

KNOWLEDGE AND METHOD IN SOCRATIC THOUGHT

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## Abstract

In this thesis I attempt to clarify the nature and limits of the Socratic *elenchus* in order to determine whether or not it is capable of justifying moral knowledge as Socrates understood it. To this end, I first compare and contrast the *elenchus* with previous philosophical methods. I then argue that Socrates conceived of moral knowledge as expert knowledge of virtue by way of definition. Finally, I analyze the *elenchus* itself, and I argue: (i) that it is, in principle, capable of adequately justifying positive convictions about virtue, but only in those cases where Socrates makes no use of premises which are either logically unsecured within the demonstration or which lack justification from external, non-elenctic sources (*ad hoc* premises); and (ii) that since Socrates often proclaims elenctic success despite using *ad hoc* premises, I conclude that his lack of epistemological and logical interest led him to habitually overestimate the results of his arguments.

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## Introduction

If all goes well, the time will come when, to develop oneself morally-rationally, one will take up the memorabilia of Socrates rather than the Bible...Above the founder of Christianity, Socrates is distinguished by the gay kind of seriousness and that *wisdom full of pranks* which constitute the best state of the soul of man.<sup>1</sup>

On the surface, it seems somewhat odd that lovers of wisdom have consistently venerated a man who adamantly maintained that he had none. Not only do a substantial number of the early dialogues end in *aporia*, but Socrates repeatedly claims ignorance, as in the Apology: "I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small." [Ap.21b]; and in the Gorgias: "For what I say is always the same--that I know not the truth in these matters." [G.509a] Yet he simultaneously avows, both in speech and in conduct, that he does in fact know a few things which seem to be of great importance, even according to his own rather high standards. In speech, we hear Socrates proclaiming that "I do know that to do wrong and disobey my superior, whether God or man, is wicked and dishonourable..." [Ap.29b]. And in conduct, we see Socrates' continual and whole-hearted committment to the virtuous life and the search for the knowledge associated with

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<sup>1</sup>Nietzsche, The Gay Science, paragraph 86.

this life. Indeed, it appears that of all those present at his trial, Socrates was quite probably the wisest man present (Plato was still young, of course!).

In this thesis I wish to investigate Socrates' conception of knowledge and the method he uses to justify his beliefs: the elenchus. I wish to determine whether or not the elenchus, as Socrates practises it in the early dialogues, is in fact capable of justifying positive convictions about virtue, and to what extent. In order to do this I will begin in the first chapter with an examination of Socrates' methodological heritage, concentrating on the methods of the pre-Socratic natural philosophers, the metaphysicians, and the sophists. Here, I wish to distinguish Socrates from his philosophical predecessors and contemporaries without failing to acknowledge the debt which he owes them. Although I will at times suggest that Socrates has been influenced by these thinkers, my primary goal is to clarify the nature of the Socratic elenchus by comparing and contrasting it with previous methods.

In the second chapter I will examine Socrates' conception of knowledge by analysing of the *techne*-analogy and Socrates' theory of definition. In order to determine whether or not Socrates' method is capable of achieving his epistemic goals, I must first determine what they in fact are. Here I will argue that Socrates conceived of virtue as a kind of



expert knowledge through definitions, and I will explain and clarify these concepts in turn.

In the third chapter I will consider the Socratic elenchus itself. I will attempt to distinguish between several kinds of elenchus, outline their formal constraints, and then clarify their logical form. This will allow me to address what Vlastos (1983) has called "the problem of the Socratic elenchus". [p.39] Put briefly, the problem is as follows. The logical form of the elenchus only warrants Socrates to claim that he has demonstrated the *inconsistency* of some set of premises which include the interlocutor's thesis. From this, Socrates can infer that at least one of the premises in this set is false. Yet Socrates typically speaks as if he has shown that the *interlocutor's thesis* is false, and not merely inconsistent with other premises which have been admitted. That is, after demonstrating the inconsistency of a set of propositions which include the interlocutor's thesis, Socrates seems to assume that it is the thesis which is false and not some other premise in the inconsistent set.<sup>2</sup> Like Vlastos, I will argue that Socrates has good reasons for considering the thesis false, although I will do so on different, and I think more plausible, grounds. In brief, I will argue that Socrates frequently argues for the

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<sup>2</sup>See especially Gorgias 475e and 508c.

premises he admits into the elenchus by means of *epagoge*, and that he appeals to a significant number of truths which strike both he and the interlocutor as so intuitively plausible that they are compelled to admit the truth of these premises and thus the falsehood of the original thesis. I will argue, therefore, that the Socratic elenchus is in fact capable of justifying positive convictions about virtue.

Before I begin, however, I wish to make some obligatory caveats and outline my interpretive prejudices. In the first place, I am concerned primarily with the Platonic Socrates, and not the historical figure. As such, I will not be addressing the "Socratic Problem". Although the accuracy of Plato's depiction of his teacher is clearly questionable to some degree, I intend to confine myself primarily to the evidence given in Plato's early dialogues and to question their accuracy only when necessary.

Second, I take the early dialogues to be (in no particular order): Apology, Euthydemus, Crito, Gorgias, Protagoras, Republic I, Euthyphro, Charmides, Laches, Lysis, Hippias Major, Hippias Minor, and the Ion. All translations of the text are (unless otherwise noted) taken from Hamilton and Cairns, Plato: Collected Dialogues, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961. Further, I will use the following abbreviations when referring to the dialogues, followed by the Stephanus page numbers:

<u>Apology</u> .....	<u>Ap</u>	(translated by H. Tredennick)
<u>Euthydemus</u> .....	<u>Eud</u>	(trans. W.H.D. Rouse)
<u>Crito</u> .....	<u>Cr</u>	(trans. H. Tredennick)
<u>Gorgias</u> .....	<u>G</u>	(trans. W.D. Woodhead)
<u>Laches</u> .....	<u>La</u>	(trans. B. Jowett)
<u>Lysis</u> .....	<u>Ly</u>	(trans. J. Wright)
<u>Hippias Major</u> .....	<u>HMaj</u>	(trans. B. Jowett)
<u>Hippias Minor</u> .....	<u>HMin</u>	(trans. B. Jowett)
<u>Euthyphro</u> .....	<u>Eu</u>	(trans. L. Cooper)
<u>Charmides</u> .....	<u>Ch</u>	(trans. B. Jowett)
<u>Ion</u> .....	<u>Ion</u>	(trans. L. Cooper)
<u>Protagoras</u> .....	<u>Pr</u>	(trans. W.K.C. Guthrie)
<u>Republic, Book I</u> .....	<u>RepI</u>	(trans. P. Shorey)
<u>Meno</u> .....	<u>M</u>	(trans. W.K.C. Guthrie)
<u>Phaedo</u> .....	<u>Ph</u>	(trans. H. Tredennick)
<u>Sophist</u> .....	<u>S</u>	(trans. F.M. Cornford)

Finally, in order to reduce the number of footnotes, I have tried to make all references to secondary sources within the body of the text. After giving the author's name, I therefore specify the year of publication (differentiated by letter where the author has published more than one document in the same year: eg. 1990a, 1990b) which can be found in the bibliography, followed by the page number in square brackets at the end of the quotation.

Third, I would like to point out that I am not overly concerned with the nature and limits of Socrates' method in an objective sense. The problem is not one of determining the actual nature and limits of the *elenchus*, but rather of determining *what Socrates and his interlocutors took to be its nature and limits*. If we wish to understand why Socrates could think himself warranted in claiming that he had demonstrated a falsehood when he had only demonstrated

inconsistency, then we must ask why *Socrates* was not disturbed by this apparent logical confusion, and why his interlocutors were similarly unconcerned. To answer this question, then, we need not know what his method was *in fact* capable of justifying, but rather only what he and his interlocutors *thought* it was capable of justifying.

