague, R., K., in Cooper (1997)

<sup>356</sup> *Laches* 186c

Similarly to the previous dialogues discussed, Socrates here says that the sophists are the ones who profess to be teachers of virtue. However, this section of the dialogue begins in a manner that reminds us of the previous two discussed above. Socrates reminds his interlocutors that one ought to be critical of such claims – that someone is capable of teaching virtue – and they should examine such people based on their actions. Socrates says: ‘...but you would not want to trust them when they said they were good craftsmen unless they should have some well-executed product of their art to show you - and not just one but more than one.’<sup>357</sup>

Once again the purpose of this text is to say that sophists *claim* to be able to make people virtuous. The dialogue does not conclude in their favor, and they are not recommended as teachers for the youth. However, there is no mention made here of the methods of sophists, and there is no technical appraisal of their teaching techniques. There is no reason whatsoever to conclude from this passage that Socrates held that having expert knowledge of virtue is a part of teaching others to be virtuous. In fact, this quote in particular does not even demonstrate the soft claim that sophists claim to have expert knowledge of virtue by which they are able to teach.

Let us now look at the fourth and final reference given by Reeves:

*Protagoras 319a3-7*

Socrates: ‘You appear to be talking about the art of citizenship, and to be promising to make men good citizens’

Protagoras: ‘This is exactly what I claim, Socrates’<sup>358</sup>

This text is of the same sort as the previous three. It is here affirmed that the sophist Protagoras claims to make his pupils virtuous through his teaching. From the start of

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<sup>357</sup> 186a

<sup>358</sup> trans. by Lombardo, S. and Bell, K., in Cooper (1997)

the dialogue we are warned by Socrates, together with Hippocrates, that we need to be critical of the claims that sophists make. We must watch, Socrates says, ‘or the sophist might deceive us in advertising what he sells...’<sup>359</sup>

Socrates warns us that not only they may not be able to deliver that which they promise, but that may even have a harmful effect on the soul. By selling us a false product in the place of, and in the name of virtue, they can confuse our soul and harm our development.<sup>360</sup>

In this passage, in a similar sentiment as the previous three, Socrates directly challenges Protagoras on his ability to deliver that which he promises. When Protagoras declares that he promises to make ‘men good citizens’ Socrates answers him in his usual manner arguing that he does not believe that virtue can be taught<sup>361</sup>.

However, unlike the interlocutors of the previously discussed dialogues, Protagoras here answers Socrates and makes the case that virtue can indeed be taught. It is in fact taught everywhere and all the time, Protagoras claims. Protagoras concludes by saying that however, some people are better at teaching virtue than others for they are themselves more advanced in virtue. He concludes that: he considers himself ‘to be such a person, uniquely qualified to assist others in becoming noble and good.’<sup>362</sup>

After this declaration on the part of Protagoras Socrates changes his approach and challenges Protagoras from a different perspective. He begins to address Protagoras much in the same way as he does other interlocutors when they make a claim about themselves. He tries to dispute Protagoras using the elenchus. He asks him saying: if you declare that you are virtuous enough to be a teacher of others, and that you

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<sup>359</sup> *Protagoras* 313d

<sup>360</sup> 314b

<sup>361</sup> 319b

<sup>362</sup> 328b

possess virtue and can pass it on to others, then you ought to be able to say what virtue is. He then proceeds to question him as to the nature of virtue.

The point that Socrates tries so hard to make in this dialogue is that Protagoras is possibly selling a false product. That what he is passing off as virtue might not even be virtue at all. The dialogue itself is a bit obscure and in my opinion it is not as easy to see Socrates' success here as it is in other works.

However, for the purpose of contextualizing the reference taken from here by Reeve, we can look at how the dialogue ends. Socrates says the following: 'Now, Protagoras, seeing that we have gotten topsy-turvy and terribly confused, I am most eager to clear it all up, and I would like us, having come this far, to continue until we come through to what virtue is in itself, and then to return to inquire about whether it can or cannot be taught...'<sup>363</sup>

It is clear from how the dialogue ends that Socrates himself considered that his argument against the claims made by Protagoras regarding the teachability of virtue were successful in unsettling his claim and have cast doubt on its truth. Protagoras, according to Socrates did not manage to defend his claim that he can teach virtue. The audience therefore was meant to have been left with the question open, as to whether Protagoras can in fact deliver that which he promises.

I see no reason to read into this dialogue that Socrates believed that having expert knowledge of virtue is the characteristic that allows a teacher to teach it to others. Socrates does not even concede to Protagoras that virtue can be taught at all.

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<sup>363</sup> 361d

## **VI. The Question of Socrates' method**

### **VI.**

‘...to most readers of Plato there seems to be something special about what Socrates does in the conversations Plato dramatizes, and something distinctive about the way he does it, but scholars have been frustrated in their attempts to reduce its essential and unique elements to any simple formula.’<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> Scott (2002: 2)

We come now to the question of educational process and technology. These final two chapters which conclude the thesis deal with the *methodology* used by Socrates in his andragogical project.

In this chapter we consider the method that is standardly associated with Socrates (the elenchus) and find that it does not sufficiently describe the educational processes employed by Socrates. We believe that this thesis shows a Socrates who had a rich and well developed approach to educating his fellows, and that the limited process of the elenchus does not include all of the facets that one might expect from such an educator.

We try to give some suggestion of what sort of educational processes Socrates would have used that would be fitting for the educational persona we have been uncovering up to now throughout the thesis.

We sum this up in chapter VII where we offer, by way of a conclusion, a discussion of the methodologies that we consider to be characteristic of the Socrates we have been describing thus far.

## VI.I

Amidst the plethora of voices that describe what they call ‘Socrates’ method’ it is perhaps impossible to identify a single unified strand. It is obvious to all that Socrates used dialogue and mostly preferred an exchange of short questions and answers. Further than this there is no general agreement as to what constituted Socrates’ dialectical method, however, many scholars agree to use the term ‘elenchus’ to define what is called the ‘Socratic method’ or ‘Socrates’ preferred method’<sup>365</sup>.

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<sup>365</sup> See Nails (2014: URL); Tarrant (2002: 63); Woodruff (2010: URL); Kuperus (2007: 193). Vlastos (1994: 18) refers to the elenchus as ‘Socrates’ *only* line of argument.

However, describing Socrates' dialogical practice as the method of the elenchus faces two problems. The first problem is that there is no consensus among scholars about what the elenchus was and what it achieved. The second problem is that many scholars have raised challenges about the adequacy of the elenchus model to describe what Socrates did. Its sufficiency as a model has been seriously questioned.

In what follows we look at some of the key positions taken in the debate regarding the elenchus. Our purpose however is to show that the disagreement amongst scholars on this topic does not run as deep as might appear. There remains a general agreement amongst scholars as to what Socrates did. Our purpose here is to highlight the basic character of what Socrates did with dialogue by noticing this agreement.

Let us begin by considering the first point of contention: what was the elenchus and what did it achieve (or at least aim to achieve).

### The elenchus

'...all of us ought to be continuously eager to know what's true and what's false about the things that we are talking about. That it should become clear is a common good to all.'<sup>366</sup>

Roughly speaking<sup>367</sup> the elenchus was a dialogical process by which Socrates brought his interlocutor to examine a set of beliefs he (the interlocutor) held to be true. By drawing out the consequences from the beliefs of the set Socrates would show to his interlocutor that the beliefs are not consistent with one another and that therefore they

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<sup>366</sup> *Gorgias* 505e4

<sup>367</sup> A more precise definition would necessarily take a position on questions regarding the elenchus which are disputed. Vlastos' structure of the 'standard elenchus' (2004: 11) assumes that the starting premise of the process is assumed to have been proven false by Socrates.



cannot all be true simultaneously. The conclusion was that at least some of these beliefs considered must be rejected as untrue<sup>368</sup>.

As to its structure, there have been made several attempts to give its basic outline. However, as Vlastos (2004: 11) points out: the elenctic method was conducted in impromptu debate, and thus it was allowed a sort of waywardness that resulted in motley variations.

How one characterizes the structure of elenctic debate depends on their view of the more focal question: what did the elenchus achieve (or aim to achieve)?

A pivotal paper in this debate has been Gregory Vlastos' paper: 'The Socratic Elenchus: Method is All'<sup>369</sup>. Vlastos describes what he termed the 'standard elenchus' as follows: a refutand (a premise *p* that is refuted in the argument) is proven false (according to Socrates) when its inconsistency with further premises (which 'have entered the argument simply as propositions on which he and the interlocutor are agreed' and are in themselves 'logically unsecure'<sup>370</sup>) is established<sup>371</sup>.

Vlastos argued that the process of the elenchus was a process of searching; and its 'object is always that positive outreach for truth'<sup>372</sup> in the moral domain<sup>373</sup>. Indeed the process has, according to Vlastos, a double objective: 'to discover how every human being ought to live *and* to test that single human being who is doing the answering – to find out if *he* is living as one ought to live'<sup>374</sup>.

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<sup>368</sup> See for example Vlastos (1994:3)

<sup>369</sup> An earlier version of this paper appeared as 'The Socratic Elenchus' in 1983

<sup>370</sup> 1994: 13

<sup>371</sup> Vlastos (1994: 3)

<sup>372</sup> *ibid*: 4

<sup>373</sup> *ibid*: 5

<sup>374</sup> *ibid*: 10. Although, it is not clear from Vlastos' technical analysis of how the elenchus works how it is supposed to achieve this aim of holding lives to a standard.

The process is a ‘cooperative endeavor for mutual enlightenment’; and it has two constraints: (a) that the interlocutor give short, spare, direct, unevasive answers to the questions put to them avoiding ‘speechifying’; and (b) that the interlocutor say what they believe<sup>375</sup>.

The elenctic process on Vlastos’ account is productive and with it Socrates establishes a number of thesis<sup>376</sup>. It is not purely a negative (refutative) process, as some would have it<sup>377</sup>. The elenchus then is an instrument of research.

With the elenchus, Vlastos argued, Socrates considered that he had ‘proved his thesis true’<sup>378</sup>. In order to make this claim, Vlastos needs to address an obvious objection:

According to Vlastos (2004: 11) the structure of the elenchus<sup>379</sup> is as follows:

- (1) The interlocutor asserts a thesis,  $p$ , which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation.
- (2) Socrates secures agreement to further premises, say  $q$  and  $r$  (each of which may stand for a conjunct of propositions). The agreement is *ad hoc*: Socrates argues from  $\{q, r\}$ , not to them.
- (3) Socrates then argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that  $q$  &  $r$  entail *not-p*.
- (4) Socrates then claims that he has shown that *not-p* is true,  $p$  is false.

From this function we can see that Socrates shows that  $p$  is inconsistent with  $q$  and  $r$ . If we accept the law of non-contradiction then it follows that  $p$ ,  $q$  and  $r$  cannot be held to be true simultaneously. The contradiction of premises reveals that there is an

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<sup>375</sup> *ibid*: 7

<sup>376</sup> *ibid*: 11

<sup>377</sup> Discussed in chapter three of this thesis. See Vlastos (1994: 2-3, 17)

<sup>378</sup> 1994: 19

<sup>379</sup> The ‘standard’ elenchus.

inconsistency in the set of beliefs  $\{p,q,r\}$  and that therefore at least some of them must be rejected as false. This process of the elenchus however does not prove which of the premises is false, only that the set is inconsistent.

According to Vlastos Socrates uses this process of elenchus to disprove the primary claim of the interlocutor, claim  $p$ . He does this by showing that it is in contradiction with further premises  $q$  and  $r$ . Socrates can claim that this is achieved, according to Vlastos, *because* he [Socrates] believes that premises  $q$  and  $r$  are themselves true. *Not- $p$*  is proven true because  $p$  is shown to be in contradiction with premises that are true.

Vlastos' reasoning is this: that that which Socrates himself believes, he takes to be true. Socrates has deductive proof of its truthfulness because he has subjected his own belief-set to the test of the elenchus for many years and it has proven itself (or at least, unlike the belief-sets of others it has not *disproven* itself) to be consistent. Therefore, Socrates believes that his belief-set consists of entirely true belief. Thus, any premise  $p$  that is shown to be in contradiction with what Socrates believes is proven false (*not- $p$*  is proven true)<sup>380</sup>.

Two assumptions are being made here. The first is that Socrates believes that all falsehood entails self-contradiction and that the truth is wholly consistent<sup>381</sup>. The second is that Socrates believes the arguments he uses in the process of elenchus to be true.

Vlastos argued for this view in opposition to previously prominent views. His paper dissents from the following views:

- (a) The view expressed by Roland Hall (1967), I. G. Kidd (1967) and Richard Robinson (1953) that Socrates used the elenchus to prove a thesis  $p$  to be false

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<sup>380</sup> 1994: 28

<sup>381</sup> Vlastos (1994: 27); Brickhouse and Smith (2002: 145)

by showing that it was self-contradictory (that it included its own negation): that is to say that Socrates used a series of questions and answers to draw consequences *from* a thesis that contradicted it.

To this view Vlastos answered that Socrates is not seen to draw further premises *q* and *r* from the thesis *p* but rather brings them into the discussion without argument<sup>382</sup>.

(b) The view that Socratic elenctic stops at showing the interlocutor the inconsistency of their belief set: thereby serving a purgative function of bringing one's awareness to the fact that their confidence in a dogma is inappropriate. The achievement of Socratic elenchus is seen here as destroying the 'conceit of wisdom'. This view was held (in the past) among others by Vlastos himself<sup>383</sup> and George Grote (1865, 1906).

In response to this view Vlastos pointed to passages in Plato's dialogues where Socrates speaks in a manner that reveals his confidence that some truth has been established through the dialogical exchange with the interlocutor. Vlastos then concludes that Socrates considers that his own method is successful in its search for truth, over and above merely revealing the *untruth* of the interlocutor's arrogant supposition of certainty<sup>384</sup>.

Vlastos' paper has spurred much reaction both from those who have disagreed with his position and those who support it; to the point that it has given shape to much of the contemporary debate regarding Socratic method<sup>385</sup>.

Nicholas White (1995) took issue with Vlastos' argument that the elenchus researched knowledge and particularly with the claim that Socrates considered his own belief set

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<sup>382</sup> 1994: 2-3

<sup>383</sup> See Vlastos (1956) and (1958)

<sup>384</sup> 1994: 17-18

<sup>385</sup> Kuperus (2007: 208), footnote 2; and Benson (2002: 101)

to be true<sup>386</sup>. White asked why, if we are to take Socrates as having beliefs he himself considered to be true did he engage others in the particular sort of educational enquiry that he did. ‘Why does [Socrates] bother telling others to consult their own beliefs’ asks White, ‘instead of simply offering himself as an oracle?’<sup>387</sup>

Vlastos’ answer to this is well articulated by Theodore Scaltsas (1993: 130)<sup>388</sup>. He notes that according to Vlastos: Socrates’ strongest moral concern was a concern for the moral autonomy of his interlocutors. Socrates on this account wanted his interlocutors to come to the truth themselves and was not willing to feed them any ready-made moral truths.

The reason for this is a basic axiom of Socrates educational approach and it explains how it is that the elenchus achieves knowledge of the truth. It is this: that one comes to learn the truth by thoroughly examining their own belief-set and developing discernment regarding it. As Scaltsas explains:

‘The elenctic method presupposes that the interlocutor believes both truths and falsehoods and by systematic applications of the elenchus the falsehoods are exposed and discarded. Therefore, it is not the aim of the elenchus to get the interlocutor to believe certain truths (after a didactic exercise), because the interlocutor already does believe them. Rather, it is getting the interlocutor to realize that he/she is committed to a contradiction, and to drop the one set of beliefs in favour of the other.... The point here is that knowledge, for Socrates, comes by recognition rather than by acceptance.’<sup>389</sup>

To place this view in the contemporary context we can say that the elenchus assumes both a correspondence theory of truth and a coherentist theory of epistemic justification. Socrates relies on a correspondence theory of truth in that his thought

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<sup>386</sup> A basic premise of Vlastos’ argument (1994: 28).

<sup>387</sup> 1995: 241

<sup>388</sup> In Scaltsas’ review of Vlastos’ book *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (1991)

<sup>389</sup> 1993: 130-131

accepts metaphysical realism: reality is something objective and a proposition can be actually and objectively true or false depending on how it corresponds to reality<sup>390</sup>.

He combines this with a coherentism in that the elenchus assumes that one is justified to hold a belief only if it coheres with their set of beliefs. A contradiction amongst the beliefs of a set reveals that at least some of those beliefs are incorrect<sup>391</sup>.

A metaphor that brings the two together is the image of making a puzzle. Socrates seems to think that true beliefs would sit together and reveal a description of reality in the same way that puzzle pieces can be put together. We can say then that the elenchus examines individual predicates about reality, turning them this way and that, trying to find how they are positioned in relation to other propositions. If a proposition cannot be found to fit with others, then it might be that it is not part of the description of truth. It needs to be discarded.

To take this metaphor a little further, we might say that in Vlastos' view Socrates already has sections of the puzzle put together. His beliefs combine coherently to depict aspects of truth. He can be confident then that a proposition that does not link-up with the pieces he already has arranged will not fit in amongst them.

Hugh Benson defended view (b) against Vlastos arguing that showing 'that one does not know does not require showing falsehood'<sup>392</sup>. He used the *Meno* to do this. He argued that Vlastos cannot be correct in saying that the Socrates of the early dialogues (the Socrates of the elenchus) had any substantive view of how knowledge is acquired, and that his method did not seek to achieve knowledge<sup>393</sup>.

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<sup>390</sup> David (2009: URL)

<sup>391</sup> Olsson (2012: URL)

<sup>392</sup> 1990: 134

<sup>393</sup> 1990: 153

Benson (1990: 129) held the belief that Plato went beyond Socrates in developing a substantive view of how knowledge is acquired. If Vlastos is right, argues Benson, that early Socrates already had a method of seeking knowledge then, Plato merely developed away from Socrates by ‘substituting one substantive view about how knowledge is acquired with another.’

Benson brings the case of Socrates exchange with the slave boy in the *Meno* as evidence for his case. He separates that part of the dialogue into four sections and says that: the first two sections correspond to what Socrates does with his interlocutors in the ‘early dialogues’. He notes that at the end of these two sections the slave boy has not yet learned anything but has merely been rid of his false conceit of knowledge.

Benson then argues that the theory of recollection does not get illustrated until the third and fourth sections of the exchange. He makes the point that it is the theory of recollection that is new in the dialogue, and that it is this that is offered as an explanation to Meno about how knowledge can be acquired through enquiry into what is unknown.

Benson thus concludes that the first two sections of the exchange show us the early Socrates engaged in his elenchus (and that the slave boy learns nothing from this process but is shown that he does not know); and that the two latter phases (which are intended to explain the theory of recollection) are what help the slave boy to bear knowledge, and that these are new<sup>394</sup>.

Benson’s argument relies on the following: (a) the theory of recollection is what explains how knowledge can be acquired through this process of questions and answer; (b) that the theory of recollection is illustrated by the third and fourth sections of the exchange between Socrates and the slave boy and that this TR<sup>395</sup> is new to the

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<sup>394</sup> 1990: 129-134

<sup>395</sup> ‘theory of recollection’

*Meno* (it cannot be found in the ‘early’ dialogues); (c) that the first two sections of the exchange do not bring the slave boy to knowledge but only rid him of false impressions; and (d) that the process used in the first two sections can be paralleled to what Socrates does in the ‘early’ dialogues.

On these grounds Benson concludes that in the *Meno* Plato introduces a substantive theory of how knowledge is achieved that did not exist earlier, and was not merely replacing one theory for another<sup>396</sup>.

However, I consider that Benson’s argument fails to oust Vlastos’ point for two reasons. Firstly, Vlastos can agree that the theory of recollection is new to the *Meno* and that nothing of the sort existed in the ‘earlier’ dialogues. He might also agree that the first two sections of the exchange are ‘Socratic’. That is not to say however that Plato saw the significance of the introduction of the TR to be that it went beyond what Socrates had been doing in so far as it introduces a method whereby knowledge can not be achieved.

Vlastos can have a different explanation of the significance of the introduction of the TR and agree with Benson that Plato is giving us something *extra* in this dialogue. Indeed Vlastos says that Plato has taken a ‘giant step’ in introducing the theory of recollection in the *Meno* ‘transforming the moralist of the earlier dialogues in to the metaphysician of the middle ones’<sup>397</sup>.

Vlastos could argue however that Plato introduces the theory of recollection to explain or justify *why it is* that Socratic exchange *does in fact* bear the fruit of knowledge. Vlastos can say that Socrates used the elenchus to bring people to knowledge but that he never explains why such a method would work. He [Socrates] did not do meta-theory. Plato then, being more of a meta-philosopher might be introducing the theory of recollection to give support to the Socratic method. The

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<sup>396</sup> 1990: 130

<sup>397</sup> Vlastos (1994: 5)



theory of recollection can be an important introduction of the *Meno* but its significance might as well be to support the Socratic method and not to overcome it.

Notice that this solution is reminiscent of Seeskin's (1986: 36) claim that some prior assumption by Socrates of the theory of recollection was needed to ground his method of the elenchus. His reasoning was that Socrates' confidence that: 'no one can manage to be a complete and consistent immoralist, since their own innate knowledge can always be elicited and shown to be inconsistent with whatever immoral position they might espouse'<sup>398</sup> needs to be based on some theory whereby one has innate knowledge of important moral truths.

We could say that Socrates assumed the premise that one has innate moral knowledge that cannot be lost, but that it was Plato who developed the theory of recollection (first appearing in the *Meno*) in order to philosophically support a method that utilized such an assumption. Arguably there is much evidence to support the reading that Socrates expected that amidst the mess of misconceptions people had true moral knowledge hidden. Dialogue might have been a method of excavating the true knowledge, and as he tells us in the *Theaetetus*, of separating the true from the false<sup>399</sup>.

Smith (1987: 217) raised an objection to this reading: saying that this view assumes that Socrates had left his whole philosophic mission groundless and that Plato was required to give it any support. Smith finds such an assumption unlikely and undermining of Socrates as a philosopher. He suggests instead that we need to take seriously the justification for his method which Socrates does give: namely that his elenctic philosophizing was good since it was divinely sanctioned.

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<sup>398</sup> Smith (1987: 216)

<sup>399</sup> *Theaetetus* 150e. The dialogue between Socrates and Polus in the *Gorgias* is a good example: here Socrates shows full confidence that he will find (through the use of dialogue) a belief in Polus that is (as Socrates believes) true. See *Gorgias* 473e

I would like to avoid too much debate about what is pure scholarly hypothesis and say only that Smith's point about the practice of elenchus being justified essentially (for Socrates) by divine command and inspiration need not be incompatible with the possibility of Plato later articulating what he might have thought of as 'the metaphysical explanation of *why* it works'.

We have no reason to think that for Plato or Socrates the commands of the divine were ontologically precarious. The god of Plato, who came to be described as the Demiurge of the *Timaeus* is better understood as one who is in line with metaphysical reality<sup>400</sup>. In other words, being commanded to do something by a god, and that *something* proving to be a metaphysically reasonable act, is acceptable to Plato.

We also should notice, as Broadie (2004: 66-67) notes, that for Plato, the intelligence that caused creation did so with a view of what is good. The Demiurge formed the cosmos in such a way that it would be good, beautiful and orderly. *Why* something is the way it is, and the fact of a god commanding people to behave accordingly is compatible: since the good way to behave, and the ontologically appropriate way to behave are one and the same.

My second objection to Benson's strengthens the first. It is this: Benson argues the first two sections of the exchange with the slave boy are intended to parallel the method Socrates uses in the 'early' dialogues<sup>401</sup>. He then argues that the theory of recollection is explained by the final two sections of the exchange, and that it is at this point that the slave boy begins to find knowledge<sup>402</sup>. The first two 'Socratic sections'

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<sup>400</sup> According to Zeyl (2013) a main theme of the description of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* is that the way the universe *is* needs to be the product of the deliberate intent of Intellect, since it is so well arranged.

<sup>401</sup> 1990: 132 and 137-8

<sup>402</sup> *ibid*: 139

are ‘purely destructive in eliminating the slave-boys’ false conceit of knowledge...’<sup>403</sup>.

Benson however does not tell us if there is any difference of method being illustrated in the first two sections and in the latter two, nor what that difference might be. Indeed I see no methodological difference between these two stages. The same method of question and answer is used for both.

Socrates interrupts the exchange with the slave boy at *Meno* 84a2-d2 to make commentary to Meno about what the slave boy had achieved up to that point. This is where Benson sets the break between the second section and the third and fourth. Benson is correct to say that at this point Socrates tells Meno that what his interlocutor has achieved is to realize that he does not know the answer and thus to become, now aware of his ignorance, more willing to search and learn<sup>404</sup>.

The third and fourth stage wherein the slave boy is led to knowledge begins after this remark, and the theory of recollection is referred to so as to explain what had happened in the latter two sections. However, what occurs between Socrates and the interlocutor does not change. The same process of question and answer, which at first brought the slave boy to acknowledge his own ignorance, is continued until the boy comes to true belief<sup>405</sup>.

Plato introduces the theory of recollection to explain how this method works, he does not use the TR as grounds for showing a different dialogical method. He does not alter in any way the method of the first two stages of the exchange, which Benson is eager to assign to the early Socrates.

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<sup>403</sup> *ibid* 133

<sup>404</sup> *ibid*: 132

<sup>405</sup> Socrates then explains how this true belief would become knowledge even though does not illustrate this (see *Meno* 85c10-d1)

The only difference that we can see between the first two stages (where the slave boy is said to have achieved a useful acknowledgement of his ignorance) and the latter two (where he is led to true belief and it is suggested that if he continues in the process he will achieve knowledge) is the time that has lapsed between them. They differ in the fact that section one and two occurred at the start of the exchange and sections three and four occurred later into the exchange.

It is natural then to assume that the experience of having your ignorance revealed to you is the introductory experience an interlocutor might have when meeting Socrates at first. If one were to stay with Socrates and persist in enquiry with him, then he can hope to move beyond this *aporia* towards knowledge. As Socrates points out: one cannot learn when they already think that they know. Such an attitude blocks the learner from proceeding in enquiry.

Benson makes much of the point that the first two sections of the exchange with the slave boy are paralleled with the first part of the dialogue between Socrates and Meno<sup>406</sup>. Let us remember then that Meno is a foreigner to Athens and he is probably speaking with Socrates for the first time. This dialogue that they are having is introductory. Meno questions whether such dialogical enquiry can be productive and Socrates tells him that indeed it can, and that one ought to persist in it<sup>407</sup>.

In his paper 'Problems with Socratic Method' Benson (2002) made another criticism of Vlastos' analysis of the elenchus. He made the claim that the premises of the elenchus {*q* and *r*} with which thesis *p* is found to be inconsistent need not be premises that Socrates himself believed. Benson claimed that the constraint of premise acceptability characteristic of the elenchus is that the interlocutor who is being refuted believe the premises. The premises, says Benson, needn't be believed by Socrates<sup>408</sup>. From this he concludes that the elenchus 'can only establish an

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<sup>406</sup> 1990: 138

<sup>407</sup> *Meno* 86b6

<sup>408</sup> 2002: 105

inconsistency among the beliefs of Socrates' interlocutors'<sup>409</sup>. Benson calls this characteristic of the elenchus its 'doxastic constraint'<sup>410</sup>.

Nevertheless, convinced by the evidence of passages throughout the 'early dialogues' that 'indicate that Socrates aims to uncover truths and acquire knowledge and to encourage his interlocutors to do the same'<sup>411</sup> which one might consider 'overwhelming'<sup>412</sup>, Benson states his position that Socrates did more than just the elenchus<sup>413</sup>. He insists that the elenchus itself is limited in its scope and can only reveal an inconsistency within the belief-set of the interlocutor (as he had held in 1990) since it has the doxastic constraint that does not allow it to do more: but he goes on to say that 'we should not suppose that whenever Socrates behaves philosophically – whenever he engages in philosophical discourse – he must be behaving elenctically'<sup>414</sup>.

Benson gives the example of the *Crito*, much of the *Apology*, and the prologue of the *Laches* as occasions where Socrates cannot be said to be using the elenchus precisely because he does not keep to the 'doxastic constraint' of the elenchus and does not require it that each premise of the argument be agreed upon by an interlocutor<sup>415</sup>.

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<sup>409</sup> *ibid*

<sup>410</sup> This is discussed in detail in Benson (2000) and Benson (2011)

<sup>411</sup> 2002: 107

<sup>412</sup> *ibid*: 106

<sup>413</sup> The reader might wonder how Benson can square this view with his argument in (1990: 153) that Plato takes himself in the *Meno* to be providing for the first time a substantive view about how genuine knowledge is to be acquired and *not* to be merely replacing a theory already existing in Socrates. If then Socrates in the 'early dialogues' were already seeking truth, then why on Benson's view would Plato not have acknowledged this?

<sup>414</sup> *ibid*: 107

<sup>415</sup> *ibid*

### Benson and Vlastos

Benson and Vlastos disagree as to whether the elenchus is constructive (whether it can establish truth and falsehood of thesis). However, we want to concentrate on a feature that the two scholars hold in common. Both agree that dialogue with the Socrates of the 'early' dialogues can help the interlocutor to achieve two aims: (a) to realize that there is a fault in their belief-set and to feel thus the need for further enquiry; and (b) to seek a doxastic improvement (learning regarding what is true) in a dialogical exchange of question and answer with Socrates at the helm of the enquiry.

The two scholars disagree about how they delineate what they call the elenctic method as they also disagree what occasions of dialogical exchange are to count as elenctic. Benson describes the *Crito*, the *Apology*, and the prologue of the *Laches* as being outside what counts as elenchus; and Vlastos found the *Euthydemus*, the *Lysis* and the *Hippias Major* to have characteristics that place them outside the elenchus<sup>416</sup>.

Vlastos thought that the elenchus both counters the conceit of wisdom in the interlocutor and acted as a method of research; Benson argues that the elenchus ends with the defeat of one's conceit of wisdom and that research into truth is carried out by Socrates out-with the bounds of the elenchus. Both agree that the two processes are attempted by Socrates.

If we move beyond the question of how the elenchus as a method can be defined, and we ask instead what it is that Socrates achieves, we find that there is more agreement between these two scholars than would appear from the way that Benson sets his arguments in opposition to Vlastos'.

Vasilis Politis (2006) agreed with Vlastos that the Socratic process is a search for truth. He does not call it the 'elenchus' but in speaking about the process of leading

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<sup>416</sup> 1994: 29

the interlocutor: ‘towards a state of *aporia*, a mental state of perplexity and being at loss, about some ethical subject’ occurring in the ‘early’ dialogues’, Politis is referring to the same dialogues that most scholars name elenctic<sup>417</sup>.

Politis also argued against the view that the only aim of *aporia* in these dialogues is to purge the interlocutor of the pretense of knowledge<sup>418</sup>. He took however a different approach to that of Vlastos: he acknowledged the phenomenon of Socratic dialogue resulting in perplexity (*aporia*) and argued that *aporia* ought to be understood as having two functions.

The first aim was cathartic: that is, to disabuse interlocutors of conceptual errors. To this extend Politis agrees with those who see the elenchus as destructive of conceit.

The second aim of *aporia*, he argues, was *zetetic*. This term comes from the Greek word *zētisis* meaning to seek something out. *Zetetic aporia* denotes a sort of *aporia* achieved in Socratic dialogue that is ‘properly a part of searching’. Politis argues that: ‘*Aporia* in these dialogues is not only a stimulus towards taking up the search for knowledge; it is part of particular searches’<sup>419</sup>.

To explain his point Politis uses a concept found in Aristotle: that having *aporiai* is an act of articulating questions. Research is guided by particular puzzles and problems to be solved. We progress in our research, and we recognize our aim if we find it, because we are able to formulate dilemmas and enquire regarding them. Studying reality involves formulating questions regarding it<sup>420</sup>. Particularly: Aristotle called *aporia* the puzzle arising when one reasons about both sides of a questions and finds equally good reasons for both sides.

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<sup>417</sup> 2006: 88

<sup>418</sup> *ibid*: 89

<sup>419</sup> *ibid*

<sup>420</sup> *ibid*: 90

Politis argues that the term *aporia* is used in Plato's works to mean both: (a) a state of mental confusion and bewilderment or helplessness and (b) such a sort of puzzle. He finds *aporia* used in the second sense (b) in the *Protagoras*<sup>421</sup>; *Apology*<sup>422</sup>; *Charmides*<sup>423</sup>; and the *Meno*<sup>424</sup>.

For our purposes let us say that this insight noted by Politis in effect makes the same general claim as we have seen Benson and Vlastos make. Namely: that Socrates used dialogue with questions and answers with an interlocutor both for the purpose of ridding a person of the conceit of knowledge and of searching for truth. For Politis also, further enquiry into the questions discussed with Socrates could bear the fruit of knowledge.

Thomas Schmid (1981) also argued against the view that the elenchus aimed at refutation alone and spoke about two products of dialogue with Socrates. However, he emphasized that to understand the productivity of the elenchus we must move away from examining its logical structure alone and consider the process as a psychological experience.

Schmid made a case that there are two kinds of elenchus. He called the one elenchus 'merely destructive' and the second 'pedagogical'<sup>425</sup>. The first, which achieved nothing more than prove that the interlocutor did not 'know what he was talking about' was purely destructive; and the second, which Schmid also calls 'genuine elenchus' produced important learning in the interlocutor.

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<sup>421</sup> 324d2-324e2 and 348c

<sup>422</sup> 21b7-21b9

<sup>423</sup> 167b-167c

<sup>424</sup> 80c-80d and 84a-84c

<sup>425</sup> 1981: 142



Whether one experienced the positive or the purely negative elenchus depended on the interlocutors themselves. A person who was genuine enough in their thought to have formulated truthful opinions resulting from their own experience of reality underwent a pedagogical experience by having these exposed and critiqued by Socrates<sup>426</sup>.