Fourth, interpreters of Socratic philosophy run the risk of confusing their pre-conceived ideal of the man with the man himself, and for good reason. Socrates is a much beloved philosophical figure: the radical enquirer who challenged the conventions of the day, the consummate teacher, the devoted champion of reason and virtue, and the paradigmatic intellectual pilgrim. In the extreme, he has become enshrined as a martyr who willingly allowed himself to be killed for his philosophical convictions. Such rational integrity is somewhat rarer in the history of philosophy than many philosophers would probably prefer, and the temptation to turn Socrates into a figure who borders on divinity is strong. But nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of a man who claimed that:

...real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, 'The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless.' [Ap.23a-b]

When attempting to understand Socrates, therefore, I believe

we should keep the minor premise of our favourite introductory example of a syllogism firmly in mind: Socrates is a man; a remarkable man, clearly, but mortal nonetheless. As such, he is susceptible to the intellectual limitations, blind-spots, and slips which plague all philosophers. To attribute greater capabilities to Socrates than his actual achievements merit suggests the *hybris* and impiety which he took such great pains to avoid.

But if we acknowledge Socrates' limitations, we should also note that he was by no means *common*, nor were his views. I therefore believe that Vlastos is correct to take Socrates' "strangeness"<sup>3</sup> as a guiding principle of interpretation, an insight which echoes a claim made some forty years earlier by A.E. Taylor (1975):

You may say Anytus misunderstood his man, Plato 'idealized' him, and Aristophanes distorted his features. But there must have been something to prompt the misunderstanding, the idealization, the distortion. The subject of them must have been in some way an extraordinary, in fact a *singular* character, an 'original', and we have to discover in what his singularity consisted. [pp.138-139]

If Socrates is a mortal, he is a remarkable one, and any interpretation which fails to accommodate this fact is immediately suspect.

In sum, we must acknowledge that although Socrates was not a systematic philosopher, something like an orderly body

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<sup>3</sup>Vlastos (1991), p. 1, and footnote 3.

of beliefs can be found in the early dialogues. This, however, does not warrant the violent imposition of a grandiose system whose schematism prevents the idiosyncrasies of the man to show through. Socrates certainly strove for consistency of belief, but there is no reason (short of granting him divinity) for believing that he had adequately examined himself *so thoroughly* that he no longer possessed inconsistent beliefs or false beliefs. In light of this, we are confronted with two interpretive strategies which tend to pull against each other. On the one hand, we must not overestimate Socrates' intellectual and philosophical achievements. At the same time, however, any interpretation which fails to preserve the "singularity" or the "strangeness" of the man will likewise fail to convince. My goal, therefore, is a mean between these two hermeneutic vices. I intend to do justice to Socrates by attributing to him a commitment to both traditional and non-traditional views about virtue and knowledge at the same time.<sup>4</sup> In this manner I hope to situate Socrates firmly above the average Athenian and, at the same time, firmly below the gods.

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<sup>4</sup>Thus Plato tends to portray Socrates as the gadfly who persistently stings the lazy intellects of self-satisfied Athenians, while Xenophon paints a much more sedate picture of a man who barely merited political attention, let alone condemnation. While both presentations of Socrates are motivated to some degree by the agendas of their respective authors, and neither can be wholly accurate, I will concentrate primarily on Plato's account.

## Chapter I: Socrates' Methodological Heritage

By the time Socrates began his philosophical mission in the fifth century B.C., Athens had become the centre of Greek intellectual life,<sup>5</sup> attracting mathematicians and geometers, poets, artists, tragedians and comedians, theologians and diviners, rhetoricians, and natural philosophers, among others. Clearly, Socrates did not conduct his elenctic examinations in an intellectual vacuum. He came into contact with an array of men who possessed a wide variety of talents and interests. In the Apology, Socrates insisted that the oracle's command to philosophize compelled him to "interview everyone who had a reputation for knowledge" [Ap.21e] where 'knowledge' is understood rather broadly: we see him "interviewing" famous military generals (Laches and Nicias), politicians (Charmides and Critias), mathematicians (Hippias of Elis), and sophists (Gorgias,

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<sup>5</sup>Kerferd (1981) attributes this change to (a) the growing democratization of the city, (b) the economic affluence which attended the rebuilding of Athens following the Persian wars, and (c) the patronage of Pericles. [pp.15-17]

Protagoras, Euthydemus, and Dionysodorus).<sup>6</sup> But there is also evidence which suggests that Socrates studied the views of earlier thinkers directly. Diogenes Laertius claims that Euripides gave Socrates the book written by Heraclitus,<sup>7</sup> and in the Phaedo Socrates confesses his youthful preoccupation with Anaxagoras. [Ph.97c-99d] Moreover, according to Xenophon, Socrates had said that:

...the treasures of wise men of old, which they have left written in books, I turn over and peruse in the company of my friends; and if we find anything good in them, we pick it out and consider it a great gain.<sup>8</sup>

We should note, however, that the available evidence concerning Socrates' philosophical relations with his predecessors and his contemporaries is rather scarce. Although I will attempt in what follows to suggest some possible connections between these early intellectuals, my primary concern is to begin clarifying Socratic methods and beliefs by comparing and contrasting them with those current in the intellectual environment of Periclean Athens. I will concentrate on three alternative philosophical approaches in particular: those of the natural philosophers, the

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<sup>6</sup>In the Apology, Socrates claims that he has conducted conversations with poets [Ap.22a] and craftsmen as well. [Ap.22c] Given the broad scope of the term 'sophist', the classes listed overlap somewhat.

<sup>7</sup>Diogenes Laertius, II.22.

<sup>8</sup>Xenophon, Memorabilia, I.6.14



metaphysicians, and the sophists.

#### A. The Natural Philosophers and The Metaphysicians

Both ancient sources and modern commentators agree that Socrates was neither a natural philosopher nor a metaphysician--his enquiries were overwhelmingly practical. Nevertheless, through books and philosophical disciples, the intellectual elite of ancient Athens were familiar with the speculations of men like Anaximenes, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, and Empedocles. Socrates may have disparaged the impracticality of their more metaphysical concerns, but (if Xenophon is correct)<sup>9</sup> it is possible that he was to some extent familiar with them, and it is equally possible that they influenced his thought to some degree. In the Phaedo, Socrates remarks that "When I was young, Cebes, I had an extraordinary passion for that branch of learning which is called natural science.", [96a] and Aristophanes' comical burlesque in The Clouds, although greatly exaggerating Socrates' character, is probably made on

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<sup>9</sup>Xenophon, Memorabilia, I.6.14

the basis of an at least somewhat genuine appraisal of Socrates' interests.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, in this section I wish to examine the relation between the thoughts and methods of Socrates and those of Heraclitus, Parmenides and Zeno, and Anaxagoras.