Alternatively, a person who lacked the intellectual integrity to have a commitment to the truth of their opinion, and who in speaking was concerned simply with dialogue as a struggle for honor, was unable to have a ‘genuine elenchus’ with Socrates. Such a person was merely refuted and shown up as incorrect in their belief set<sup>427</sup>.

In this case Socrates refutes his interlocutor for the sake of *others*. He knew that these interlocutors themselves would not benefit from the experience, but by exposing these would-be authorities Socrates warned other more truthful minds to avoid their influence<sup>428</sup>.

Pedagogical elenchus (a) frees the interlocutor to think and choose for themselves; it (b) confirms to the interlocutor that the values he had sought to articulate are true values; (c) points to new areas of learning for him to pursue; (d) points beyond ‘knowledge’ that the interlocutor has to both a new understanding of the virtue and a new conception of what it means to know; (e) and it involves the interlocutor in the commitment to truth as a personal value.

For Schmid pedagogical elenchus works much the same way that the exchange with the slave-boy demonstrates in the *Meno*. It ‘begins with present knowledge, shows its limits...and finally points beyond it to another kind of knowledge, which cannot be

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<sup>426</sup> *ibid*: 143. The example of Charmides is given for this.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid*: 145. The exchange with Critias is given as an example of this.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid*: 146

understood at present, but which might be understood later, as the dialogue is recollected and reexamined in memory<sup>429</sup>.

In other words, Schmid considered genuine elenchus to be in fact directive towards more complex knowledge<sup>430</sup>. The ability of the interlocutor to benefit from the learning available in the exchange depended on their genuineness and willingness.

Again we can say that Schmid is in agreement with Vlastos, Benson, and Politis in that: dialogue with Socrates can (in some cases) be both productive of knowledge *or* merely destructive (disputative). Schmid places the blame for the *failure* of what could have been productive elenchus on the interlocutor. Nevertheless, he gives us a picture of a Socrates who achieves both of these aims through dialogue.

Perhaps the important contribution of Schmid's position is that the elenchus is not a purely logical process. Dialogue with Socrates could function both as either purely destructive of one's conceit of knowledge and as an educational tool bringing about learning. The involvement and attitude of the interlocutor decides which it will be. In that sense it is as much a psychological process as it is a logical one, and, as Schmid complains, if we try to understand what Socrates did by concentrating only on the logical structure of the elenchus we fail<sup>431</sup>.

Indeed in his paper: 'Socratic Moderation and Self-Knowledge' Schmid described the elenchus as a 'psychotherapeutic medical practice which, when applied to oneself and others, leads to intellectual and psychic moderation'<sup>432</sup>.

A related argument is made by Robert Reed (2013) who argued that the disruptive experience of self-questioning encountered in the Socratic elenchus is productive in

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<sup>429</sup> *ibid*: 144

<sup>430</sup> *ibid*

<sup>431</sup> *ibid*: 141

<sup>432</sup> 1983: 342

that it leads to moral maturity. It is a process that leads one to the psychological practice of expert knowledge.

Talisse (2002) took a position against Vlastos' claim that the elenchus proved thesis to be true or false, but he agreed that the method is productive and not purely destructive. He agreed with Schmid's point that the elenchus teaches the interlocutor something about the nature of knowing.

Talisse argued that the reason that the elenchus does not prove a proposition either true or false is because it simply does not examine propositions; rather it examines persons<sup>433</sup>.

Notice that this in itself does not defy Vlastos' position who, like others<sup>434</sup>, held that the elenchus examined *both* beliefs and persons<sup>435</sup>.

Talisse argued that Socrates practiced the elenchus in order to purge people of false claims to knowledge<sup>436</sup> *in order to* correct their conception of knowledge. By disputing their views Socrates showed his interlocutors that the basis of knowledge is not authority or something like it, but logos itself<sup>437</sup>.

Talisse gives the example of the *Euthyphro*. He points out that even though Euthyphro does not learn what piety is, he does learn from Socrates what a definition is; what an argument is; what it means to participate in enquiry; that one's knowledge of piety runs only as deep as one's account (logos) of piety; that one's conception of

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<sup>433</sup> 2002: 52

<sup>434</sup> Leshner (2002: 35)

<sup>435</sup> 1994: 10

<sup>436</sup> *ibid*: 54

<sup>437</sup> *ibid*: 55

knowledge cannot be grounded in mystical, private experiences; and that the search for knowledge is participatory non-dogmatic, anti-authoritarian, and egalitarian<sup>438</sup>.

As will be seen, we agree with Talisse that Socrates teaches his interlocutor how to participate in enquiry, and hence how to do philosophy. For the moment however let us say that this does not need to be the case at the exclusion of any other propositional or ethical learning that might occur in dialogue with Socrates.

Doing philosophy for Socrates was not an abstract activity separated from developing the ethical maturity referred to by Reed (2013), or from learning about the true state of the world (propositions that are true or false regarding reality). The technical practice of philosophy, truth, and conscious virtuous activity all came together for Socrates<sup>439</sup>.

Carpenter and Polansky (2002) show the compatibility of the views discussed thus far by arguing that Socratic cross-examination achieves all of these purposes. Socrates examines lives, ideas and claims to expertise; punctures conceit of wisdom; reorients lives towards philosophy; and establishes certain views<sup>440</sup>.

At the same time, in order to accommodate all of these purposes of Socratic dialogue, they conclude that Socrates has no single method of refutation or cross-examination; but rather uses a variety of methods to suit the needs of each interlocutor.

Regarding the question debated between Vlastos and Benson<sup>441</sup> as to whether the elenchus establishes the truth and falsehood of propositions, or if it merely shows

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<sup>438</sup> *ibid*

<sup>439</sup> Please refer to chapter II of this thesis where I have discussed this theme in more detail.

<sup>440</sup> 2002: 89

<sup>441</sup> Amongst others

inconsistency in the thought of the interlocutor, Carpenter and Polansky argue that it most likely does both, sometimes the one and at other times the other<sup>442</sup>.

They offer a universal description of Socratic refutation which makes it sound very much like what is called in contemporary theory of logical consequence the method of counterexample.

The method of counterexample is the countering of an argument by ‘manifesting the manner in which the premises of the argument *fail* to lead to a conclusion. One way to do this is to provide an argument of the same form for which the premises are clearly true and the conclusion is clearly false. Another way to do this is to provide a *circumstance* in which the premises are true and the conclusion is false’<sup>443</sup>.

The method of counterexample is as intuitive as it sounds, and its primary success is to show that more thought is required regarding the arguments considered. It reveals that a solution has not been achieved yet: whether it be by showing that some particular premise is false, or by showing some logical inconsistency in a set of beliefs.

Carpenter and Polansky (2002: 90) characterize Socratic refutation so: ‘Given that someone has stated a belief...or some belief can be taken as an implication of or be construed from what the person has said, refutation occurs when one or more statements are made or a series of questions asked that raise a difficulty for holding that belief in the way in which the interlocutor does, a difficulty that would, if appreciated, require some significant modification of that belief.’

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<sup>442</sup> 2002: 90

<sup>443</sup> Beall and Restall (2013: URL)

Particularly, Socrates brings people to self-refutation by counterexample through engaging the person in a dialogue of question and answer, by allowing them to confirm each motion of the argument<sup>444</sup>.

By showing how pervasive refutation is in Socratic dialogues, and by highlighting the several different approaches taken towards it, Carpenter and Polansky support their claim that it is inappropriate to speak of one method of elenchus, as opposed to a ‘variety of Socratic elenchi’<sup>445</sup>.

They offer us a description of what Socrates does that is broader than any one description of the elenctic method; and by showing the prevalence of this ‘method of refutation’ in Plato’s dialogues, they show the incapacity of a single concept of elenchus to describe Socratic activity.

### The insufficiency of the elenchus

Vlastos, like other scholars has concentrated on analyzing the elenchus because he considered it to be the activity that characterized Socrates: he saw the elenchus as Socrates’ ‘only line of argument’<sup>446</sup>.

As we have seen already with Carpenter and Polansky, this has raised much controversy amongst Socratic scholars. Regarding the elenchus no general agreement has been reached about what the elenchus is; and scholars continue to disagree about even its most basic defining traits<sup>447</sup>. Alongside this however there has been disagreement as to whether we should accept the elenchus as exclusively ‘that which Socrates did’, or even, as something that Socrates did at all.

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<sup>444</sup> 2002: 91-92

<sup>445</sup> *ibid*: 91

<sup>446</sup> 1994: 18

<sup>447</sup> Brickhouse and Smith (2002: 146)

A notable problem with the view that Socratic dialogical method equals the elenchus is that the elenchus as a process – whatever it was – does not occur in all of the dialogues that scholars tend to consider (at least somewhat) Socratic. As Vlastos himself noted: the standard elenchus is not found in the *Euthydemus*, the *Lysis*, the *Menexenus*, or the *Hippias Major*<sup>448</sup>. Benson argues that the elenchus does not occur in the *Crito*, the *Apology* or the prologue of the *Laches*<sup>449</sup>; and Kuperus (2007) counts the *Protagoras* and the *Phaedo* as non-elenctic.

Of the eighteen dialogues that are considered early, transitional or early middle dialogues at least half have been argued to be non-elenctic in style.

Due to this and other various problems encountered by scholars who try to interpret Socratic dialogical activity within the limited structure of an elenchus, several scholars have concluded that the practice of the elenchus is insufficient for describing what Socrates did in dialogue.

Harold Tarrant (2002: 61) agreed with Talisse (2002: 52) that Socrates did not examine the truth and falsehood of propositions but rather persons and their belief-sets.

He saw the elenchus as a tool of refutation but argued that Socrates only used this tool occasionally, when refutation was Socrates' intention. He did not see this as the purpose of each Socratic dialogue (which he calls 'investigations') and therefore: found it misleading to apply the term 'elenchus' to what Socrates did, since it does not usually capture the *purpose* of what Socrates was doing with dialogue<sup>450</sup>.

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<sup>448</sup> 1994: 1

<sup>449</sup> 2002: 107

<sup>450</sup> 2002: 62-63

Tarrant made a case for this by analyzing the vocabulary used in Plato's texts. He notes that when Plato employed the term 'elenchus' he did not apply it to what Socrates himself was doing. Tarrant's explanation for this was that the term denotes a hostile practice, and Socrates usually had a friendlier, more sensitive approach to his interlocutors<sup>451</sup>.

By making a list of the verbs used by the author Plato, Tarrant makes the case that Plato preferred to describe what Socrates did as 'exetasis'. Tarrant defined exetasis as a process that examined (not truth and falsehood but) knowledge and lack of knowledge. It was a process that revealed expertise: 'Socratic exetasis does not appear to lead us to the discovery of truth or falsehood; at best it gives us an indication of those whose leadership might ultimately help up to distinguish the one from the other.'<sup>452</sup>

According to Tarrant 'exetasis' was a particular process whereby inconsistency in the interlocutor's belief-set was demonstrated and: 'what is revealed when a person's beliefs are demonstrated to be inconsistent is a personal lack of credibility, not the presence of a false proposition'<sup>453</sup>.

Tarrant reaches two main conclusions in his research:

- (a) that Socrates used both the 'elenchus' and 'exetasis' as tools in dialogue with people on different occasions.
- (b) That Socratic interrogation did not discover or search for truth and falsehood<sup>454</sup>.

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<sup>451</sup> 2002: 68

<sup>452</sup> *ibid*: 73

<sup>453</sup> *ibid*: 74

<sup>454</sup> 2002: 73



One problem I find with Tarrant's claims is that he makes the same mistake that has tormented scholars before him who have tried to maintain that Socrates (using the elenchus as his only method) did not search for truth through dialogue.

This view has faced the problem that several occasions in Plato's texts show Socrates as having a strong longing for truth, and for being ever in search of it. Passages that have been quoted against this view include: *Gorgias* 505e4-505e6; *Laches* 201a2-201a7; *Apology* 29d-30b; and *Charmides* 166d4-166d6.

For this reason I consider that we need to accept that a description of what Socrates *did* (regardless of how we name that and how many *types* of method we distinguish in order to characterize it) needs to acknowledge that Socrates (at least sometimes) actively sought for truth together with other people through dialogue<sup>455</sup>.

A second problem I find with Tarrant's view is that, although his work attempts to expand the conceptual repertoire we use to interpret Socrates (and so make deeper also our understanding of him), he still places what I consider to be an arbitrary limit on Socratic study.

Tarrant identifies two processes instead of one: the 'elenchus' and the 'exetasis'. However, in the same texts where he finds evidence for these there is also evidence that Socrates was doing something more. I am referring to Socrates exchange with Calicles in the *Gorgias*. Here Tarrant notices a pattern that does not fit neatly into what he has delineated as 'exetasis'; and he responds to this by (as he himself acknowledges) *arbitrarily* drawing the line under Socrates.

He says that this is an occasion of 'dialectical investigation', that it is un-Socratic and that it was composed at a later date, and added on as a Platonic section<sup>456</sup>. We feel that this attitude amongst scholars to try to find a simple and narrow description of what

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<sup>455</sup> See for example Benson (2002: 107)

<sup>456</sup> Tarrant (2002: 75-76)

Socrates did, and to chop-up the dialogues and dismiss whatever does not fit nicely into their description as non-Socratic is a problem that prevents us from fully appreciating Socratic dialectics.

Rather, incorporating this ‘dialectical investigation’ into his profiling of Socratic method (instead of arbitrarily dismissing it) might have helped Tarrant to respond to the criticism that Socrates is described clearly by Plato as seeking truth.

Finally, Tarrant’s analysis of the ‘elenchus’ as something aggressive and always ‘unfriendly’ – from which he concludes that we need a kinder term to describe what Socrates did (namely the ‘exetasis’) – is in disagreement with the historical canvassing of the meaning of the term conducted by Lesher.

Lesher (2002: 24) found that by the time Plato was writing his works the term had come to mean (also) the act of putting a person to the test. This meaning is much the same as the one Tarrant has wanted to differentiate with the term ‘exetasis’. If Lesher is correct in this then the distinction between ‘exetasis’ and ‘elenchus’ needs to be re-evaluated.

Tarrant indeed makes a good case that the ‘elenchus’ is not usually applied by Plato to describe what Socrates did. Nevertheless, the case for what we ought to learn from this fact has not, in my mind, been made convincingly as yet<sup>457</sup>.

Gerard Kuperus (2007: 193) also made a case that the elenchus does not describe what Socrates did: because it is too limited a concept to capture the complexity of Socrates’ dialogical activities. He argued that there was no ‘blueprint or standard formula’ used by Socrates, and that a close look Socratic dialectic in the *Protagoras* for example, shows that Socrates used a method that was ‘open’ and ‘did not develop through a specific plan’.

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<sup>457</sup> See Also Young (2002) for this criticism of Tarrant.

Kuperus also found in Plato's text a different terminology used by the author to describe Socratic dialogical activity: the metaphors of 'labyrinth' and 'navigation'.

Kuperus applies the metaphor of navigation to the *Protagoras*<sup>458</sup> in a manner that arguably many would find difficult since it does not distinguish between Socratic thought and Platonic forms. He says: 'both *navigators* and philosophers deal with "things" that are not ready to hand (navigators with stars, the wind, and the days of the year, the philosopher with the ideal forms), and both are dealing with these eternal truths within a world that is characterized by change or flux'<sup>459</sup>.

Referring us to the crisis in dialogue between Socrates and Protagoras at 336d Kuperus shows that the dialogue takes a conscious turn away from Protagoras' dialogical method and towards Socrates'. The latter is characterized as an art of argumentation; dialectic or dialogue; a process of question and answer<sup>460</sup>.

It is also suggested that Socrates' method can teach one to become virtuous. To make sense of this we need to understand that Kuperus does not speak of virtue as something *static* (as an achieved state of being that can be had like an object) but as something *fluid* (as a state of becoming through process). That process is philosophy itself; and Socratic dialogue is philosophical.

Kuperus says: 'One cannot simply be good, but one actually has to do things in order to become good. Virtue can only be pursued or taught through praxis. This praxis seems for Socrates, first of all, to be actively involved in a dialogue. Virtue cannot be learned by simply listening to someone else; one needs to develop one's own knowledge by actively participating in a dialogue. Virtue thus cannot be taught by

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<sup>458</sup> For our purposes we will discuss only Kuperus' study of navigation since he uses the metaphor of the labyrinth primarily to study the *Phaedo* and we would like to avoid a debate regarding Socratic and Platonic dialogues for the moment.

<sup>459</sup> 2007: 193-194. Inspired probably from *Republic* 485b

<sup>460</sup> 2007: 195

Protagoras' *technē* – in which one listens to long monologues – but...by way of dialectic.

In fact, Kuperus says, we see Protagoras *becoming better* by 318b because through dialogue Socrates taught him something he did not know: that virtue cannot be taught sophistically<sup>461</sup>.

In the place of the formal elenchus, Kuperus describes the characteristics of Socratic educational dialectic as a research process that achieves knowledge of first principles:

A process whereby the philosopher comes to gain knowledge of *the things that are* (forms). This is achieved by 'leaving nothing untouched' and doing the research needed to become able to give an account of the *things that are*. This research is: a process of enquiry that 'destroys or does away with hypotheses 'up to the first principle itself in order to find confirmation there'<sup>462, 463</sup>

For this dialogical process to work the interlocutors need to be willing to change their position and accept a new one<sup>464</sup>. Socrates' makes use of the art, according to Kuperus<sup>465</sup>, of 'assistants and helpers in the turning around of others'.

Linking this view with the *Phaedo*<sup>466</sup> Kuperus claims that the philosopher travels with the vessel of *logos* as navigators travel on ships: and they search for the arguments that are 'best and hardest to disprove'<sup>467</sup>. Navigation through the complex 'sea' of

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<sup>461</sup> *ibid*: 196

<sup>462</sup> Kuperus quotes this from *Republic* 533c

<sup>463</sup> 2007: 198

<sup>464</sup> 2007: 196

<sup>465</sup> Again borrowing the concept from *Republic* 533d

<sup>466</sup> 85c

<sup>467</sup> 2007: 199

possible arguments is difficult, and the dialectician finds ways to make an appropriate path through these waters<sup>468</sup>.

Kuperus' basic contribution is to find that Plato himself uses the metaphor of navigation to describe what the philosopher does in dialogue and to try to apply this metaphor *instead* of our notion of 'elenchus'. As a result he concludes that: Socratic enquiry was a form of research through the destruction of hypothesis; and that it was able to search for truths (both of these points agree with Vlastos' analysis of the 'elenchus').

Kuperus further wishes to conclude that due to the difficulty of this navigation through the vastness of possible arguments, the dialectician remains free to follow the path they choose (as a ship has no fixed road carved in the ocean) and that no single method (i.e. the elenchus) is systematically applied. However, we find that his arguments make more of a case for contextualizing the process of 'destructive interrogation of hypotheses' (and thus describing it as a process of research into truths) than for describing the mechanisms of this research in a way that is different from the 'elenchus'.

Brickhouse and Smith (2002: 147) concluded that these controversies regarding the elenchus are to be expected since no single analysis of 'elenctic' arguments can capture what Socrates did. Like Carpenter and Polansky (2002) they argue that 'there is no such *thing* as the Socratic elenchos'.

Simple categorization of Socrates' behavior that can yield a unified description of his practice has been found problematic by those who share the view of Christopher Rowe: that what we find in each dialogue differs from the rest significantly, and even though there are some categories of method, structure and content that can be traced, the overlap is partial<sup>469</sup>.

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<sup>468</sup> *ibid*

<sup>469</sup> Rowe (2009: 28)

Brickhouse and Smith consider that Socrates ‘argues with people in several different ways’ and that this variety cannot be captured by a single heading.

We agree with them on a basic premise of their view: that Socrates spoke differently with different people, and that we cannot expect to characterize every philosophical act that Socrates achieved through dialogue with a single methodological tool as is the elenchus. We furthermore agree with them that the attempt to squeeze everything that Socrates did into one methodological tool creates confusion purely because one tool is insufficient to describe what Socrates did, no matter how we might try tweak the profile of that tool.

Socrates spoke differently to different people. If you allow me some artistic license: I would call Socrates a ‘lonely genius’, always looking for a like mind to speak with.

### Socrates, the lonely genius

The most natural thing to expect from Socrates is that he would have spoken about certain things with some people but not with others. Being an andragogue<sup>470</sup> who was concerned with others learning – and one particularly concerned with learning through dialogue - Socrates would likely have engaged each interlocutor on the level they capable of, and about the subjects that were relevant to them in particular.

Speaking differently to different people is natural. I will speak about what I have been learning during my time as a PhD student of philosophy differently to my mother, to another philosophy student, or to a child. It is still the case that I have learned the same things, but I will engage in dialogue about them differently with different

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<sup>470</sup> A term used in Adult Educational theory to denote the particular practice of educating adults. See Pratt (1988).

people, each time discussing these matters in a way that is relevant and accessible to my interlocutor.

That is the nature of dialogue. Dialogue is an event amongst people. Each participant to an extent defines how the dialogue will go. If they did not, then it would not be a dialogue but a speech. Socrates has made clear on several occasions his preference for dialogue rather than speeches.

I do not go around with a power-point presentation repeating to each person who asks me what I learn in academic philosophy. In the same way, Socrates was a philosopher who shared his experience of philosophy with others and engaged with them philosophically in dialogue. This is particularly to be expected of Socrates who as we have seen was not a doctrinaire teacher. His was a pedagogy of dialogue.

Socrates involved others in philosophy through dialogue. A person (an interlocutor) can only become as involved in a conversation as they are capable and willing. For a dialogue to proceed in a certain direction, the participants need to be both able to follow that direction, and willing to do so.

Even though Socrates was the same person across the dialogues, his interlocutors whom we meet in Plato's works are various people, each with a variety of abilities, attitudinal tendencies, and intentions. Thus it is natural to see a variety amongst the dialogues both in form and in content.

That is not to say of course that Socrates did not challenge people through dialogue and pull them into discussing more deeply than they may have liked. Indeed Socrates did do so, as we are told by Nicias in the *Laches*. Speaking to Lysimachus he exclaims that anyone who is familiar with Socrates will know that:

‘...whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation must necessarily, even if he began by conversing about something quite different in the first place, keep on being led about by the man's arguments until he submits to answering

questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived hitherto. And when he does submit to this questioning, you don't realize that Socrates will not let him go before he has well and truly tested every last detail.'<sup>471</sup>

However, even though we are told that Socrates pulled people beyond their comfort zone, it is still the case that each person has a different limit to what they are comfortable with. Socrates pulled people, but he could only pull them as far as they were able to go.

Socrates engaged people in thorough enquiry. Those people who were inclined to taking part in such analysis follow Socrates with more ease. Others however found Socrates' probing too invasive since it brought to light things they may have been ashamed of. These people tended resist to such enquiry, and felt much more that a struggle was taking place between them and Socrates. Nicias goes on to tell us as much:

'I personally am accustomed to the man and know that one has to put up with this kind of treatment from him....I take pleasure in the man's company...and don't regard it as at all a bad thing to have it brought to our attention that we have done or are doing wrong. Rather I think that a man who does not run away from such treatment but is willing... to value learning as long as he lives...will necessarily pay more attention to the rest of his life. For me there is nothing unusual or unpleasant in being examined by Socrates... but find out how Laches here feels about such things.'<sup>472</sup>

Socrates refers to this himself in the maieutic simile. He tells Theaetetus that he ought not to respond to Socrates' questions as some people do, who:

'...have often before now gotten into such a state with me as to be literally ready to bite when I take away some nonsense or other from them. They never believe that I am doing this in all goodwill; they are so far from realizing that no God can wish evil to man, and that even I

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<sup>471</sup> 187e7-188a3

<sup>472</sup> 188a3-188c4



don't do this kind of thing out of malice, but because it is not permitted to me to accept a lie and put away truth.<sup>473</sup>

Compare for example the different reactions to Socrates's questioning displayed by Theaetetus and Meno. Meno resists following Socrates in dialogue and this is seen throughout the work. When Socrates shows Meno that what he considers himself to know regarding virtue is unsupported, he reacts by naming Socrates a torpedo. He points out that the effect that Socrates has on people is undesirable. He says:

‘... you seem, in appearance and in every other way, to be like the broad torpedo fish, for it too makes anyone who comes close and touches it feel numb, and you now seem to have that kind of effect on me, for both my mind and tongue are numb, and I have no answer to give you... I think you are wise not to sail away from Athens to go and stay elsewhere, for if you were to behave like this as a stranger in another city, you would be driven away for practicing sorcery.’<sup>474</sup>

It is reasonable to expect that Socrates will not be able to carry out a conversation with such people that is as involved, as he can with those interlocutors who are willing and able to enquire with him.

Theaetetus on the other hand has a very different reaction to Socrates and is particularly willing to be lead by him through conversation. His attitude to Socrates is exemplified by responses of the sort: ‘...I ought to answer Socrates, as you and Theodorus tell me to. In any case, you and he will put me right, if I make a mistake’<sup>475</sup>. Their encounter notably results in one of Plato's longest, most complicated and most in depth enquiries.

To borrow a term from contemporary educational theory, Socrates was a sort of person-centered andragogue and he met his interlocutors ‘where they were at’. To

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<sup>473</sup> 151c

<sup>474</sup> *Meno* 80b

<sup>475</sup> *Theaetetus* 146c

continue the metaphor, we might say that Socrates walked with each interlocutor *towards* the same direction – that is, towards understanding the value of piety and the divine – but he picked up each person where they were at, and walked with each only as far as they could (and were willing) to go with him. With interlocutors who were able, Socrates engaged in a more complex analysis of reality that involved several considerations and dimensions. With those who were less able, he kept it simple.

Let us notice that in the ‘simpler’ dialogues where Socrates is discussing with interlocutors who are not ready for complex enquiry. Socrates does not refuse to speak about more complex questions on the grounds that they are not relevant or interesting. Rather, in each case, Socrates makes it clear that they (the interlocutor and himself together as one unit) are not ready or able to address such a complicated question.

Socrates is happy for a conversation to evolve in every direction, as we are told in the digression of the *Theaetetus*. Let us remember that here, when Socrates is describing the philosopher and distinguishing him from the ‘slave’, the first point he makes is this one.

Theodorus makes the point that they have ‘plenty of time’ and that they can digress from their main point of enquiry to pursue a point that had just come up between them. Socrates agrees with him and says that this fact here noted reminds him of an idea that had often occurred to him: that the philosopher is free, and the non-philosopher is a slave. He explains:

‘Because the [philosopher]...has...plenty of time. When he talks, he talks in peace and quiet, and his time is his own. It is so with us now: here we are beginning on our third new discussion; and he can do the same, if he is like us, and prefers the newcomer to the question at hand. It does not matter to such men whether they talk for a day or a year, if only they may hit upon that which is.’<sup>476</sup>

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<sup>476</sup> 172d

Why then is it that we see Socrates restricting some of his interlocutors, refusing to discuss with them the questions they bring up, or forcing them to stay upon a question that Socrates chooses? As we can see in the *Meno* it is because Socrates does not think that their conversation will be substantial or profitable if they attempt to give answers to certain questions. He does not think that they are ready to take on such questions. He feels that there is still a lot of groundwork to be done.

Socrates does not refuse to answer Meno's questions about virtue because he does not care about these matters. He refuses to speak about them because he does not think that the conversation is ripe for them in its current condition.

Consider what Socrates tells Callicles at the conclusion of their conversation in the *Gorgias*. He tells Callicles to come and join him in philosophy so that they may 'practice excellence' together. Then he says:

'And then, after we've practiced it together, then at last, if we think we should, we'll turn to politics, or then we'll deliberate about whatever subject we please, when we're better at deliberating than we are now. For it's a shameful thing for us, being in the condition we appear to be in at present – when we never think the same about the same subjects, the most important ones at that – to sound off as though we're somebodies. That's how far behind in education we've fallen.'<sup>477</sup>

Let us now look at the *Meno* for an example of Socrates refusing to take up Meno's questions.

The work begins when Meno asks Socrates whether virtue is teachable. We know that this is a question that Socrates cares about and has thought about. We see this from the conclusion of the *Meno* where Socrates says that he has made great efforts over

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<sup>477</sup> *Gorgias* 527d

the years to find teachers of virtue, but that he has not yet met one<sup>478</sup>. Socrates interest in this question is again exhibited in the *Protagoras*.

Nevertheless Socrates answers Meno telling him that his question cannot be answered as it is being asked. Socrates says that he does not know the answer, whilst making the point that he does not expect that Meno, or anyone else who pretends to speak on this matter can give a worthwhile rhetorical answer<sup>479</sup>.

Meno is taken aback by this. He is confident that he does have answers. Socrates then, thinking that Meno's belief that he knows what in fact he does not know will inhibit him from engaging in any substantial enquiry into the matter of virtue, begins a refutation of Meno, with the purpose of revealing to him his mistake. In this way he intends to rid him of his conceptual handicap (of thinking he knows what he does not in fact yet know)<sup>480</sup>. The dialogue becomes what we call 'elenctic'.

After a process of elenctic Meno asks Socrates again to answer whether virtue is teachable. Socrates eventually concedes and they begin together an examination of the question. However, Socrates only agreed to proceed with this question because Meno insisted. Meno's eagerness to speak about this, and perhaps the fact that Meno would be leaving Athens the following day and his time with Socrates was limited, convinced Socrates to enquire about this question together with Meno.

The obvious willingness and desire of Meno to speak about this motivates Socrates. However, we know that Socrates himself would normally take a milder approach, and would not have taken up such a question with Meno. He would have made sure first that a foundation had been laid. As he told Callicles in the *Gorgias*, he would have prepared Meno more thoroughly before taking on such a complex question. We have

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<sup>478</sup> *Meno* 89e

<sup>479</sup> See *Meno* 71

<sup>480</sup> 71d

reason then to assume that, had Meno not insisted, they would not have come to touch upon this topic.

Socrates tells us as much. He says:

‘If I were directing you, Meno, and not only myself, we would not have investigated whether virtue is teachable or not before we had investigated what virtue itself is. But because you do not even attempt to rule yourself, in order that you may be free, but you try to rule me and do so, I will agree with you.... So we must, it appears, enquire into the qualities of something the nature of which we do not yet know.’

If we look at Plato’s texts we will see a pattern. That is: when Socrates’ interlocutor is someone capable, Socrates is happy to indulge in more complex discussion. When on the other hand his interlocutor exhibits behaviors that Socrates considers to be barriers to philosophical activity, he makes an effort instead to bring his interlocutor to a level from whence he could eventually participate in an authentic enquiry. The dialogue between them then is simpler, and deals primarily with the interlocutor’s understanding of their own unknowing.

One example of this is the *Protagoras*. The dialogue begins with an exchange between Socrates and an excited youth<sup>481</sup> Hippocrates. Socrates quickly shows Hippocrates to be thoughtless, in that he is eager to study under the sophist Protagoras, certain that he will benefit from this. Socrates shows that he is eager to attain an education which he has not properly evaluated. He has not thought properly about the matter but he is entirely willing to give himself over to the sophist. We are given to understand that this youth has been careless<sup>482</sup>.

The dialogue then that takes place between Socrates and Hippocrates is merely a series of questions and answers where Socrates is urging Hippocrates to be more

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<sup>481</sup> *Protagoras* 310d

<sup>482</sup> 311

careful and thoughtful and to not assume that he knows what he does not yet know. He warns him that such carelessness over one's soul can be harmful<sup>483</sup>.

Socrates then only agrees to approach Protagoras with Hippocrates on the condition that the two of them will enquire more seriously into the matter of what sort of education it is good to subject one's self to. 'Anyway', he says, 'these are the matters we should look into'.

'Having agreed on this', Socrates tells us, only then did we set out to meet Protagoras.

In the same Platonic work we see Socrates conversing with Protagoras. Protagoras is a very educated and successful sophist. With him, Socrates is able to touch upon more complex matters. Together, among other things, they discuss whether virtue is teachable; they compare speech giving to the dialogical method of questions and answer; the definition of virtue; whether people can be good; the relationship between ignorance and evil; the concept of pleasure; cowardice and courage.

Consider also the *Theaetetus*. This is a dialogue where Socrates goes into great depth and takes great pains to thoroughly examine whether things are relative or whether there are universal truths.

As Socrates explains to Theodorus, this is very much an ethical question. The Protagorean axiom: 'man is the measure of all things' is being discussed. The discussion in the dialogue becomes rather technical and much of it is logical analysis, but Socrates is aware that this question is part of a larger question about ethics.

Socrates tells us this at 172b. He says:

'It is in those other questions I am taking about – just and unjust, pious and impious – that men are ready to insist that no one of these things has by nature any being of its own; in

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<sup>483</sup> 313b

respect of these, they say, what seems to people collectively to be so is true.... But I see, Theodorus, that we are becoming involved in a greater discussion emerging from a lesser one’.

Socrates knows that what they are discussing with Theaetetus and Theodorus is a technical element of a significant ethical question. Socrates is willing to do this, I think, because he is speaking with two men who are very intelligent and particularly mathematically minded. Theaetetus shows himself to be capable of going into such analytic depth, and Socrates is happy to oblige him.

The praises of Theaetetus are sung clearly throughout the dialogue. From the very start we are told about his excellence. Euclides and Terpsion speak about him and say:

‘A fine man.... Only now I was listening to some people singing his praises for the way he behaved in battle.’

‘Well there is nothing extraordinary about that. Much more to be wondered at if he hadn’t distinguished himself.’

As Euclides remembers, this is an opinion that Socrates shared:

‘I thought of Socrates and what a remarkably good prophet he was... about Theaetetus. It was not long before his death... that he came across Theaetetus, who was a boy at the time. Socrates met him and had a talk with him, and was very much struck with his natural ability; ...he repeated to me the discussion they had and it was well worth listening to. And he said to me that we should inevitably hear more of Theaetetus if he lived to grow up.’<sup>484</sup>

Plato does not stop there in informing us about the abilities of Theaetetus. The main body of the dialogue begins with Socrates asking Theodorus if there are any young men with exceptional cognitive abilities. Theodorus then introduces Theaetetus by praising him very highly.