### *1. Socrates and Heraclitus*

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<sup>10</sup>Chroust (1951), writes: "As a rule the comedians of the latter part of the fifth century chose their topic from contemporary events. They tried to amuse their audience by ridiculing personalities or incidents familiar to the audience. Hence it might be assumed that the characterization of Socrates in The Clouds is based on what the Athenian populace believed or gossiped about Socrates and his activities." [note 38], adding that "...since there is usually some element of truth in any rumour, we must assume that the gossip about Socrates' concern with natural or cosmological speculation was based on some facts." [p.131] It is also possible that Aristophanes was simply slandering Socrates for comic effect, or playing upon popular prejudices which had no basis in fact whatsoever. We should note that Apology 19c-d need not necessarily conflict with the claim that Socrates was familiar or interested in matters of natural philosophy as a youth. Here Socrates says: "You have seen the play by Aristophanes, where Socrates goes whirling around...uttering a great deal of nonsense about things of which I know nothing whatsoever. I mean no disrespect for such knowledge, if anyone really is versed in it...but the fact is, gentlemen, that I take no interest in it." Although Socrates takes no interest in natural philosophy, and proclaims that he knows nothing about it, (i) he does not exclude the possibility that such knowledge could be useful or beneficial, and (ii) he could simply mean that he no longer, though he once did at a young age, takes in interest in it. His lack of knowledge, then, would be a lack of adequate knowledge (which he surely lacks, having given up its study). Socrates' claim is no more strange than mine when I say that, although I played the saxophone for two weeks when I was twelve, I know nothing about saxophones and I take no interest in them.

Diogenes Laertius claimed that Euripides gave Socrates the book written by Heraclitus (probably entitled On Nature).

Although the testimony available is far from conclusive, Kahn (1979) remarks that

...there is enough evidence for widespread interest in Heraclitus among the intellectuals...of the late fifth century B.C. to establish the plausibility, if not the literal truth, or [this] story.[p.4]

In what follows I will assume that Socrates was indeed familiar with Heraclitus' thought. The source of this familiarity is not relevant for my purposes. I will begin by examining two important substantive similarities, followed by two methodological similarities.

In the first place, both Heraclitus and Socrates display disdain for common-sense knowledge. According to Diogenes Laertius, Heraclitus' intentionally secluded his book from the general population by placing it in the temple of Artemis, "...having purposefully written it rather obscurely so that only those of rank and influence should have access to it, and it should not be easily despised by the populace."<sup>11</sup> This contempt for the intellectual capabilities of lesser men is explicit in fragments LIX and LXIII:<sup>12</sup>

LIX: "What wit or understanding do they have? They

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<sup>11</sup>Diogenes Laertius, IX.6, quoted in Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (1983), p. 183

<sup>12</sup>I am adopting Kahn's (1979) ordering of the fragments, as well as his translation.

believe the poets of the people and take the mob as their teacher, not knowing that 'the many are worthless', good men are few."

LXIII: "One man is ten thousand, if he is the best."

We should note that Heraclitus does not disparage the common people simply because they are common. There is, as Kahn remarks, "no reason to think of him as an unconditional partisan of the rich." [p.3] Rather, Heraclitus is an aristocrat in the non-pejorative sense of the word: he values intellectual merit over reputation, refuses to accept traditional authorities,<sup>13</sup> and despises ignorance. Presumably this is due to his belief that "Thinking well is the greatest excellence and wisdom: to act and speak what is true, perceiving things according to their nature [*physis*]." [fr.XXXII], and his conviction that the majority of people are content with mere semblances of the *logos*: they "hear like the deaf" [fr.II] and are thus incapable of deciphering what are essentially enigmatic truths.

Socrates shares a similar disdain for the traditional religious, political, and philosophical authorities. This disdain is the result of the non-partisan importance he assigns to *episteme*, which ultimately results in the decisive role played by the *techne*-analogy: just as the expert

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<sup>13</sup>See fragment XII: "In taking the poets as testimony for things unknown, they are citing authorities that cannot be trusted.", XVIII: "Much learning does not teach understanding. For it would have taught Hesiod...", and especially XIII: "We should not listen like children to our parents."

navigator must steer the ship, so too should we follow the guidance of the man who possesses expert knowledge of virtue. We should note that Socrates does not despise the common man, rather the common man's knowledge. He says that he is willing to examine "...everyone that I meet, young or old, foreigner or fellow citizen..."[Ap.30a], and exhorts *all* Athenians to test the truth of their beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, we should be careful not to depict Socrates as an extreme radical. He is willing to accept traditional beliefs *if* they are capable of surviving his elenctic examination. In fact, he makes use of *endoxic*<sup>15</sup> beliefs within the elenchus, and he adopts some traditional views about the virtues as presuppositions of his questioning.<sup>16</sup>

Second, both Socrates and Heraclitus portray the soul as a rational power which possesses causal efficacy over human behaviour. For Heraclitus, the soul exists in a pre-

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<sup>14</sup>Here Socrates seems to depart slightly from Heraclitus. While Heraclitus' intolerance toward common knowledge becomes intolerance toward the *hoi polloi*, Socrates claims that he will speak with "...everyone that I meet, young or old, foreigner or fellow citizen." [Ap.30a] This is unsurprising, given Socrates' views on the spurious value of false goods like wealth and power.

<sup>15</sup>That is, beliefs which are, on Aristotle's account, believed "...by all or by most or by the wise and, of these, by all or most or the most distinguished and most reputable." [Topics.100a28-b24]

<sup>16</sup>As Irwin (1977) points out: "He insists that any virtue must always be admirable (*kalon*), good (*agathon*), and beneficial (*ophelimon*); any definition which does not conform to this principle must be rejected." [p.39]

established harmony with the rational *logos* that guides all things, thus leading to his claim that "Eyes and ears are poor witnesses for men if their souls do not understand the language." [fr.XVI] That is, although the *logos* permeates all things, without a soul which is properly attuned to the true (rational and universal) nature of the cosmos, men are confined to the particularity of their personal beliefs.<sup>17</sup> They do not comprehend the truth, because their soul does not "understand the language" of the *logos*. Similarly, Socrates adopts a rational-causal account of the soul. In the Apology, Socrates makes clear that he is concerned with the state of men's souls, and that the means he adopts to assess and correct defective souls is the rational test administered through elenchus. In the *Hippias Minor*, Socrates claims that justice is both knowledge and a "power of the soul". [375e] Throughout the early dialogues Socrates maintains that the soul is essentially rational, and that this element is capable of guiding men's actions. Indeed, Socrates thinks that knowledge is a sufficient cause of virtuous behaviour, and it is this that leads to the famous Socratic paradox that "No one willingly does wrong."

There are two important methodological similarities between Socrates and Heraclitus: (i) both stress the

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<sup>17</sup>See fragment III: "Although the *logos* is shared, most men live as though their thinking were a private possession."

importance of self-knowledge as a means to wisdom (though wisdom is conceived differently for each); and (ii) both adopt an enigmatic style of expression for substantially similar reasons.

In the first place, Heraclitus writes "I went in search of myself." [fr.XXVIII], and that "It belongs to all men to know themselves and think well." [fr.XXIX] Kahn (1979) thinks that Heraclitus adopted a form of pan-psychism [pp.119;128], such that adequate knowledge of one's soul would be equivalent to knowledge of the universal *logos*. Kahn writes that:

...by seeking for his own self, Heraclitus could find the identity of the universe, for the *logos* of the soul goes so deep that it coincides with the *logos* that structures everything in the world. [p.130]

Socrates, on the other hand, maintains the importance of self-knowledge on the basis of what I take to be a precursor of the Platonic doctrine of recollection.<sup>18</sup> The transition from ignorance to wisdom is not, to be sure, grounded on the immortality of the soul and its pre-natal acquaintance with truth, although Socrates may indeed have thought the soul to be immortal.<sup>19</sup> Rather, it is made on the basis of Socrates'

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<sup>18</sup>Self-knowledge also leads to an awareness of one's epistemic limitations--one of the highest lessons in piety which Socrates hopes to convey.