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<sup>484</sup> 142b7-142d3

It is remarked on several occasions that Theaetetus is an exceptionally able learner, his teacher saying: ‘But this boy approaches his studies in a smooth, sure, effective way, and with great good temper; it reminds one of the quiet flow of a stream of oil. The result is that it is astonishing to see how he gets through his work’<sup>485</sup>.

This prepares the reader for what is to come. Together with Socrates, Theaetetus will be seen to get through an astonishing work of enquiry. The abilities of the young man are so great, that Socrates is not inhibited by his interlocutor. Together they are able to indulge in the sophisticated analysis that is the *Theaetetus*. Socrates here has found a fellow enquirer whom he can enjoy.

What is worth noting is that in this dialogue Theaetetus is compared to Socrates himself. First physically by Theodorus<sup>486</sup>, and then cognitively by Socrates. Socrates responds positively to the promise of such a youth. He wants to meet him, and if I dare make a conjecture, perhaps Socrates is hoping that with Theaetetus he will finally have an exchange that is up to his own standard, one that he might himself find fulfilling. This, we might imagine, is something Socrates always longed for and looked for, the way every skilled person longs to interact with their equals.

Socrates says: ‘I wish you would ask him to come and sit with us over here’. This is reminiscent of the desire that Socrates shows to speak with Charmides<sup>487</sup>, another youth who is introduced to him as particularly promising<sup>488</sup>.

Then Socrates says: ‘Yes, come along, Theaetetus, I want to see for myself what sort of face I have.’ To make yet another conjecture, this literary choice by Plato serves also as a symbolism for what occurs between Socrates and Theaetetus. For we might say that it is in dialogue with one’s equals that a person has the chance to see their

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<sup>485</sup> 144b

<sup>486</sup> 143e

<sup>487</sup> *Charmides* 155b

<sup>488</sup> Though not to the degree that Theaetetus is presented as excellent.



own abilities. Much like a talented dancer can dance with everyone and even teach them some dance moves, but they will be able to dance most beautifully and express their talent when they have a dance partner who is up to their own standard.

Socrates is frank about his desire to interact with Theaetetus. From the start of their conversation he says:

‘But supposing it were the soul of one of us [Theodorus] was praising? Suppose he said one of us was good and wise? Oughtn’t the one who heard that be *very anxious* to examine the object of such praise? And oughtn’t the other be very willing to show himself off?’

Then, my dear Theaetetus, now is the time for you to show yourself and for me to examine you. For although Theodorus often gives me flattering testimonials for people... I assure you I have never before heard him praise anybody in the way he has just praised you.<sup>489</sup>

Again, at 146a Socrates again expresses his intense desire to enquire into matters in the dialogical company of Theaetetus. He does not expect that in this conversation he will merely be addressing the young man’s basic barriers to learning, as we saw him do with Hippocrates. Socrates expects that this will be an interesting and involved discussion. He expects that he will be able, together with Theaetetus to examine matters that interest him deeply. And for this reason their enquiry begins from its onset with complex questions. He says:

‘Now this is just where my difficulty comes in. I can’t get a proper grasp of what on earth knowledge really is. Could we manage to put it into words? What do all of you say? Who’ll speak first?... Well why this silence? Theodorus? I hope my love of argument is not making me forget my manners – just because I’m so anxious to start a discussion and get us all friendly and talkative together?’

Given Theaetetus’ exceptional promise, we might say also that it is appropriate that Socrates speaks to Theaetetus about himself in a manner that is not seen with any other interlocutor. Describing himself as a midwife, Socrates takes the opportunity of speaking with an interlocutor who will understand him so well, to speak about his art.

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<sup>489</sup> *Theaetetus* 145b

Socrates is not able to speak about himself so openly to most people because they are not able to understand him. With Theaetetus however, Socrates feels that he is speaking with a kindred spirit, and his tongue is loosened. He tells this much to Theaetetus saying:

‘I do [have the art of the midwife], believe me. Only don’t give me away to the rest of the world, will you? You see, my friend, it is a secret that I have this art. That is not one of the things you hear people saying about me, because they don’t know; but they do say that I am a very odd sort of person, always casing people to get into difficulties. You must have heard that, surely.... And shall I tell you what is the explanation of that?<sup>490</sup>

Such a difficult reputation is one that Socrates is willing to bear. He considers it to be the price one needs to pay for living the life of excellence, for Socrates does not believe that society welcomes true excellence. We can see this in what he says to Callicles at the conclusion of the *Gorgias*:

‘So, listen to me and follow me to where I am.... Let someone despise you as a fool and throw dirt on you, if he likes. And yes, by Zeus, confidently let him deal you that demeaning blow. Nothing terrible will happen to you really are an admirable and good man, one who practices excellence’.<sup>491</sup>

Nevertheless, we can imagine that Socrates is glad to meet someone who is able to understand him and fully appreciate his talents. We also would expect these two to enjoy a deeper and more complex conversation than the ones we see Socrates having with other people.

Perhaps a similar explanation could be given of the *Republic*. The reader will notice the following: that in books one and two of the dialogue Socrates encounters a number of different interlocutors. Each has a different intellectual ability, a different

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<sup>490</sup> 149a

<sup>491</sup> *Gorgias* 527c6-527d3

degree of interest in enquiry and different attitudinal inclinations. Socrates responds to each appropriately.

As the ability and willingness of the interlocutor increase, the complexity of Socrates' engagement also increases. The exposition of the just state that makes up the *Republic* begins after Socrates is challenged by two brothers, Adeimantus and Glaucon, both of whom are praised for their intellectual abilities. Notice also that both brothers are entirely willing, and in fact strongly desire, to engage in enquiry with Socrates. At no point in the central part of *Republic* does Socrates encounter any resistance to enquiry from his main interlocutor. On the contrary, his interlocutor is willing and able to follow Socrates into every detail of the discussion. He even reminds Socrates, and prompts him to take up strands of the enquiry which had been put aside.

Such a reading of the *Republic* is possible<sup>492</sup>.

#### So what does all this mean for the elenchus?

In the previous section we have been saying that: although there is much disagreement regarding the details of what should count as the elenchus; what its aims are; and whether it is the appropriate name for what Socrates did dialogically; there is nevertheless significant agreement amongst scholars about what Socrates did in the agora.

It is widely acknowledge that he: disputed knowledge that was false and addresses the conceit of knowledge in this manner; sought some form of knowledge together with

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<sup>492</sup> In order to apply this sort of analysis to the *Republic* one needs to enter into the 'Socratic Question', since it is generally accepted that the main body of the *Republic* is Platonic rather than Socratic. We would like to avoid this question in the present thesis, merely for the purpose of not losing the focus of this work. We wish here only to suggest that such a reading is possible. A separate piece of research would be needed however to do this matter justice.

others through dialogue; and that in the process he probably assessed the lives of the interlocutors and made felt to what degree they were pursuing virtue.

Much of the debate then around Socratic method and the elenchus can perhaps be dissolved by making equivocal terms more precise. Much of the disagreement is also about what we should name what Socrates did, and how we should delineate the elenchus. Less of the debate is in fact about what Socrates actually did in the agora.

What really interests us in this thesis is what Socrates did in the agora (regardless of what we might call it). Can we then take what we have found agreement about and dismiss much of the disagreement as dispute about where to draw the line regarding the elenchus (and in this sense secondary to describing to what Socrates did)? Whether we call it the elenchus or something else?

To an extent, this is what we will do for the purposes of this particular thesis. However, we find that James Doyle (2012) gives us a good reason for wanting to delineate Socrates' methodology.

Doyle points out that scholars generally accept that (a) that which Socrates was commanded to do by the god is the same as (b) that which he urges others to do, and shows them how to do by example<sup>493</sup>.

He makes the case that this confusion of what Socrates refers to in the *Apology* as his service to Athens (assigned to him by the god) with what Socrates urges and teaches others to do is inappropriate<sup>494</sup>. We do not need to rehearse his argument for this claim here, but simply to say that we find his case convincing.

As an effect we find Doyle gives us grounds for distinguishing between some sort of elenchus carried out by Socrates (as commanded by the god) and the practice of

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<sup>493</sup> 2012: 40

<sup>494</sup> 2012: 39-58

philosophy which he urges everyone to take up. This distinction is vital for us in our study of what Socrates did as an educator in the agora. We can say that he engaged in something like the elenchus on certain occasions; but that what he taught others to do, and urged them to do, was something else: it was the act of philosophy.

The elenchus might have been a specific tool used by Socrates to examine people; but the process of philosophical enquiry that he teaches and promotes is something other, and arguably broader.

Doyle distinguishes the act of philosophy taught by Socrates from the ‘missionary’ interrogation (that he himself conducts in obedience to the god) in the following ways; and shows these elements of philosophical enquiry by pointing us to the *Gorgias*:

(a) In a process of elenchus, where Socrates aims to cross-examine his interlocutor, Socrates needs to act as the questioner. In the process of philosophy as dialogical enquiry, both the questioner and the answerer are engaged in philosophy. They search together<sup>495</sup>.

(b) In the elenctic process there is a coercive element to the interrogation. Socrates insists until the interlocutor is brought to the realization of their error. When Socrates is doing philosophy, as we see him do with Gorgias, both parties need to be willing to participate in the dialogue<sup>496</sup>.

(c) When an interlocutor is being refuted it is necessary that they say what they believe so that the refutation can be personal. When persons are participating in philosophical enquiry instead, ‘it *doesn't* matter which of those present make what contribution’ because the discovery of truth is beneficial for all of the participants<sup>497</sup>.

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<sup>495</sup> *ibid*: 61

<sup>496</sup> 2012: 62

<sup>497</sup> *ibid*: 65

(d) Finally, in philosophical enquiry it is expected that every participant shares the same motivation: the will to truth<sup>498</sup>.

Doyle shows that what Socrates is seen doing in the *Gorgias* is significantly different from the act that he describes himself in the *Apology* as taking up at the behest of the god. He calls the one ‘lay philosophy’ and claims that this is what Socrates teaches and urges others to do. The second he calls missionary philosophy and claims that this is what Socrates himself did in response to the Delphic oracle, and that it is something different from what he urges others to do.

This point is very important because it draws our attention to the fact that - what Doyle calls our ‘monomaniacal preoccupation with Socratic elenchus’<sup>499</sup> – does not help us necessarily to understand Socrates as an educator. There seems to be good reason to distinguish the occasions of Socrates cross-examining his fellow Athenians and his practice of philosophy through dialogue with others.

We want to agree with Werner Jaeger that the elenchus is one method used by Socrates. It is something that he utilizes on certain occasions<sup>500</sup>; but prompted also by Doyle, we feel that in order to understand Socrates as a teacher in the agora, we need to look beyond the limits of the elenchus.

### Our findings

In chapter one I said that Socrates was a teacher. I defined that as: he gave intellectual, moral and social instruction, he taught skills, he gave direction, and he showed his fellows ‘how to do something’. In chapter six I referred to Socrates as an

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<sup>498</sup> *ibid*: 70

<sup>499</sup> *ibid*: 63

<sup>500</sup> 1943: 39

andragogue. This is not to say something different. It simply indicates more specifically that his education was directed at adults rather than children.

I argued that as an educator Socrates was actively interested in the epistemic state of his fellows and that he engaged with all of the following: what the interlocutor knew; what they thought they knew; the disputation of any inappropriate claims to knowledge which they made; the evaluation of the opinions they held; and in helping them to make ‘correct’ steps towards learning; so as to improve their method of dealing with knowledge generally.

We found also that Socrates was not a teacher in the manner of ‘banking education’ – where one transmits ready bits of knowledge to others. Rather, he used the process of dialogue to bring others to an improved epistemic state. He engaged people in philosophy and through this process educated them<sup>501</sup>.

In section I.II I argued that Socrates acted as a teacher of others because he cared for the wellbeing of their souls. In chapter two made the distinction: that Socrates was not a teacher of virtue but a teacher of philosophy. Though as a teacher of philosophy, what he taught pertained to helping people lead a virtuous life. As we argued: philosophical enquiry and learning were for Socrates an important part of being and becoming virtuous.

In chapter three I examined Socrates’ notion of the soul in order to show that: virtue was the health of the soul; caring for the souls of others amounts to helping them to become more virtuous; and again, that learning and philosophy are the way which Socrates saw for bringing about this health. It is for this reason then that Socrates, in caring for the souls of his fellows, engaged educationally with their epistemic state. It is for this purpose that he was the andragogue he was.

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<sup>501</sup> See section I.I of this thesis for all of the above.

Following this it was argued that Socrates was an intellectualist and that his engagement with others was notably intellectual. We resisted however the view that this intellectualism made Socrates neglect the other aspects of a person's being. We made the case that for Socrates, philosophy was a process that involved the entire person. One's intellect as well as their motivation and attitude had to be inclined towards philosophy in order to be successful in it.

Therefore, we argued, Socrates as an educator was involved in 'turning the person' to philosophy. He tried to spark their love for it as well as turn their mind to it. Socrates sought a dedication to philosophy that only comes with a sincere love of truth. This was a love he considered most valuable, and he tried to awaken other people to it.

In section III.I.II we used the *Gorgias* in order to go into more detail about Socrates' teaching regarding the process of philosophy and the role of the attitude therein. It was shown there that Socrates had much to teach his interlocutors about how they can engage with and thus benefit from true philosophical enquiry. He taught them *how to* participate in the process of enquiry. In short, he taught what it meant for a person to be fully dedicated to truth (a requirement for achieving philosophical enquiry).

Having prepared thus the ground, we began in chapter four to speak about the technicalities of Socrates' method of teaching. We discussed the widespread view that Socrates' dialogical act was primarily disputative and entirely destructive: that his method was to reveal to people that their beliefs were unsustainable.

We argued that there is good reason to think that this view of Socrates as a disputant is limited and that his educational act needs to have been richer and more multifaceted than this. We saw that in the *Apology* where Socrates reflects on his own dialogical act in the agora, he uses a variety of verbs to describe what he did, suggesting that we need to understand him as doing more over and above showing up problems with his interlocutors' belief-set. At the end of chapter six we referred to James Doyle (2012)



who gives us further textual reason to separate Socrates' 'negative' act of disputation from his other educational philosophical activities.

We argued that it would have been out of character for Socrates – who so cared for his fellows - if he were to leave them only with a sense of their own ignorance, and not strive to give people further training in philosophy.

At the start of chapter four we made the case that Socrates valued enquiry and learning very highly. He might have seen the recognition of one's ignorance as a useful and necessary stage of learning – an awareness without which one could not become 'humble' enough to be able to participate in philosophy – but the urgency with which he sought knowledge and truth brought him to further stages of learning. As Doyle (2012) pointed out, it is this pursuit of truth and knowledge that Socrates urged others to undertake (and taught them how to carry out).

In chapter five we emphasized that Socrates was more a teacher of process than of content. That is not to say that he never achieved any knowledge through the process of philosophy; but that he did not simply pass on any 'moral facts' to others. He joined them in, and guided them through, a process of philosophical enquiry whereby he believed moral truths can be known. We confirmed with this what we had already found in chapter II: that Socrates taught people *how to do* philosophy.

We argued that Socratic dialogical education can otherwise be called: an 'apprenticeship in philosophy'.

In this chapter (chapter VI) we looked briefly at the problems faced by those scholars who have attempted to describe the total (or the essence) of what Socrates did through the mechanism of the 'elenchus'. Our discussion of this vast topic has been by no means conclusive; but we suggested that the elenchus is best understood as *a part of* what Socrates did, or, as *one tool* he employed for his general educational aims.

In light of these findings we expect Socrates to have an educative dialogical approach to his interlocutors that brought them into the practice of philosophy: where philosophy is the love for and pursuit of truth and (thus also of) virtue. A method of elenchus would have been useful to Socrates in so far as it serves towards this goal.

We agree with most of the scholars discussed in this chapter in the sense that we consider that Socrates did *all* of these things: he scrutinized people and tested their epistemic states, showing them where they were lacking in knowledge of virtue; he examined propositions regarding virtue and sought true knowledge regarding ethical matters; and he examined *both* conceptions of reality and persons.

In all of these acts Socrates sought to bring to light what is true and how things really are for, as he often said, the benefit of all. To know what is true about these matters is beneficial for all.

In our view Socrates was an educator who sought truth in two senses. Firstly he examined propositions about the world in order to uncover how reality was constituted. He did this in full faith that the way things are inscribe moral reality and value. He sought in this way to know the laws of the moral cosmos<sup>502</sup>.

We can understand this when we look at Socrates' claim that virtue is knowledge. A person who understood the facts about their existence, the constitution of their soul and the inevitable track of moral laws: would see clearly that it is prudent to behave virtuously. For this reason, knowing the truth about propositions brings one closer to a world view that is true and which (therefore) motivates one to be virtuous.