<sup>19</sup>On the basis of the Apology [39d-41e], Morgan (1990) argues that Socrates viewed his impending death as a benefit because he was committed to the immortality of the soul [pp.13-14]--a doctrine

view that one is incapable of consistently denying true beliefs. Here we should note two passages from the Gorgias: at 474b Socrates remarks "For I think that you and all other men as well as myself hold it worse to do than to suffer wrong, and worse to escape than to suffer punishment." Polus vehemently disagrees: neither he nor anyone else would think such a thing. And yet Socrates continues to question him, slowly convincing him that he does in fact believe this since he has *already granted premises which yield this conclusion*. More strongly, however, Socrates remarks to Callicles at 482b that:

You must either then prove...that to do wrong and evade punishment for wrongdoing is not the worst of all evils; or if you leave this unrefuted, then, by the dog that is God in Egypt, Callicles himself will not agree with you, Callicles, but will be at variance with you throughout your life.<sup>20</sup>

The point, I think, is that Callicles implicitly believes Socrates' odd thesis that doing wrong is worse than suffering it, but does not yet realize it. The elenctic examination which follows, then, demonstrates that Callicles' explicit belief is incorrect by drawing out the true propositions which

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he inherited from his encounters with Thracian religion during his time in Macedonia. [p.30]

<sup>20</sup>Vlastos (1983) makes these two passages from the Gorgias the basis of his controversial claim that Socrates "makes a tremendous assumption...Anyone who ever has a false moral belief will always have at the same time true beliefs entailing the negation of that false belief." [p.52] For more on this, see chapter III.D



he implicitly believes.<sup>21</sup> That this is Socrates' intention is confirmed, I think, by a later passage in the Gorgias:

Socrates: Let us remember this then, that Callicles of Acharnae says pleasure and the good are the same, but that knowledge and courage are different from one another and from the good.

Callicles: But Socrates of Alopece does not agree with this. Or does he?

Socrates: He does not, and I think Callicles will not either when he comes to know himself aright. [G.495d-e]

For Socrates, then, self-knowledge means more than the pious acknowledgement of one's epistemic limitations. By cashing out the consequences of one's implicit beliefs, the elenchus transforms self-knowledge into knowledge of "...the actual truth." [G.486e]

Second, Heraclitus' enigmatic style earned him the epithet "Heraclitus the Obscure". In fact, if Diogenes Laertius' account is accurate, upon reading Heraclitus' book, Socrates responded: "What I understand is excellent, and I think the rest is also. But it takes a Delian diver to get to the bottom of it."<sup>22</sup> Heraclitus' style is modelled, I think,

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<sup>21</sup>It is also possible that Socrates is using this manner of expression merely to convey some sort of epistemic norm: Callicles does not believe Socrates, but since Socrates speaks the truth, Callicles *should* believe him. This however cannot account for the claim that "Callicles would disagree with Callicles throughout his life"--Socrates does not split the subject into 'What Callicles believes' and 'What Callicles *should* believe', but rather into 'What Callicles explicitly believes' and 'What Callicles truly (or implicitly) believes.'

<sup>22</sup>Quoted in Kahn (1979), p.95

on the cryptic pronouncements of the oracle, about whom he writes: "The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither declares nor conceals, but gives a sign [*alla semainei*]. If Heraclitus possesses a theory of truth, then it is a cryptic one: note fragment X, "Nature [*physis*] loves to hide.", and fragment LXXX, "The hidden attunement is better than the obvious one." It is the obscure and deceptive nature of truth that leads Heraclitus to remark that "Although this account holds forever, men ever fail to comprehend, both before hearing and once they have heard...".[fr.I] Kahn (1979) argues that Heraclitus' style is not an attempt to "mirror the nature of reality"[p.124], since he thinks Heraclitus did not see the structure of reality as inherently contradictory; rather, Kahn thinks that:

...what is reflected in the semantic difficulty of interpreting these utterances is the epistemic difficulty of grasping such a structure, the cosmic *logos*, as the underlying unity of our own experience of opposition and contrast.[p.124]

In other words, Kahn thinks that the obscurity of Heraclitus' style is not due to the contradictory nature of the *logos*, but rather to the epistemic limitations of mortals who "ever fail to comprehend". Kahn adds that:

...to speak plainly about such a subject would be to falsify it in the telling, for no genuine understanding would be communicated. The only hope of 'getting through' to the audience is to puzzle and provoke them into reflection. Hence the only appropriate mode of explanation is allusive and indirect...[p.124]

If Kahn is correct, then Heraclitus' obscurity is the result of pedagogical and not ontological concerns. That is, Heraclitus' enigmatic fragments are not intended to reflect an inherently contradictory *logos*, but rather to lead the minds of mortals from the contradictory appearances of phenomena toward the inherently rational and universal *logos* which underlies them.

Like Heraclitus, Socrates sometimes (though less frequently) adopts a perplexing manner of expression for reasons that are primarily pedagogical. Socrates is, I think, committed to the belief that truth (or at least, moral truths) can be expressed in relatively straightforward terms. If he was not so committed, his persistent requests for paradigmatically rational definitions would hardly make sense. At the same time, however, he does not always speak clearly and consistently about his beliefs. Here we might think of his unabashed flattery of interlocutors like Euthydemus and Dionysodorus,<sup>23</sup> his transparently hyperbolic estimation of

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<sup>23</sup>At Euthydemus 273e, Socrates says to Euthydemus: "Well, if you truly have this knowledge, O be gracious!--for I humbly address you as gods..."; and at 275c, Socrates remarks to Crito: "What allowed Crito, how could I describe properly? It is not a small business to recall and repeat wisdom ineffably great!". In the orgias Socrates says "I consider that in meeting you [Callicles] have encountered such a godsend." [486e], and refers to his troublesome opponent as "most sage Callicles." [489c; see also Ion 30b-c]. In the case of the Euthydemus, at least, Socrates may imply be overstating the point somewhat: he does think that the sophists' discussions can help to teach someone about the correct use of names [Eud.277d], something which he might have considered

Euthyphro and his requests to become the youth's pupil [Eu.5a-c], or more substantively, his clearly un-Socratic conclusion in the Charmides that wisdom "...produces no advantage." [Ch.175a] From these examples, I think, it is clear that at least in some cases Socrates is quite willing to mislead--to express himself in terms other than those with which he truly agrees.

In an excellent article, Brickhouse and Smith (1984c) argue that Socrates' own moral principles prevent him from knowingly misleading his interlocutors: this follows from his conviction that ignorance is harmful, and that harming others is never morally justifiable.<sup>24</sup> This, I think, is true: Socrates cannot knowingly spread falsehoods. Why then does he blatantly flatter his interlocutors when it is clear that they do not deserve his praise, or endorse a view he disagrees with in order to test his opponent? In most cases, I think,

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a necessary condition for wisdom.

<sup>24</sup>Brickhouse and Smith (1984c), p.34 They claim that (within the context of Socrates' defense in the Apology, at least): "Were Socrates to risk misleading or annoying the jury about these matters, whether by irony or by arrogance, he would risk creating or sustaining false belief about the most important of all things, and thereby bring about or contribute to the worst possible harm to his judges. But that is what he must never do." [p.34]. Brickhouse and Smith, I think, go too far: clearly, Socrates' moral principles could never allow him to mislead his interlocutors outright, but I see no reason why he could not *risk* such misdirection--that is, if and I stress this 'if') he thought that telling them the 'plain truth' as he saw it constituted a *greater* harm. Further, although Brickhouse and Smith confine their claim to the Apology, I think it could be extended to cover the early dialogues as a whole.

Socrates' motivation is pedagogical: a perplexing or misleading comment stimulates both the desire to know and the effort to discover what truths lurk behind the mask. It is also clear that Socrates refuses to sermonize or simply declare moral truths which he believes. Vlastos (1991) claims that here Socrates betrays a deep respect for the intellectual autonomy and hence "moral autonomy" of the individual, which is the "deepest thing" in the Socrates of the early dialogues, and the "...strongest of his moral concerns." [p.44] This, however, goes too far. Socrates may well believe that it would be harmful for his interlocutors and disciples to mindlessly parrot his beliefs, but in adopting an enigmatic manner of expression, he runs the risk of doing them harm-- indeed, great harm, given the seriousness of the subject-matter. I propose the following solution: Socrates is willing to speak misleadingly when, and only when, he has reasonable grounds for thinking that the interlocutor possesses the ability to see through his deceptive comments. It is also possible that Socrates would think himself justified in misleading an interlocutor if some third party (or parties) present is (are) capable of grasping the underlying point. So, for example, Socrates can praise the god-like wisdom of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus while hoping that Clinias will not miss the irony. Further, he is perfectly content to mislead or to flatter when and only when his comments do not *directly*

concern important moral issues.<sup>25</sup> In any given dialogical situation about issues which Socrates deems ethically important, he must carefully weigh the potential harm of encouraging ignorance against the potential harm of encouraging unreflective imitation. On this account, Socrates does not deceive intentionally, but he does risk deception and must take reasonable pains to avoid it.

In conclusion: Socrates and Heraclitus (i) share a disdain for common-sense knowledge and traditional authorities; (ii) depict the soul as an essentially rational power which guides men's actions; (iii) regard self-knowledge as a means to wisdom; and (iv) adopt an enigmatic manner of expression as a pedagogical device intended to assist the reader or interlocutor in their search for essentially rational truths.

## 2. Socrates and Anaxagoras

I have already claimed that Socrates was familiar with the thought of Anaxagoras, although he may or may not have

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<sup>25</sup>Vlastos (1991) makes this point as well. He argues that Socrates is always free to resort to deceit except "when arguing seriously" [p.134]--that is, "...when Socrates is searching for the right way to live, in circumstances in which it is reasonable for him to think of the search as obedience to divine command." [p.134]

been directly acquainted with the man himself. Given Socrates' lack of interest in the sort of grand cosmological and scientific enquiries which occupied Anaxagoras, I will focus on one striking substantive similarity in their thinking which is crucial for understanding the role of definition in Socratic ethics, and hence for his elenctic methodology as a whole.

In the Phaedo, Socrates remarks to Cebes that as a youth he had:

...once heard someone reading from a book, as he said, by Anaxagoras, and asserting that it is mind [*nous*] that produces order and is the cause of everything. This explanation pleased me. ...On this view, there was only one thing for a man to consider, with regard both to himself and to anything else, namely the best and highest good, although this would necessarily imply knowing what is less good, since both were covered by the same knowledge. ...I lost no time in procuring the books, and began to read them as quickly as I possibly could, so that I might know as soon as possible about the best and the less good. [Ph.97b-98b].

It is clear from this passage that what attracted Socrates to Anaxagoras was the causal role the latter assigned to *nous* or mind. Given the overwhelmingly Platonic content of the Phaedo, one might be tempted to dismiss this passage as a Platonic invention introduced for dramatic purposes. But we should not overlook two important aspects of this passage which, even if they are not genuinely Socratic, are at least consistent with Socratic thought: (i) the role of teleology in causal explanation, and (ii) the implied hierarchy of ends.

In the first case, Socrates says that he was pleased with Anaxagoras' claim that *nous* "is the cause of everything", and that his "wonderful hope" was "quickly dashed" [Ph.98b] when he discovered that Anaxagoras explained phenomena by way of causes "...like air and aither and water and many other absurdities." [Ph.98c] Socrates says that:

It is as if someone were to say, the cause of everything that Socrates does is mind--and then, in trying to account for my several actions, said first that the reason why I am lying here now is that my body is composed of bones and sinews.... Or again, if he tried to account in the same way for my conversing with you, adducing causes such as sound and air and hearing and a thousand others, and never troubled to mention the real reasons, which are that since Athens has thought it better to condemn me, therefore I for my part have thought it better to sit here and more right to stay and submit to whatever penalty she orders. [Ph.98c-e]

Two things are made clear in this passage: (i) Socrates is unsatisfied with explanations made in terms of material causes *alone*,<sup>26</sup> and (ii) he prefers explanations which make reference to a final cause which is apprehended through reason: "I have *thought it better to sit here and more right to stay...*". [my emphasis] This is why Socrates remarks shortly thereafter that the real cause of his lying in prison and conversing with

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<sup>26</sup>Socrates is clear that material causes are necessary but not sufficient for adequate explanations: "If it were said that without such bones and sinews and all the rest of them I should not be able to do so what I think is right, it would be true. But to say that it is because of them that I do what I am doing, and not through a choice of what best...would be a very lax and inaccurate form of expression. Fancy not being able to distinguish between the cause of a thing and the condition without which it could not be a cause!" [Ph.99a-b]



Cebes is his rational "choice of what is best", [Ph.99b] and then laments the fact that most people "do not think that anything is bound and held together by goodness or moral obligation." [Ph.99c] Socrates therefore prefers explanations made in terms of a final cause: an individual's rational choice of "what is best" constitutes the end toward which his action aims.

This preference for teleological explanation in terms of the good is, I think, genuinely Socratic.<sup>27</sup> Readers of the early dialogues are familiar with Socrates' puzzling denial of *akrasia*: by equating virtue with knowledge, Socrates seems to claim that knowledge of the good necessarily entails the pursuit of the good and thus the performance of good actions. Indeed, Aristotle remarks that this is a crucial error in Socratic ethics:

In equating virtue with knowledge [Socrates] goes far in destroying the non-rational part of the soul. In so doing, he does away with the passive and active aspects of moral character. So his treatment of the virtues is at fault.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>We should note Aristotle's remark that what distinguishes the Socratic dialogues from discourses on mathematics is that the latter "...depict no character; they have nothing to do with moral purpose, for they represent nobody as pursuing any end.", while "On the other hand, the Socratic dialogues do depict character [and hence moral purpose], since they are concerned with moral questions." [On Rhetoric, 1417a16-21]

<sup>28</sup>Magna Moralia, 1182a15-22. There is some doubt that this is an authentic work of Aristotle--however, the point made is interesting in respect to its content and not in respect to its author.

Aristotle adds that "Socrates of old completely did away with incontinence, saying that it did not exist. No one, in his view, would choose evil, knowing it to be such."<sup>29</sup> The denial of *akrasia* presupposes that all men desire the good by nature, such that if one knows the good, one will perform the good. More accurately, perhaps, we might say that if an agent pursues some end, then he must view this end as beneficial in some sense. Thus Socrates asks Clinias in the Euthydemus:

Do we all wish to do well [*eu prattein*] in the world? Or perhaps this is one of the questions which I feared you might laugh at, for it is foolish, no doubt, even to ask such things. Who in the world does not wish to do well?[278e]

And in the Protagoras, he argues that those who pursue pleasures which they know to be evil do so because these pleasures appear good when their destructive consequences are ignored. They therefore "...pursue pleasure as being good, and shun pain as evil." [354c] This leads Socrates to conclude slightly further on that:

...it must follow that no one willingly goes to meet evil or what he thinks to be evil. To make for what one believes to be evil, instead of making for the good, is not, it seems, in human nature. [358c]

It should be clear from these passages that Socrates holds a teleological view of the decision-making process: thus he asks Euthyphro to explain and justify prosecuting his father for impiety by giving an account of the holy, the end toward which

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<sup>29</sup>Magna Moralia, 1200b75-79

Euthyphro's legal action aims. From this, we can see the motivation for Socrates' obsession with defining the virtues: an adequate definition must specify that for the sake of which a particular action is performed, and hence explain this action by appeal to some final cause--the object of man's natural desire.