Secondly, Socrates sought to show people the truth about their own relationship to virtue. On the first hand he alerted people to the fact that pursuing virtue was the most valuable activity; and he also urged them to pursue truth in their own lives whenever

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<sup>502</sup> This is the view of Werner Jaeger (1943: 28, 30-31) who found that: 'It was natural for a Greek to try to find in the cosmos the principle which he held to be the basis of order in human life, and to derive it from the cosmos.'

he found that they were failing to do so. He examined persons in this sense: he tested their approach to life and revealed to them their shortcomings in relation to the ultimate ideal of living the life of virtue, thus inciting them to turn their whole being and become more dedicated to living the virtuous life.

As he tells us in the *Apology*<sup>503</sup>: “Most excellent man, are you...not ashamed to care for the acquisition of wealth and for reputation and honor, when you neither care nor take thought for wisdom and truth and the perfection of your soul?” And if any of you argues the point, and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once, nor shall I go away, but I shall question and examine and cross-examine him, and if I find that he does not possess virtue, but says he does, I shall rebuke him for scorning the things that are of most importance and caring more for what is of less worth.’<sup>504</sup>

We therefore find it appropriate that despite the much apparent disagreement about the elenchus, there is an underlying general agreement about what Socrates was hoping to achieve through dialogue that connects (albeit sometimes loosely) the various positions. We consider that Socrates did all of these things.

Regarding the elenchus itself, we do not intend here to give yet another analysis of its specifics. We want merely to say that: as a tool it was useful for Socrates to the extent that served his general aims. It was an aspect of what he did.

We share Brickhouse and Smith’s (2002) conviction that what Socrates did with his interlocutors was broader than what an well-defined concept of the elenchus can describe; but we are optimistic that we can describe the general approach Socrates took.

In our concluding chapter that follows we try to say something more about Socrates andragogical methodology. We describe it (as has been suggested earlier in the thesis)

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<sup>503</sup> 29d-29e

<sup>504</sup> Translation by Fowler (1966)

as an andragogy of truth that uses the intuitive and broad method of counterexample to stimulate people to participate in philosophy: turning their focus and fixing their attention on truth and virtue.

## VI.

Socrates' general educational aims – what he did in the agora – have been approached throughout the entire thesis; but we want to say something summative about them in conclusion.

### An andragogy of truth

Socrates' aim in the agora is told to us completely plainly in the *Apology*. He wanted people to care about virtue, and to turn their attention, their mind, and their life to the pursuit of virtue. He wanted them to take up philosophy (philosophy = turning your mind away from petty matters towards the pursuit of virtue and truth). As he says in the *Apology*, he never rested from urging people to do this<sup>505</sup>.

This is what Socrates did in the agora. He urged people to care about virtue.

It is in context of this that we need to understand Socrates use of educational tools such as refutation, or more specifically, the 'elenchus'. In so far as refuting the belief-set of an interlocutor was useful for Socrates to prompt them towards philosophy (and it often was), he employed this tool.

But I want to speak now more generally about Socrates' approach to his interlocutors. I believe that what can be said generally about his attempts to bring his fellows to philosophy is so natural, simple and un-technical that it can appear ridiculous to

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<sup>505</sup> 30a

propose it as an ‘approach’ at all. Nevertheless I think that we need to state this *very basic* description of what Socrates did in the agora.

I believe that a problem in Socratic scholarship is that we have tried to characterize what Socrates did using concepts that are very narrow and technical - picking on an aspect of how Socrates enquired dialogically, isolating it, taking it out of context and overemphasizing it. In this way we have very much fragmented the Socrates given to us by Plato; and our understanding of him has been made poorer therefore.

I do not wish to say that analyses of the mechanisms used by Socrates (such as the elenchus) have not been fruitful or useful. They have been. Such concentrated study of Socrates’ practice has brought much of its detail to our attention, and we can only be grateful to the scholars who have achieved this detailed study.

However, any detailed study of a mechanism used by Socrates can only be fully understood in the context of his general practice; and I feel this is unfortunately lacking.

It is my purpose here therefore to say something more general about Socrates educational act in the agora. What I will argue might seem too obvious to be worth saying: that Socrates urged people to enquire into virtue, *and* into their own relationship to it; but I feel that it needs to be said nonetheless.

Let us see what Nicias and Laches expect to learn from Socrates in the *Laches*. Socrates has just shown his intent to criticize them for their willingness to give advice about the education of the youth<sup>506</sup>; and they consider whether they are willing to submit themselves to (what Nicias warns will be) a Socratic sort of dialogue.

Nicias explains that in this dialogical engagement with Socrates he expects:

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<sup>506</sup> 186a-187b

- To give an account of himself, of how he spends his days, and of the sort of life he chooses to lead. He then expects that Socrates will put ‘all of his ways’ to the test<sup>507</sup>.
- That Socrates will be frank and critical of him, reminding him of any past or present misdoing<sup>508</sup>.
- That through this process he will *learn* from Socrates<sup>509</sup> and be improved thereby.

Laches expects:

- To be cross-examined by Socrates,
- and to learn from him because of it<sup>510</sup>
- That Socrates will also learn from Laches during the exchange<sup>511</sup>.

Both enter the conversation expecting to be both *taught* and *refuted*<sup>512</sup>; and the learning they expect is regarding living one’s life virtuously. They expect to be improved in this sense: by having their errors pointed out to them and being reminded of how they ought to conduct themselves instead. It is this learning that they hope to receive from Socrates, and it is for this reason that they willingly submit themselves to scrutiny. Because like Solon, they trust that such improvement is beneficial for them<sup>513</sup>.

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<sup>507</sup> 187e11-188a4

<sup>508</sup> 188b1

<sup>509</sup> 188b4

<sup>510</sup> 189a

<sup>511</sup> 189b

<sup>512</sup> 189b2

<sup>513</sup> 188b4 and 189a3

It is this that Laches explains when he tells the company that he is very willing to listen to a man who is himself virtuous and trustworthy; but that he is put off by men who can speak well but of whom there is no evidence of virtue.

Together with this, they are open to learning something about virtue itself if they are lacking this knowledge, as Laches expects that Socrates will learn from him if *he* has any knowledge regarding it that Socrates lacks.

This experience of learning *that which is most important* through a perusing dialogue is precisely what Socrates tells us in the *Apology* he does for his fellows. Like a gadfly on a drowsy horse he prompts his fellows to become more alert and philosophically active<sup>514</sup>; through urging and reproaching each one<sup>515</sup> he urges them to care for virtue<sup>516</sup>.

He talks ‘every day about virtue’ and about these things he examines himself and others<sup>517</sup>. In this way Socrates claims to make his fellows truly happy<sup>518</sup>. It is this benefit that Nicias and Laches desire in conversing with Socrates.

I find that a general and yet precise way to describe Socrates’ system of education (a way that highlights its defining characteristics) is as offering an apprenticeship in philosophy; or in other words: he taught the practical processes of the love of truth.

As we shall see, truth had two functions for Socrates in his educational aim. The first is understood by his claim that virtue is knowledge. Person who truly understands reality will realize that being virtuous is the most prudent way to be. It is the most

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<sup>514</sup> *Apology* 30e

<sup>515</sup> 31a

<sup>516</sup> 31b5

<sup>517</sup> 38a

<sup>518</sup> 36d9



beneficial for them. Therefore true understanding is the most direct motivation for pursuing virtue.

Secondly, as we saw with Nicias and Laches, examining one's self and becoming aware of the truth regarding the value of one's choices reminds the person that they need to correct themselves and better position themselves in their attempts to live in a virtuous manner. Dialogue with Socrates (we might say) brings one face to face with themselves and examines them in the context of virtue. It highlights thus where improvement is needed.

Socrates engaged his fellow men in, and guided them through, a pursuit of truth; all the while teaching them how to best participate in such a process. Through a process of both correcting their beliefs regarding reality and virtue; and by turning their attention to themselves and their shortcomings, Socrates assisted people to live a more truthful life.

His main practice of andragogy had three main elements to it: (i) it raised awareness about the value of truth; (ii) it taught people how to seek out of truth; and (iii) it had a method for addressing the various intellectual barriers that people face whilst searching for truth.

When I say that his was an andragogy of truth – that Socrates was an andragogue of truth – I am merely saying, in a new way, that Socrates was a teacher of philosophy. That is, if we understand philosophy – *φιλοσοφία* – in the way that Plato has used it. It literally means the love for wisdom and truth, but as a term denoting a practice, when used by Plato, it meant ‘the investigation of truth and nature’<sup>519</sup>.

(i) Teaching the value of truth

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<sup>519</sup> See entry in Middle Liddell

One of the three basic elements of Socrates' andragogy of truth was that he passed on to people an awareness for the value of truth. Socrates himself esteemed truth very highly and with his engagement with his fellow men he desired to bring others to value truth also.

We can find this for example in the *Theaetetus*. At 150e we can see that for Socrates successful thought is also truthful thought; and this is what Socrates brings forth in others. He says:

‘And after they have gone away from me they have resorted to harmful company, with the result that what remained within them has miscarried; while they have neglected the children I helped them to bring forth, and lost them, because they set more value upon lies and phantoms than upon the truth; finally they have been set down for ignorant fools, both by themselves and by everybody else’

As we can see from this quote, Socratic andragogy insisted that people keep their minds upon the truth; and when someone left Socrates' influence before they had acquired this love of truth for themselves, they would become harmed by becoming attracted to 'lies and phantoms'.

Again at 19d-e of the *Apology* Socrates tells the jury that what is characteristic of his pedagogical engagement of others is that he is committed to truthfulness. In fact, he says, that he chose to not receive a fee for his conversations precisely for this reason: he wanted to preserve the right to always be truthful. As Teloh has summarised it: ‘sophists whose eyes are on their fees must pander to the students, and give them what they want...Socrates does not take a fee, and hence he is free to tell the truth, even if the truth angers others.’<sup>520</sup>

A further example from the *Apology* comes at 29d-e where Socrates again shows that his educational act involves prompting people to think about the truth. He says:

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<sup>520</sup> 1986: 109

‘Men of Athens...I will obey the god... and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practice philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: Good Sir... are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth...?’<sup>521</sup>

Finally a third example is found in the *Gorgias* at 526d. Here Socrates says:

‘So I disregard the things held in honor by the majority of people, and by practicing truth I really try, to the best of my ability, to be and to live as a very good man, and when I die, to die like that. And I call on all other people as well, as far as I can... to this way of life, this contest, that I hold to be worth all the other contests in life.’

Here, as in the above references we can see Socrates explicitly stating that his aim is to engage in truthful thought and to bring others to do so also. In the digression of the *Theaetetus*, when speaking about the free man and the slave, he calls this act of thinking with truth the life of philosophy<sup>522</sup>.

Why then, as Socrates taught, was truth and truthful reflection so very important and valuable? What was so valuable about truth?

For Socrates truth had paramount value. Put simply, Socrates believed that the way we live our lives is supremely important. He believed that the way one lives their life has serious consequences. We can live it well, or we can live it badly, and this impacted accordingly on ones soul and its fate.

Socrates believed that making the wrong choices and living badly had serious ramifications. They ultimately devastated a person. Likewise, living well brought one closer to a desirable, healthy and joyful condition.

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<sup>521</sup> ‘χρημάτων μὲν οὐκ αἰσχύνῃ ἐπιμελούμενος ὅπως σοι ἔσται ὡς πλείστα, καὶ δόξης καὶ τιμῆς, φρονήσεως δὲ καὶ ἀληθείας’

<sup>522</sup> 172c

One then needed to take care to make the right choices and to live their life as best as they could. They ought to live as consciously as possible, so that the improper way of life could best be avoided. Socrates wanted people to take seriously the question of what makes a life good, and to make a point of living well.

As he tells Polus in the *Gorgias*: ‘...the matters of dispute between us are not at all insignificant ones, but pretty nearly those it’s most admirable to have knowledge about, and most shameful not to. For the heart of the matter is that the recognizing or failing to recognize who is happy and who is not.’<sup>523 524</sup>

Socrates thought that the question of: ‘what does it mean to live well’ was extremely important, and ultimately he believed that what makes a life good and worthwhile was virtue. Therefore, he thought, to know the truth is to know that one ought to live a virtuous life. Thus, to seek to know the truth came hand in hand with seeking to live well (virtuously).

Socrates believed that a person who did not know the truth of the matter might hence not understand the value of living a virtuous life. Hence unwittingly they could harm themselves by allowing themselves to choose to live a life of vice. For this reason Socrates called people to seek to know the truth and in the same breath called them to strive towards a life of virtue. For this reason he said that he who knows the truth will prefer virtue to vice: because to know the truth of the matter was to be aware that the only life worth living was the virtuous one.

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<sup>523</sup> *Gorgias* 472c

<sup>524</sup> The Greek reads: ‘καὶ γὰρ καὶ τυγχάνει περὶ ὧν ἀμφισβητοῦμεν οὐ πάνυ σμικρὰ ὄντα, ἀλλὰ σχεδόν τι ταῦτα περὶ ὧν εἰδέναι τε κάλλιστον μὴ εἰδέναι τε αἰσχιστον: τὸ γὰρ κεφάλαιον αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἢ γινώσκειν ἢ ἀγνοεῖν ὅστις τε εὐδαίμων ἐστὶν καὶ ὅστις μὴ.’

The unexamined life, for Socrates, was not worth living because a person who is not informed about how to live their life well would live it to their detriment.

We are told these things in the digression of the *Theaetetus* where Socrates compared the life of ‘the slave’ (a man who does not know what is good and allows himself to be preoccupied with vice), and the ‘free man’. The ‘free man’ Socrates tells us is the philo-sopher who has sought to know the truth about matters, and who has aligned himself with virtue<sup>525</sup>. Let us look again at the relevant text.

Of the truth Socrates says the following:

‘Let us put the truth in this way. In God there is no sort of wrong whatsoever; he is supremely just, and the thing most like him is the man who has become as just as it lies in human nature to be. And it is here that we see whether a man is truly able, or truly a weakling and a nonentity; for it is the realization of this that is genuine wisdom and goodness, while the failure to realize it is manifest folly and wickedness.’<sup>526</sup>

Furthermore, regarding the most prudent way to live one’s life says:

‘...a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and escape means becoming as like God as possible; and a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pious, with understanding.’<sup>527</sup>

Here Socrates said that after their mortal life each person will find a fate that is in accordance with the way they had lived their life. Those who loved virtue and strived to be virtuous would come closer to the divine which is supremely good and joyful.

He says:

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<sup>525</sup> 172d

<sup>526</sup> *Theaetetus* 176c

<sup>527</sup> *Theaetetus* 176a-b

‘...there are two patterns set up in reality. One is divine and supremely happy; the other has nothing of God in it, and is the pattern of deepest unhappiness. This truth the evildoer does not see; blinded by folly and utter lack of understanding, he fails to perceive that the effect of his unjust practices is to make him grow more and more like the one, and less and less like the other. For this he pays the penalty of living the life that corresponds to the life he is coming to resemble.... Unless he is delivered from this ‘ability’ of his, when he dies the place that is pure of all evil will not receive him; that he will forever go on living in this world a life after his own likeness – a bad man tied to bad company...’<sup>528</sup>

The same claims as these are made just as boldly and definitely by Socrates at the end of the *Gorgias*. Here Socrates is speaking to Callicles about the ultimate consequences of living a virtuous or a wicked life.

Of the man who was found to be without virtue, Socrates says that he is sent to Tartarus where he ‘undergoes the appropriate suffering’<sup>529</sup>. But, Socrates says, if a man’s soul is found to ‘have lived a pious life, one devoted to truth’ then it is admired by the judge and he is sent off to the Isles of the Blessed. This is ‘especially’ the case, Socrates says, of a ‘philosopher who has minded his own affairs and hasn’t been meddling in the course of his life’<sup>530</sup>.

‘For my part’, Socrates says, ‘I’m convinced by these accounts, and I think about how I’ll reveal to the judge a soul that’s as healthy as it can be. So I disregard the things held in honor by the majority of people, and by practicing truth I really try...to be and to live as a very good man, and when I die to die like that. And I call on all other people... to this way of life’<sup>531</sup>.

It is these truths about reality that inform Socrates’ andragogy. He calls people to look at the truth of their situation, to realize what their task is and to live a life of seeking

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<sup>528</sup> *Theaetetus* 176e-177a

<sup>529</sup> *Gorgias* 526b9

<sup>530</sup> 526c

<sup>531</sup> *Gorgias* 526d

to be virtuous. The virtuous life, Socrates concludes is the one that will be advantageous both here and in the next life<sup>532</sup>. Therefore it is the most prudent life to live, and anyone who knows the truth of their existential situation will be informed about this.

This is at the heart of Socrates' andragogy, and it is for this reason that completes his discussion with Callicles by saying: 'So, listen to me and follow me to where I am, and when you've come here you'll be happy both during life and at its end, as the account indicates.'<sup>533</sup>

(i) It taught people how to seek out truth

In order to understand Socrates' very simple approach to helping people to enquire philosophically we need to borrow a notion attributed earlier to Vlastos by Scaltsas (1993). Let us remind ourselves of how Scaltsas explained the basic assumption of the elenchus:

'the interlocutor believes both truths and falsehoods and by systematic applications of the elenchus the falsehoods are exposed and discarded. Therefore, it is not the aim of the elenchus to get the interlocutor to believe certain truths (after a didactic exercise), because the interlocutor already does believe them. Rather, it is getting the interlocutor to realize that he/she is committed to a contradiction, and to drop the one set of beliefs in favour of the other....

The point here is that knowledge, for Socrates, comes by recognition rather than by acceptance.'<sup>534</sup>

Knowledge comes by recognition rather than by acceptance because a person already has the beliefs that they need in order to know truth. The problem, according to Socrates, is that these beliefs are lost amongst a confusion of false beliefs. The person

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<sup>532</sup> *Gorgias* 527b-c

<sup>533</sup> 527c6

<sup>534</sup> 1993: 130-131

needs to think thoroughly about what they believe and to sieve out those beliefs that do not stand the test of reason.

Learning is a difficult process of achieving clarity and consistency of thought; and it is achieved by meticulous effort and attentiveness to one's beliefs. Becoming wise, we might say, is the process of acquiring discernment through a close examination of possible beliefs.

We are reminded here of what Socrates tells Theaetetus regarding the 'importance of his performance' that likens him to the midwife: to deliver the patient sometimes of phantoms and sometimes of reality; and to distinguish the true from the false offspring<sup>535</sup>.

The information is there. It does not as such need to be constructed. Therefore what is most needed is attentiveness and persistence in the process of sorting.

It is this that Socrates felt was lacking in his fellows. Not that they were unable to know the truth, but that they were unwilling and did not apply themselves to the laborious process.

Socrates often lamented this lack of 'disciplined examination of beliefs' on the part of his fellows. He often pointed out to them that they were failing to do this, that they ought to do this, and explained to them what is involved in such a process. This is the process – the process of philosophy – that Socrates taught. We can otherwise call it the discipline of attentiveness and persistence in enquiry.

He have already seen this in practice in our study of the *Gorgias* in section III.I.II of this thesis. It is suggested in several of the 'Socratic dialogues' but let us consider briefly only one where this is 'positively' displayed: the *Charmides*.

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<sup>535</sup> *Theaetetus* 150b



At 159a Socrates and Charmides begin the enquiry into temperance. Charmides is to say what temperance is by reflecting upon his own experience of it and trying to put it into words. He makes a formulation that seems appropriate to him (temperance as quietness) and Socrates shows him the insufficiency of the formulation through a process of counterexample<sup>536</sup>. Socrates merely draws his attention to example cases when quietness would not be a favorable way to behave.

This difficulty is used to prompt Charmides to think more deeply about the question at hand. Socrates indicated to Charmides that he needs to undertake a more thorough examination of his beliefs about temperance.

Again, Charmides is to seek for the answer by reflecting on his own experience of it; but as Socrates showed, his reflection upon that which he experiences needs to be thorough and will demand Charmides concentration and effort.

We see this when Socrates tells Charmides: ‘Once more then...Charmides, attend more closely and look into yourself; reflect on the quality that is given you by the presence of temperance, and what quality it must have to work this effect on you. Take stock of all this and tell me, like a good, brave fellow, what it appears to you to be.’<sup>537</sup>

Then at 160e when Charmides had taken the cue from Socrates to think more deeply about the matter, Socrates showed his approval by reporting that Charmides had made ‘quite a manly effort of self-examination’<sup>538</sup>.

To put it very simply, Socrates’ method of seeking truth was thinking about it. As we had said of the analysis of Carpenter and Polansky of Socrates’ method, Socrates

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<sup>536</sup> 159c

<sup>537</sup> 160d5-160d9. Translations are from Lamb (1955)

<sup>538</sup> The Greek reads: ‘καὶ ὃς ἐπισχῶν καὶ πάνυ ἀνδρικῶς πρὸς ἑαυτὸν διασκεψάμενος’

encourages and proceeds in the process of dedicated thought via a process much like that of counterexample.

He investigated matters with his intellect seeking to find out what was the truth about them. His main method can be described very simply: he cared about it, he valued it, and so he sought it. He enquired into matters; with his interest always being, undistracted, on what is true. He applied this attentiveness himself; and he urged others to do the same.

### Turning our attention towards the truth

What we are claiming is reminiscent of a point voiced by Socrates in the *Republic* at 518c when speaking about the education needed for the enlightenment of cave dwellers. Here he explains the concept that we do not put true knowledge into the soul that does not possess it as if we were 'inserting vision into blind eyes'. Rather, people have eyes that are capable of seeing. An education enlightens when it turns the person towards the truth, so that they can make use of their 'eye sight'.

This idea of education as a turning or a re-orienting is standardly attributed to Plato. Losin (1996) identifies this 'orientation' of the soul in the direction in which it is best for it to mature, as basic to Plato's expounded educational theory. Whilst discussing the parable of the cave, he says:

'Perhaps the first thing we notice about the prisoners in the cave is that they are looking in the wrong direction. Their bonds prevent them from turning their heads away from the rear wall of the cave, and what they need to see is behind their heads (51461-2, 515a9-b1). The first step in the journey out of the cave is to stand up and turn around towards the firelight (periagein, 515c7), and the first impulse of the freed prisoners upon being made to look towards the firelight is to turn back towards the familiar shadows (apostrephein, 515e2). This notion of orientation is central to Plato's idea of education: he later describes real education as the art of

orientation (techne... tes periagoges, 518d3-4) and the educator's task as that of turning souls around (metastrephein, 518d5).<sup>539</sup>

What Losin describes comes directly out of Plato's texts. At 518d3-d7 of the *Republic* Socrates says the following:

‘Then education is concerned with doing this very thing, this turning around, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it. It isn't the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately.’

At first this might seem to us as a non-method. One might ask: why we would expect that ‘if we attend to truth we can hope to find it’<sup>540</sup>.

However, let us say that a method of *attentiveness, dedication in enquiry and a focus on truth* is the natural process with which we approach learning on most occasions. If we look at the way we study the subjects of the humanities, we will see that there is no formal or magical process that is structured to bring us to knowledge regarding them. Instead, we become knowledgeable in the humanities by becoming acquainted with them.

The methods we use are to read as much quality material we can find written on the topic of our interest and to critically consider this material<sup>541</sup>. We often read theories and evaluate their truthfulness through a process of counterexample: considering whether their claims correspond to reality as we experience it. Furthermore, to assist

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<sup>539</sup> 1996: 52

<sup>540</sup> We would like to thank Dr. Andrew Mason for bringing this question to our attention.

<sup>541</sup> Notice that Xenophon in his *Memoirs* reports that Socrates: ‘used to go through the ‘sages of old’ – i.e. the poets and philosophers – with his young friends in his own house in order to extract important passages from them’ (Jaeger 1943: 30). Also in Plato's *Phaedo* Socrates says that he did just this with the book of Anaxagoras (97b).

us in this process, we read the opposing views of other scholars and the counter arguments they have proposed regarding the questions at hand.

Though this process of considering claims and arguments, checking both for their logical validity and their truth value (in how they correspond to reality); and through a process of setting opposing arguments against each other and considering the merits of each, we cultivate in ourselves an understanding of the complexity of the matter at hand.

Coming to understand this complexity is the first real sign of becoming knowledgeable in a topic. This complexity then gives us a context in which we can evaluate every new argument and proposition we encounter. We become, through acquaintance with the topic more able to discern the quality of claims.

This process is achieved both on one's own through an internal dialogue with the literature and in dialogical exchange with others. We discuss these matters with others and pose counterexamples to one another, in this way improving our understanding.

Conducting this process of learning on one's own is more difficult and complicated than doing it in conversation with others, since it requires the tendency of self-awareness and self-criticism. It is something that we become better able to do as we mature in our ability to learn *dialogically* (that is: by considering arguments and counterexamples).

The mechanics of it are the same as what we do in the classroom with a teacher as a guide or in a critical dialogue with others. What I am describing here is simply the process of learning that is used in most schools and universities. It also occurs often spontaneously in social groups; and is characteristic of the manner in which most intellectuals think.

It is really a process of thinking thoroughly about a matter; staying focused on the topic; and evaluating claims always caring only for their truth-value. It is a process of enquiry through familiarization with and evaluation of concepts through counterexample.

Instinctively we might say that a person who is dedicated to an ideology and who spends their time constructing a view that merely reflects that discourse is not conducting genuine enquiry in the same way that a person who is seeking the truth (and in the process is open to being refuted and having their opinion changed) is.

Take for example a person who insists that the communist reading of history is the most appropriate. They do this because they have invested interests in the communist ideology. In their study of materials and in their consideration of the facts occurring in history they might ignore anything that casts questions on their general ideology and build a world view that employs only those elements that support their ideology. We call this propaganda.

Much study can be conducted by ideologists, and many of humanity's ideologists have been very well educated. Nevertheless, if their aim in study is not truth itself but propaganda, we would not say that their enquiry can bear the fruit of truth, except if it accidentally corresponds to reality.

Furthermore: in a competitive debate the two parties say what they can to prove their point, but do not interact in the sense of genuinely considering the position of the other and adjusting their views accordingly. Their interest is not in the truth of the matter but in making their own claim convincingly.

When watching a debate we can hope to hear some interesting arguments and some clever thought-constructions; but we cannot hope to search for truth in that way. Except that it, to the extent that the counterexamples the debaters pose to one another assist us in our own thinking about what is true.

The difference between a dialogue and a debate is that in dialogue the parties involved are willing to move together towards the common goal of truth. They might have their own strong beliefs, but in dialogue they need to either offer support for these beliefs and defend them against the logic of counterexample, or they need to be willing to reconsider them. Defending your claim at all costs does not allow you to participate in enquiry into truth.

In both examples given here a person fails to enquire into truth because they are not interested in it. It is not what they have their mind's eye set upon. This is the point that Socrates makes: that if you want to know the truth you need to want to know the truth indeed. It needs to be that which you seek; it needs to be the purpose and aim of your enquiry and of your dialogue.

If you do not seek you will not find, except accidentally perhaps. Even accidentally, one might wonder if without what Politis (2006) described as the *aporiai* that guide an enquiry, how would you recognize the truth if not as that which answers satisfyingly to your dilemmas? In any case, we can conclude that the person who does not actively seek the truth with their enquiry will have more difficulties finding it.

I propose that this is an intuitive fact; and I propose that much of what Socrates did was intuitive. He was not a teacher in the sense that he had developed some magical pedagogical technology, but in the sense that he applied himself to the process of assisting others through the processes of learning. Most teachers are teachers for this same reason.

#### Sharing learning with an intellectual

Socrates was an intellectual. He spent a lot of his energy thinking about matters and trying to understand them. He did not engage in enquiry simply in order to appear

learned, but because he had a genuine interest in the matters and a thirst for understanding. This is where he saw his fellows failing in their thought process: in that they prioritized other desires over the desire for truth<sup>542</sup>.

He enjoyed enquiry, both on his own and in the company of others through dialogue. He profited from enquiry personally. This was genuinely so for Socrates, and thus, when he was in dialogue with another, he was a dedicated interlocutor who kept focused at the matters at hand. He pursued inquiries and strands of thought to their completion as far as one can, and he was not distracted from this process by any attachment to other things.

Socrates prioritized enquiry and did not compromise its pursuit for the sake of honor, reputation, wealth, or any other such benefit. Like the philosopher he describes in the digression of the *Theaetetus* Socrates does not care whether he has the ‘goods’ that people generally pride themselves in.

Socrates did not compromise his pursuit of truth for the demands made on us by such socially accepted ‘goods’ because simply, he does not value them. He found truth to be more fulfilling and satisfying than any of these things can ever be: and thus he found the pursuit of truth incomparably more worthwhile than spending time on such ‘trivial matters’ could ever be.

Socrates’ mind was on his wealth and his wealth was philosophy.

As he told Theodorus:

‘...he does not hold himself aloof from them in order to get a reputation, but because it is in reality only his body that lives and sleeps in the city. His mind, having come to the conclusion

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<sup>542</sup> Remember our discussion of the *Gorgias* on these point (section III.I.II of this thesis).

that all things are of little or no account, spurns them and pursues its winged way... tracking down by every path the entire nature of each whole among the things that are...<sup>543</sup>

Socrates lived the best life he could possibly come up with. He spent his time primarily doing that which according to him was the most worthwhile activity available to people. He engaged with his mind with things that are akin to the divine as these are the most valuable things he can manage to engage with. He asked: what is the truth about these things?

As he told Theodorus: ‘...a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and escape means becoming as like God as possible; and a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pious, with understanding.’<sup>544</sup>

Or again, as he told Callicles in the *Gorgias*: ‘I disregard the things held in honor by the majority of people, and by practicing truth I really try, to the best of my ability, to be and to live as a very good man.... this way of life, this contest, that I hold to be worth all the other contests in life.’<sup>545</sup>

Socrates lived the philosophical life practicing truth, as he tells us, to the best of his ability. As a part of such a life Socrates engaged in dialogue with other people. These were an element of his philosophical life and grew out of his personal love and practice of philosophy. As Doyle (2012) pointed out, it was in this way that Socrates offered himself as an example to his fellows; and it was in these ways that he urged them to imitate him.

As we have already seen him tell Callicles:

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<sup>543</sup> *Theaetetus* 173e

<sup>544</sup> *Theaetetus* 176b

<sup>545</sup> 526d5-526e4



‘...by practicing truth I try, to the best of my ability, to be and to live as a very good man....  
And I call on all other people as well, as far as I can...to this way of life, this contest, that I  
hold to be worth all the other contests in this life.’<sup>546</sup>

In his preoccupation with truth, and his teaching of it, Socrates used dialogue. That is, he engaged with other people in the examination of concepts through *logos*. Dialogue with his fellows had three functions for Socrates.

The first was that he learned about the world and about himself through a process of learning about others. As Socrates enquired into the way things are, he inevitably also enquired into people and their epistemic states. As people are a part of the world, Socrates came across them in his examination of truth.

We can see this particular function discussed in the *Apology*. Consider the section where Socrates is speaking about the Oracle at Delphi and the proclamation that he is the wisest of men. The report of this proclamation caused Socrates to wonder. He became interested in finding out what the oracle meant in how it spoke about wisdom. A dilemma was created for him and he wished to enquire into it.

He says: ‘When I heard of this reply I asked myself: ‘Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle?’.... For a long time I was at a loss as to his meaning; then I reluctantly turned to some such investigation as this; I went to one of those reputed wise, thinking that there, if anywhere, I could refute the oracle....’<sup>547</sup>

Furthermore he says: ‘After that I proceeded systematically. I realized, to my sorrow and alarm, that I was getting unpopular but I thought that I must attach the greatest importance to the god’s oracle, so I must go to all those who had any reputation for knowledge and examine its meaning.’<sup>548</sup>

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<sup>546</sup> 526d-e

<sup>547</sup> 21b

<sup>548</sup> 21e

An example of such a search might be the *Ion*. Here Socrates approaches a successful rhapsode. We are told that Ion had won the first prize for his performance at the Epidaurean festival of Asclepius.

As a rhapsode Ion would have been the voice that delivers the wisdom of the poets to the people. Socrates questions him, showing us that this man did not have any understanding of the poetry he was delivering, and that he had no ability to discern the truth or falsehood of what he repeats.

Socrates begins by asking him: if he is ‘so wonderfully clever about Homer alone, or also about Hesiod and Archilochus? He then proceeds to ask if he understands the subjects and would be able to explain the verses well. Particularly, he asks, would you be able to explain what the poets say about divination?

Ion agrees that he is indeed clever about these things and very able to carry the meaning of the poets<sup>549</sup>. However, Socrates immediately begins to question Ion and to show that he has not such abilities whatsoever.

By 538 Socrates has built the case that Ion does not have the slightest ability to discern and discriminate what the poets say. He is not able to judge whether what he delivers in his performances is true or false, just like: ‘a person who has not mastered a given profession will not be able to be a good judge of the things which belong to that profession, whether they are things said or things done.’

The short dialogue is then brought to an end with Socrates saying: ‘You aren’t even willing to tell me what it is that you’re so wonderfully clever *about*, though I’ve been begging you.’ He tells Ion that he does not seem in fact to have the wisdom that he claims to have. He agrees with Ion that he is indeed talented at his performance work, but that this is not because, as he claims, he has any knowledge about the subjects of

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<sup>549</sup> See *Ion* 531

which he speaks. He has a skill, but this is not to be puffed up into a pretension of having knowledge about other matters also.

Socrates points this fact out to Ion and thus offers him the opportunity to become aware of it, but Socrates also learns this for himself as he examines Ion. This particular dialogical preoccupation of Socrates is educational, both for himself and for others. Socrates learns about the world; at the same time, those around him who interact with him, are given the opportunity to learn along with him. As Socrates goes about his business of enquiring and questioning, people crowd around him and learn with him.

Alongside learning about the world and about people, dialogue serves the second function of Socrates learning about the world *with* others. Dialogue is a shared enquiry. It is the act of enquiry conducted with the active involvement of more than one person.