In the second place, throughout the early dialogues Socrates advocates a hierarchy of ends. This hierarchy is explicit in the Euthydemus, where Socrates argues that "doing well" or *eudaimonia* [Eud.279b] is the ultimate end of action. He first secures agreement from Clinias that knowledge of how to produce something is without benefit unless one also possesses the knowledge of how to use it, [Eud.279a] and therefore, since knowledge of proper use is necessary for doing well [Eud.281a], he remarks that "...every man in every way should try to become as wise as possible." [Eud.282a] Wisdom, then, is not good in-itself (similarly: good fortune, health, beauty, noble birth, power, and temperance), but good in respect to the final end--*eudaimonia*. It is for this reason that Socrates points out to Clinias that

...the truth is that in all those things which we said at first were good, the question is not how they are in themselves naturally good, but this is the point, it seems. If ignorance leads them, they are greater evils than their opposites... [Eud.281d]

Thus the hierarchy of ends appears: one desires 'x' because of the benefits which follow from proper use of 'x', and since

proper use achieves the ultimate end of *eudaimonia* (which we naturally desire), then *eudaimonia*, as a final cause, explains our desire to both possess and use 'x' properly. A second case occurs in the *Lysis*, where Socrates argues that if a man is a friend to something, then it is "for the sake of and on account of something." [Ly.218d]--that is, friendship (*philia*) is motivated by some final cause. Using the art of medicine as an example, he next argues that if a man is a friend to the art of healing, then he is such for the sake of health, the end desired. But if a man desires this end (health), then he "is a friend to health too" [Ly.219c]--since, however, it has already been granted that all friendship is motivated by some final cause, Socrates notes that such a person must be "...a friend to that thing (health) for the sake of some other thing to which he is a friend." [Ly.219c] At this point Socrates faces an infinite regress of ends, and so he remarks:

Can we possibly help being weary of going on in this manner, and is it not necessary that we advance at once to a beginning, which will not again refer us to friend upon friend, but arrive at that to which we are in the first instance friends, and for the sake of which we say we are friends to all the rest? [Ly.219c-d]

Socrates seeks some ultimate final cause which will halt the infinite regress of ends. He wants to know that "for the sake of which we say we are friends to all the rest." This is the essence of friendship, and as such it explains all friendship by giving an account of that which guides and motivates the

subordinate species of *philia*.

To conclude: Socrates is preoccupied with the explanatory power of final causation guided by *nous*. That is, Socrates wishes to explain human behaviour in terms of the agent's rational choice to pursue some end. He claims that by nature all men are motivated by their desire for the good, and since one may be deceived by false goods, he therefore accords knowledge a central role in his ethical theory. If one knows the proper end of action, then one will take the steps necessary to achieve this end. Further, Socrates maintains a hierarchy of ends, which are themselves means to something desirable in-itself: a final *telos*.

### 3. Socrates and the Eleatics

In the Parmenides, Plato has Cephalus ask Glaucon and Adeimantus to recount a conversation between Socrates and Parmenides and Zeno.[126b-c] Given the overwhelmingly Platonic content of what follows, however, it is highly unlikely that Plato is faithfully reproducing the discussion, if it indeed occurred. Still, this does not rule out the possibility that the conversation actually took place when

Socrates was a young man.<sup>30</sup> I will assume that the conversation did take place, but I will refrain from speculating on its content; instead, I wish to focus on the relation between the Socratic elenchus and Zeno's use of *reductio ad absurdum*.<sup>31</sup>

Zeno's paradoxes have tested the minds of some of the greatest philosophers in the Western tradition. There is, however, little reason to think that Zeno's motivation for constructing these paradoxes was purely pedagogical. Nor should we think that Zeno, as Lee (1936) puts it, "...wrote purely in the spirit of wanton paradox" [p.7]. Although his paradoxes may have influenced such *antilogikoi* as Protagoras,

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<sup>30</sup>Plato claims that Parmenides was sixty-five years old, and Zeno approximately forty when they "...came to Athens for the Great Panathenaea", and that "...Socrates was then quite young." [Par.127b-c] Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (1983) do not doubt Plato's estimate of the ages of Parmenides and Zeno, since Plato "...need not have been so precise...", [p.240] echoing a point made by Lee (1936, p.5) some twenty years earlier. If this is correct, then Socrates would have indeed been "very young" at the time of the conversation--approximately twenty years old.

<sup>31</sup>Diogenes Laertius [VII.5] reports that Aristotle attributed the invention of dialectic to Zeno in the lost dialogue Sophistes. As Vlastos' (1975) notes, the lack of context for this remark, combined with the plurality of senses which Aristotle gives to the term *dialectike*, renders an accurate interpretation of his meaning difficult. [note 17] Although it is possible that Aristotle is referring to the fact that Zeno argued by accepting the belief of his opponent and deducing a contradiction from it, it is more likely that he has in mind the fact that Zeno began his arguments on the basis of *endoxa* (and one endoxic belief in particular: the existence of plurality), and then showed that this endoxic belief necessarily entailed contradiction--this would accord with Aristotle's definition of dialectic in the Topics (100a30-31).

Zeno was not attempting to construct logical antinomies-- rather, his arguments against plurality are in all likelihood an attempt to defend the monism of his master, Parmenides.<sup>32</sup> In the Parmenides, Plato has Zeno remark that his book is a "retort" to those who accuse Parmenides of advocating a position that leads to absurdity:

[This book] pays them back in the same coin with something to spare, and aims at showing that...their own supposition that there is a plurality leads to even more absurd consequences than the hypothesis of the one. [Par.128d]

This might lead one to think that Zeno saw both the Parmenidean 'One' and the much more intuitive recognition of plurality as *both* entailing contradiction. Indeed, Gulley (1968) writes that Zeno's method was "...to find sets of arguments of which one set will yield a conclusion contradicting the conclusion yielded by another set." [p.30], and Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (1983) note that "...some of Zeno's arguments in fact undermine Parmenidean positions as much as pluralistic common-sense." [p.277] They therefore conclude that Zeno's

...paradoxes should be interpreted as showing that it is no conclusive objection to a philosophical thesis that it leads or seems to lead to absurd conclusions--or if it is, common sense is just as vulnerable as Eleatic logic. [p.277]

This, however, seems unlikely. In the first place, Kirk,

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<sup>32</sup>For more on the relation between *antilogike* and the *elenchus*, see chapter I.C

Raven, and Schofield acknowledge that even if Zeno was not committed to the thesis that 'all things are one' in exactly the same sense as Parmenides presented it, he was still "...certainly committed to some form of monism." [p.277] Whatever form of monism Zeno might have endorsed, there can be no doubt that arguments against plurality would have served him well. Second, all of Zeno's arguments are directed at propositions derived from the hypothesis of plurality, since, as Kerferd claims, "...Zeno supposed that the contradictions 'like--unlike', 'one--many', 'and 'resting--in motion', all followed from a single initial hypothesis, 'if things are many'." [p.60]<sup>33</sup> And third, none of Zeno's paradoxes are directed at the thesis of the 'One'. While it is possible that Zeno intended the Parmenidean thesis to form one half of an antinomy, only Plato<sup>34</sup> credits Zeno with an argument against

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<sup>33</sup>Vlastos (1975, pp.150-155) argues for this point more thoroughly, primarily on the basis of Plato's testimony in the Parmenides, which he takes to be substantially accurate.

<sup>34</sup>Alexander and Eudemus, following Aristotle and Simplicius, also attribute such an argument to Zeno, as Vlastos (1975) points out. [p.149]. Vlastos argues, however, that Simplicius' testimony misrepresents Zeno substantially--he writes that "...the crucial lines in Simplicius into which a Zenonian argument against unity has been read, contain nothing, to all appearance, which constitutes an argument against unity as such: all that Zeno has argued in this portion of the argument, according to Simplicius, is that if Being were One, it would have no size; and we know from Melissus how an Eleatic would use such an inference: he would take it as proving the denial of size, not of unity, to Being." [note 57] As for Aristotle's account, Vlastos claims that "...a careful reading of Aristotle [Metaphysics.1001b7-8]...will show that it does not profess to report an inference drawn by Zeno [that if the



the 'One' (Phaedrus,261d), and he does not present the argument itself. In this latter case, Vlastos (1975) argues that we should expect Zeno's argument to follow the standard pattern of his paradoxes, in which case he would not be attempting to prove that the unity thesis is untenable on the grounds that that which is one is also many, but rather that he intended to prove that the hypothesis 'The things in existence are many' entails the unacceptable consequence that such things appear both like and unlike, one and many, and at rest and moving.[p.151-152]<sup>35</sup> Zeno's audience is thus the class of people who "...grant the hypothesis which is the refutand of Zeno's argument"[p.152]--that is, 'The things in

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One were indivisible, it would be nothing], but only one which Aristotle takes it upon himself to draw on the strength of what he calls 'Zeno's Axiom'."[note 57] Finally, Vlastos argues that it is not clear that "...Eudemus and Alexander were referring to Zenonian arguments which they thought were directed against unity as such rather than *the unity of physical things* (whose very existence an Eleatic would seek to disprove)."[note 57]

<sup>35</sup>There is substantial evidence, therefore, to prevent us from referring to Zeno as *antilogikos* in the strict sense (one who constructs opposing arguments which are--apparently--equally valid). Zeno's paradoxes were intended as an indirect proof of either the Parmenidean thesis or some closely related monism. We should note that Plato *does* refer to Zeno as *antilogikos* at Phaedrus 261c-d. Vlastos (1975,pp.150-155), Kerferd (1981,pp.63-67), and Rankin (1983,p.21) argue that this term is not meant in an wholly pejorative sense. They claim that for Plato, the "controversialist" occupied a position somewhere between an outright rhetorician and a true dialectician, though somewhat more on the side of the former than the latter.

existence are many.'

Zeno's method, then, is *reductio ad absurdum*, whereby he deduces contradictory consequences from a single hypothesis. The fragment preserved by Simplicius is a paradigmatic example:

[A] 'If there are many things, it is necessary that they are just as many as they are, and neither more nor less than that. But if they are as many as they are, they will be limited.'

[B] 'If there are many things, the things that are are unlimited; for there are always others between the things that are, and again others between those. And thus the things that are are unlimited.'<sup>36</sup>

Here Zeno draws contradictory conclusions (that [A] the things which exist are limited and that [B] the things which exist are unlimited) from the same hypothesis: "If there are many things." This contradiction therefore demonstrates the falsity of the initial hypothesis.<sup>37</sup> Zeno's method is thus an indirect proof or *reductio ad absurdum*. It is both a refutation of the common-sense belief in plurality, and a positive justification of (some form of) the unity of 'that which is'.

Zeno's penchant for refutation by way of reducing a proposition to a contradiction has frequently been compared to

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<sup>36</sup>Quoted in Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (1983), p.266

<sup>37</sup>We should note that the falsity of the proposition "There are many things" does not necessarily entail that the Eleatic thesis "All things are one" is true. However, it is certain that both Parmenides and Zeno would have considered the two propositions to be both logically exhaustive and contradictory.

the Socratic elenchus.<sup>38</sup> There are three key differences. First, Zeno's method aims to establish a logical contradiction, and no other kind of falsehood. Socrates, on the other hand, considers a thesis refuted if he manages to demonstrate that it entails unacceptable consequences in a wider variety of senses. Socrates will reject a proposition if (i) it leads to a logical contradiction; (ii) it contradicts some belief which the interlocutor has already testified to; and which Socrates considers true;<sup>39</sup> (iii) it contradicts some plain empirical fact, or (iv) it contradicts some belief that no reasonable Greek could deny. Pending further analyses of the logical form and positive capabilities of the elenchus in chapter III, I will defer my defense of these four claims and thus this first point for the time being.

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<sup>38</sup>See Kerferd (1981), pp.60-63; Rankin (1983), pp.21-22; Gulley (1968), p.24.

<sup>39</sup>Socrates is at pains to establish the falsity of many proposed ideas, but he is not, I think, at pains to establish the falsity of *all* proposed ideas. That is, *if* the value of the elenchus is not purely destructive and pedagogical, then Socrates would be negligent to think himself successful when he has merely demonstrated that a given thesis contradicts some point already conceded by the interlocutor. What is important is not that the interlocutor has contradicted himself, but that he has said something contrary to the truth. This of course presupposes either or both of (a) Socrates is wholly committed to the truth of certain propositions independent of elenctic justification (they are empirically valid, self-evidently true, or logically necessary), and/or (b) Socrates thinks that the elenchus is capable of justifying positive convictions. Both of these alternatives will be examined in chapter III.

Second, Zeno's arguments, as Vlastos (1983) puts it, "...investigate the contradictory consequences of its counterfactual premise." [p.36] Socrates, however, as Vlastos is at pains to show, refuses to debate "unasserted counterfactuals" [p.35]. That is, Socrates insists that the propositions advanced during the course of the elenchus are sincerely believed by their proponent. In the Crito, he remarks "Now be careful, Crito, that in making these single admissions you do not end by admitting something contrary to your real beliefs. [49d]; and in the Protagoras, the sophist says "If you like, let us assume that justice is holy and holiness just.", to which Socrates replies:

It isn't this 'if you like' and 'if that's what you think' that I want us to examine, but you and me ourselves. What I mean is, I think the argument will be most fairly tested if we take the 'if' out of it. [331c]

Presumably, then, Socrates rejects hypothetical arguments<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>There are two exceptions: Protagoras 333c and Charmides 169d. In the case of the former, Socrates entertains a view which is explicitly attributed to the "many" and not to the interlocutor. As Vlastos (1983) points out, however, this concession is made to convince Protagoras to continue the discussion since he is becoming somewhat reluctant. [p.38] Moreover, Socrates adds that "...what I chiefly examine is the proposition. But the consequence may be that I the questioner and you the answerer are also examined." [333c] In this case, then, debating a hypothetical proposition serves two ends: (i) by distancing Protagoras from a particular view, it prevents the sophist from being seriously embarrassed when the proposition is refuted and thus facilitates a continuing conversation; and (ii) it indirectly serves to examine Protagoras (and Socrates) himself--that is, although the first end seems to require that Protagoras' beliefs (and thus his way of life) are not in serious jeopardy, Socrates is confident that he will indirectly examine and test these beliefs and thus their

because he is interested in testing the consistency of people's lives, and not just their words. Since the interlocutor has no personal stake in the truth or falsity of a purely hypothetical belief, Socrates has no desire to pursue them.<sup>41</sup>

Third, while Zeno deduces a contradiction directly from the hypothesis, Socrates never does. Robinson (1953) has claimed that on some occasions Socrates does in fact deduce an "unacceptable consequence" directly from the interlocutor's thesis without the aid of extra premises.[pp.24-25] Vlastos (1983) has pointed out, correctly I think, that this is false. He writes that:

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lives. The second case is similar. Socrates remarks: "*In order that the argument might proceed*, I said to him, Well then, Critias, if you like, let us assume that this science of science is possible--whether the assumption is right or wrong may hereafter be investigated." [my emphasis]. In this case, then, not only does Socrates waive what Vlastos calls the "say what you believe" constraint for the sake of continuing the conversation, but he also leaves open the possibility of examining the hypothetical proposition at a later point.