This is one of the reasons that Socrates wishes to converse with his fellows. Granted we might be able to say that Socrates is often disappointed in this desire, as he finds even the most reputed intellectuals to be unable or unwilling to follow him in discussion. Nevertheless, if we are to take Socrates on his word, this co-searching is something that he often hopes for in a dialogical exchange.

A good example of this in the *Theaetetus* at 146a where Socrates says to Theodorus and Theaetetus:

‘Now this is just where my difficulty comes in. I can’t get a proper grasp of what on earth knowledge really is. Could we manage to put it into words? What do all of you say? Who’ll speak first?’

This is also seen on occasions when Socrates speaks about what he wants to get at during a discussion. Socrates is sometimes accused by an interlocutor of wanting to win the argument and humiliate the other, to which Socrates always explains,

earnestly I think, that what he really wants is to have a conversation that will get to the truth of the matter of which they are speaking.

Rather preemptively Socrates explains this to Gorgias saying: ‘You should know that I’m convinced I’m one of those people who in a discussion with someone else really want to have knowledge of the subject the discussion’s about’<sup>550</sup>.

Again, at 457e Socrates says:

‘So, I’m afraid to pursue my examination of you, for fear that you should take me to be speaking with eagerness to win against you, rather than to have our subject become clear. For my part, I’d be pleased to continue questioning you if you’re the same kind of man I am, otherwise I would drop it. And what kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue; one who, however, wouldn’t be any less pleased to be refuted than to refute.’

This sort of dialogue – the co-searching by means of logos – is again education, both for Socrates and for others. Like every enquiry, it produces some learning for the participants. Whether it be that what they learn is that what they had presumed to know they do not in fact know (as in the *Theaetetus*), or whether some conclusions are drawn (as in the *Crito* and the *Gorgias*) Socrates and his interlocutors learn from this shared process.

Indeed it is often Socrates who is the authority in the discussions, though this does not make them any less shared. Much like if I were to go on a canoe trip with an experienced instructor and had spent the weekend being directed by him: it would still be correct to say that we went canoeing together and traversed ground together.

The third and final function that dialogue had with Socrates was the explicitly instructive function. Socrates, who was an experienced enquirer (philosopher), actively helped other people to enquire. He assisted them through the process of

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<sup>550</sup> *Gorgias* 453b

enquiry. Engaging in dialogue with Socrates was something like going fishing with an expert. He could see what people were doing wrong within the process of enquiry and he could correct them.

As we have been saying: the main barrier that people had to enquiring about the truth that we can deduce from what Socrates says is that they did not seek it. Socrates spent his life exhorting his fellows to engage in dialogue.

The problem was not to get people to speak. We do not see any occasion in Plato's or even Xenophon's corpus where someone refuses to speak and Socrates has to convince him to take up the activity of speaking.

Rather the problem was that people did not seek the truth about matters. They are happy to engage in speaking with others, but not in genuine enquiry. We often see Socrates having to deal with interlocutors who are very happy to engage in rhetoric and eristic. The people of Socrates' time were happy to converse with others, often for the purpose of showing off, keeping company, or gaining some benefit. The problem was that they did not think deeply or honestly about matters.

Socrates tried to turn people's focus and interest to truth. He tried to get them to enquire about it.

We are told of this in the *Apology*. Socrates says: 'I was attached to this city by the god... as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly.... I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long'<sup>551</sup>.

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<sup>551</sup> *Apology* 30e

He continues saying that he went beyond human nature in having neglected all of his own affairs always concerning himself with his fellows: ‘approaching each one of you like a father or an elder brother to persuade you to care for virtue’<sup>552</sup>.

As we saw in our analysis of the *Gorgias*<sup>553</sup> and briefly in the *Charmides*: Socrates’ main method was to organize the discussion and to keep the other person focused on the discussion. He did not allow his interlocutors to speak lightly about matters, but if they spoke empty words he drew their attention to the actual meaning and consequences of what they were saying. He shone a light at what they were saying and assuming, revealing its inadequacy.

However, as Socrates often said, his purpose was not to show up the shortcomings of the other. He pointed out their cognitive faults in an attempt to help them to improve what it was they were saying. For this reason Socrates focused primarily on how a discussion (and the thought process exhibited therein) could be improved. He concentrated on those mistakes that acted as barriers to learning. We will discuss these further in the following section.

This third function that dialogue had with Socrates was the one scholars most frequently identify as pedagogical. Socrates served this role, of putting his fellows through a sort of ‘apprenticeship’ in enquiry, wherever it was needed. Being an expert enquirer, wherever he perceived an inability in another to participate in philosophy, Socrates would help his interlocutor to overcome this.

His method was straightforward and frank. He pointed out the fault.

As he says in the *Apology* at 23b: ‘Therefore I am still even now going about and searching and investigating at the god’s behest anyone, whether citizen or foreigner,

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<sup>552</sup> 31b

<sup>553</sup> In section III.I.II of this thesis

who I think is wise; and when he does not seem so to me, I give aid to the god and show that he is not wise.’

His method was to care and to bother to engage with others despite the difficulties it caused him. His method was to dare to be difficult and often unpopular by challenging people: by thinking deeply about what they say and believe and pulling them up on it. His method was to focus and to thoroughly examine matters.

Socrates sought truth and he sought it also with other people. Depending on the level of his interlocutor, this co-searching took on different forms. With his experienced eye for enquiry Socrates helped others to enquire into the truth. He showed them what they were doing wrong. He did this, not in order to humiliate them by revealing their ignorance, but so as to help them, and to keep them on the course to truth – the course of enquiry.

(iii) Socrates had a method for addressing the various barriers to truth that people face

Let us end by saying something about a possible role for refutation in all of this.

As has been said already, Socrates helped people to overcome barriers to the seeking of truth by keeping them concentrated on the enquiry at hand, and by pointing out to them each time that they said something to avoid genuine enquiry.

The biggest barrier people faced in seeking to know the truth is this: that they did not actually seek it. If you do not look for the truth you will not find it. If you are not genuinely enquiring, but if you are using speech acts in order to pose, you will not get any quality of thought. You will not get more out of it than you put in.

Socrates’ method was to get people to focus and to enquire seriously. He managed the enquiry so that it would keep to its task.

In the *Gorgias* we are told that a person will fail to enquire if they do not exhibit the characteristics required of a philosopher<sup>554</sup>. A person who does not exhibit the traits of a genuine enquirer into truth is not able to become virtuous through dialogue (and achieve truth) because in fact they do not seek this. They are merely speaking because they are in some manner attached to pleasing people. They are flatterers.

Socrates has a practical solutions to barriers to enquiry. First of all he makes it painfully obvious to you that you are being petty. If need be he lets you know that you have no right to be obnoxious.

We see this for example in the conversation with Polus<sup>555</sup> on occasions where explains precisely how Polus is failing to participate in inquisitive dialogue. At 448e Socrates says that Polus does not answer the question posed to him; at 461e he mocks him for wanting to use long rhetorical forms of speech; at 462d he points out to him that he has not concentrated enough on the point discussed to achieve and answer from Socrates; at 471e-472d he corrects him on his manner of refutation; and so on.

Together with this ‘correcting’ Socrates gave people hope. He told his interlocutors, as he told Meno, that of one thing he is certain: that they should persist in enquiry because it will profit them. He said:

‘the belief in the duty of inquiring after what we do not know will make us better and braver and less helpless than the notion that there is not even a possibility of discovering what we do not know, nor any duty of inquiring after it—this is a point for which I am determined to do battle, so far as I am able, both in word and deed.’<sup>556</sup>

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<sup>554</sup> Please see section III.I.II for our analysis of the attitudinal points of the *Gorgias*.

<sup>555</sup> *Gorgias*

<sup>556</sup> *Meno* 86b-c. The Greek reads: ‘οἶδά τοι, ὦ ἑταῖρε. ἐν μέντοι τι αὐτοῖς συμβέβηκεν: ὅταν ἰδίᾳ λόγον δέη δοῦναι τε καὶ δεῖξασθαι περὶ ὧν ψέγουσι, καὶ ἐθελήσωσιν ἀνδρικῶς πολὺν χρόνον ὑπομεῖναι καὶ μὴ ἀνάνδρως φυγεῖν, τότε ἀτόπως, ὦ δαιμόνιε, τελευτῶντες οὐκ ἀρέσκουσιν αὐτοὶ αὐτοῖς περὶ ὧν λέγουσι, καὶ ἡ ῥητορικὴ ἐκεῖνη πῶς ἀπομαραίνεται, ὥστε παίδων μηδὲν δοκεῖν διαφέρειν. περὶ μὲν οὖν τούτων, ἐπειδὴ καὶ πάρεργα τυγχάνει λεγόμενα, ἀποστῶμεν—εἰ δὲ μή, πλείω [177ξ] αἰεὶ ἐπιρρέοντα καταχῶσει ἡμῶν τὸν ἐξ ἀρχῆς λόγον—ἐπι δὲ τὰ ἔμπροσθεν ἴωμεν, εἰ καὶ σοὶ δοκεῖ.’



Socrates kept bringing his interlocutors back to the point. He helped them to concentrate, and he showed them what they were saying.

Socrates began to speak about this method of his at the end of the digression in the *Theaetetus*. Unfortunately though, he cuts the discussion of this short. Speaking to Theodorus about men who do not love truth or seek it he says:

‘Yes, my friend, I know. However, there is one thing that has happened to them: whenever they have to carry on a personal argument about the doctrines to which they object, if they are willing to stand their ground for a while like men and do not run away like cowards, then, my friend, they at last become strangely dissatisfied with themselves and their arguments; their brilliant rhetoric withers away, so that they seem no better than children.’<sup>557</sup>

This is the process Socrates uses. He focused their attention. He made them look.

In this process of turning the attention Socrates used various tools of refutation, at times what we call the ‘standard elenchus’, and at other times general counterexamples. In order to understand what role refutation might have played in helping people to overcome particular barriers to dialogue we need to emphasise what Socrates saw as the problem.

Socrates believed that the greatest barrier people have to enquiring into truth is that they do not care for it and are not preoccupied with it. This is because they are caught up in other, less important matter. It is because, according to Socrates, they have a narrow understanding of their self-interest.

Socrates addresses this problem by pointing out to his interlocutors that that which they esteem as valuable is incorrect. Consider the conclusion of the dialogue between Callicles and Socrates in the *Gorgias*. After a long discussion where Callicles reaches

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<sup>557</sup> *Theaetetus* 177b-c

the point that he agrees in fact with Socrates regarding virtuous behavior, Callicles says: that even though Socrates' statement seems right, and it has been reached through *logos*, he cannot believe him.

Socrates answers him that his soul cannot follow his mind towards the truth because his soul is trapped by a love of the demus<sup>558</sup>. However, Socrates promises him, if he were to persist in such reasoned examination of what is true, he would soon turn also his soul towards philosophy and become better able to accept truth.

Notice how Socrates describes the difference between the philosopher and the slave of vice to his friend Theodorus in the digression of the *Theaetetus*. The philosopher represents the ideal that Socrates seeks to promote among his fellows.

Firstly, the philosopher is superior in the choice of matters that he concerns himself with. The philosopher seeks familiarity with the essence of things. He is free and upward-bound (residing like Thales not on earth but in the heavens<sup>559</sup>) because he disregards superficial thought and conversation and shuns vain aspirations for worldly glory and power.

Instead he is inquisitive and enquires into the nature and essences of things. He does not ask questions of the sort: 'my injustice towards you, or yours towards me'. Rather he examines *justice and injustice themselves*: 'what they are, and how they differ from everything else and from each other'<sup>560</sup>. He is not guided in his thought by the pettiness of self-interest but by an interest in truth.

He does not ask: 'whether a king who possesses much gold is happy'. Instead he inquires into 'kingship, and into human happiness and misery *in general* – what these

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<sup>558</sup> 513c

<sup>559</sup> 174a

<sup>560</sup> 175c

two things are, and what, for a human being, is the proper method by which the one can be obtained and the other avoided'<sup>561</sup>.

The philosopher applies his mind to the truth, and he is not distracted or limited by any narrow ideas of self-interest or attachment to vanity. These are the greatest barriers to truthful thought that Socrates sees. And he targets these by (a) pointing them out; and (b) by negating the views that give these inclinations a basis.

Disputation of false moral ideas (through a process of counterexample and at times the elenchus) breaks down the basis of, what Socrates considered, inappropriate and harmful attachments to vanity.

As he tells Theodorus:

- The 'philosopher, unlike the slave, grows up without knowing the way to the market-place, of the whereabouts of the law courts or the council chambers or any other place of public assembly. Laws and decrees, published orally or in writing, are things he never sees or hears. The scrambling of political cliques for office; social functions, dinners, parties with flute girls – such doings never enter his head...'<sup>562</sup>.

In saying this, Socrates is speaking metaphorically and not literally. Of course, in a city the size of Classical Athens, it would have been extremely unperceptive and dull-minded of a person if they were to reach maturity without actually knowing the literal location of political activity in their own city. What Socrates means to say however is that the philosopher has no interest in these matters (in the attainment of political influence) – his heart and mind are indifferent to them and he pays no attention to them.

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<sup>561</sup> 175c

<sup>562</sup> 173d

- Nor is he interested in the various ways in which people ascribe prestige and glory to one another. He considers these to be vainglorious and he has better ways to expend his intellect. ‘So with questions of birth – he has no more idea whether his fellow citizen is high-born or humble, or whether he has inherited some taint from his forebears, male or female, than he has of the number of pints in the sea as they say’<sup>563</sup>.
- He considers these distinctions to be petty and irrational. He holds himself aloof to them – not in order to get a reputation of being high-minded, but because he really is concerned with more important and interesting things. ‘His mind, having come to the conclusion that all these things are of little or no account, spurns them and pursues its winged way... throughout the universe, ‘in the deeps beneath the earth’ and geometrizing its surfaces, ‘in the heights above the heaven’, astronomizing, and tracking down by every path the entire nature of each whole among the things that are, never condescending to what lies near at hand.’<sup>564</sup>

The philosopher wants to know what things are. He is deeply curious about the world. But he does not put his mind to trying to achieve appraisal from his fellows, or in ascribing any such petty praise to others. He considers such social practices as vain, trivial and unreasonable.

- The philosopher does not deign to participate in the social games of undermining or attributing glory to people. He does not gossip; ‘he knows nothing to the detriment of anyone’. Nor does he know how to pay compliments or practice self-laudation<sup>565</sup>.

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<sup>563</sup> 173d-e

<sup>564</sup> 174b

<sup>565</sup> 174c-d

- He is not interested in the glory of this world ‘that is in front of him’ ‘at his very feet’. He is not impressed by status and political power. ‘When he hears the praises of a despot or a king being sung, it sounds to his ears as if some stock-breeder were being congratulated.’ He considers such men to be heavily-laden with cares and thus effectively imprisoned<sup>566</sup>.
- He is not impressed by wealth. ‘When he hears talk of land – that so-and-so has a property of ten thousand acres or more, and what a vast property that is, it sounds to him like a tiny plot, used as he is to envisage the whole earth.’ This is so because he has a love for things that are truly valuable. Thus, in comparison, he can see how little worth and significance belongs to the things that the society values.
- Likewise, he does not think it is reasonable to esteem people based on family lineage. In fact he thinks of this as unreasonable. ‘When his companions become lyric on the subject of great families, and exclaim at the noble blood of one who can point to seven wealthy ancestors, he thinks that such praise comes from a dim and limited vision, an inability, through lack of education, to take a steady view of the whole, and to calculate that every single man has countless hosts of ancestors, near and remote, among whom are to be found rich men and beggars...’<sup>567</sup>

The philosopher has this distance from the normal attributions of glory because he loves real beauty and he knows where real glory and value belong. Thus, ‘when men pride themselves upon a pedigree... they seem to him to be taking a curious interest in trifles.’<sup>568</sup>

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<sup>566</sup> 174e

<sup>567</sup> 175a

<sup>568</sup> 175b

‘How ridiculous, he thinks, not to be able to work that out, and get rid of the gaping vanity of a silly mind. Having experience of greater things, the philosopher thinks that the glory of this world is vanity, and that it is a consequence of small-mindedness, ignorance and inexperience of the good, on the part of people, that allows them to value such vanities.

- The philosopher lives in a different realm from others. His is on a higher level. He is not concerned with appearances – with the hypocritical nature of things – but with their real essences<sup>569</sup>.
- He has been ‘brought up in true freedom and leisure’. Thus it is no disgrace to him to appear simple and good-for-nothing when he is presented with petty matters. He does not know how to make a flattering speech, because flattering does not concern him; rather truth concerns him. In a sense then, Socrates is suggesting that the love of truth and a curiosity for the essential gives the philosopher a nobility that is not to be had otherwise<sup>570</sup>.

This is a love of truth that is more dear to the person than any love of vanity. This love sets the philosopher free and enables him to pursue truth uninhibited. Disputation of false moral ideas could have been a method of Socrates’ of helping people turn their attention to philosophy by showing to them that their attachment to ‘non-philosophical interests’ was unfounded. He undermined, using the *logos* the foundation which they felt these attachments to have.

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<sup>569</sup> 175c

<sup>570</sup> 175e

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