<sup>41</sup>See Gorgias 487e-488a, and Laches 187e-188a. This, however, does not prevent Socrates from treating his interlocutors' proposals as hypotheses in the somewhat vague sense of 'a proposition whose truth or falsity remains to be established'. Further, Gulley (1968) has argued that the elenchus sometimes exhibits a process of gradual refinement of a proposed definition (in the Euthyphro in particular), which is consistent with more modern conceptions of hypothetical method. He writes that it is capable of suggesting "...modifications in the premises which yielded the false conclusion." [p.51] This presupposes that Socrates has some extra-elenctic justification for the truth or falsity of premises used in the elenchus, a claim which I think is true, and which I will examine more fully in chapter III.D

The premises from which Socrates derives [the negation of the thesis] generally do not include [the thesis] and even when they do, there are others in the premise-set elicited from the interlocutor, not deducible from [the thesis]. [p.30]

In support of his claim, Robinson cites Charmides 170, and adds that "The refutation without extra premisses is common in the Lysis; otherwise the arguments in that dialogue would not be so unusually short." [p.25] But Robinson is misinterpreting the refutation at Charmides 170. He writes that:

...from the thesis that temperance is knowledge of knowledge Socrates professes to deduce without the aid of any extra premiss the unacceptable consequence that temperance, when it knows knowledge, does not know what that knowledge is knowledge of. [p.25]

But the fact that temperance, as defined by Critias, is a form of knowledge which has knowledge as its object, and yet does not "...know what that knowledge is knowledge of" is not the unacceptable consequence Socrates draws. In fact, Socrates only draws an unacceptable consequence at 171c-d, one and a half Stephanus pages later, where he concludes that such a knowledge would be unable to distinguish the true expert from the pretender, and hence would produce no benefit [*ophelimon*]. Socrates therefore draws the unacceptable consequence with the help of a number of extra premises, chief among which is the claim that knowledge is beneficial. Further, I can find only one argument in the Lysis which does not use extra premises to reach its unacceptable consequence, despite the fact that a number of the refutations here are "unusually short". The

clearest candidates would probably be found at Lysis 211d-213d, where three refutations of Menexenus' claim that 'if X loves Y (without reciprocation) then X and Y are mutual friends' come fast and furious. [Ly.212b] Of these, only the first seems to make no use of extra premises, since here Socrates refutes Menexenus with a counter-example: Menexenus agrees that (a) his definition does not exclude cases where a lover loves someone who is either indifferent to the lover or downright hostile, and (b) in such cases, neither party is a friend to the other. [Ly.212c] As such, Socrates does not deduce a falsehood from the thesis, but rather demonstrates the falsity of the conjunction of the thesis and the minor premise.<sup>42</sup> I therefore think that Vlastos is correct: Socrates never deduces an unacceptable consequence directly from the thesis itself.

To conclude: Socrates adopts a method which is significantly similar to that of Zeno. In general, Socrates is at pains to refute a given proposition by reducing it to some untenable consequence. He differs from Zeno, however, in three ways: (i) the Socratic elenchus does not necessarily reduce a thesis to self-contradiction but rather to falsity in any of a number of senses; (ii) Socrates shows little tolerance for hypotheses (in Vlastos' sense of an "unasserted

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<sup>42</sup>A similar example can be found at Hippias Major 498a-b.

counterfactual"; and (iii) Socrates does not deduce the falsity of the thesis directly from the thesis itself. Further, we should note that while Socrates does use (what he takes to be) indirect or *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, he does not use this form exclusively as Zeno appears to. Rather, he makes use of direct arguments, indirect arguments, as well as arguments from analogy and those which establish general truths on the basis of induction.

#### B. Socrates and the Sophists

Under the sympathetic patronage of Pericles, the sophists came to Athens from all corners of ancient Greece to teach a population that had the time, the desire, and the money necessary to study under masters like Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias of Elis. We should begin by noting that the sophists were part of a gradual and significant transition from natural philosophy and cosmology toward the more practical sphere of human affairs. At the same time, it would be misleading to suggest that the sophists were ignorant of the more theoretical studies or even that they were simply unconcerned with these disciplines. Although Protagoras lectured on such topics as the virtues and rhetorical method, and was appointed by the Athenian government to create a constitution for Thurii, he also wrote



such texts as On the Nature of Being, On the Gods, and On Mathematics. Likewise, Hippias was perhaps one of the greatest mathematicians of the age, and a *polymath* with a remarkable memory and a voracious intellectual appetite-- Kerferd (1981) remarks that he was:

...known to have been ready to teach astronomy, mathematics and geometry, genealogy, mythology and history, painting and sculpture, the function of letters, syllables, rhythms, and musical scales. Moreover, he wrote epic verses, tragedies and dithyrambs... [p.47]

The proliferation of intellectual experiments during this period in Greek history was as varied as it was influential on subsequent thinkers. In particular I wish to focus on the relation between Socratic methods and the sophistic methods of *epideixis*, *antilogike*, and *eristike*.

### 1. *Epideixis*

*Epideixis*, or the "public display lecture",<sup>43</sup> consisted in lengthy speeches on a wide variety of topics and were given in front of a crowd which had paid for the privilege of hearing the master exhibit his talent. The subject matter of *epideixis* varied widely, and seems to have been more an attempt to impress the audience than it was an

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<sup>43</sup>Kerferd (1981), p.28. The word can also refer to a course of lectures.

*Antilogike* is somewhat closer to the method preferred by Socrates, and was exemplified best in the works of Protagoras.<sup>44</sup> According to Kerferd (1981), *antilogike* "...consists in opposing one *logos* to another *logos*, or in discovering or drawing attention to the presence of such an opposition in an argument, or in a thing or state of affairs." [p.63] Such a general characterization of *antilogike* is, however, distressingly uninformative: Kerferd's definition encompasses such diverse cases as *reductio ad absurdum* and the construction of logical antinomies. Worse yet, it covers any dialogical situation in which two speakers oppose one another in argument. A brief look at Protagoras should help. According to Diogenes Laertius, Protagoras was "...the first to say that on every issue there are two arguments opposed to each other."<sup>45</sup>, adding that he "was the first to introduce the method of attacking any thesis..."<sup>46</sup> Protagoras therefore taught his students general argumentative skills which enabled them to take any given side in a debate. De Rommiley (1992) writes that he showed them "...how to defend first one point

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<sup>44</sup>de Rommiley (1992) traces the origin of *antilogike* to Sophocles and the earliest comedies. [p.76]

<sup>45</sup>Diogenes Laertius, IX.51

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., IX.53. These innovations can probably be attributed to his famous dictum that "Man is the measure of all things.", since it entails epistemic uncertainty and thus competing opinions.

of view, then its opposite, how to praise and how to censure, how to present a prosecution and also a defense." [p.76] This no doubt enabled both he and his students to 'make the weaker argument the stronger', and thus helped them win dialectical contests. The form of Protagoras' Antilogies is no doubt similar to that of the Dissoi Logoi (written approximately 400 B.C.), in which an unknown author argues both for and against the existence of good and evil, justice and injustice, and the beautiful and the ugly. Moreover, Protagoras' Refutatory Arguments probably contained, in de Rommiley's (1992) words, "...models of arguments to which no answer could be found." [p.60]<sup>47</sup> For these reasons I think that *antilogike* is much closer to *eristic* than it is to the Socratic elenchus: antithetical arguments would clearly serve the *eristikoi* well. However, when taken in itself *antilogike* is remarkably unproductive since it lacks the methodological means to arbitrate between its opposing claims. Although the Socratic elenchus habitually pits one *logos* against another, it does not do so in the service of scepticism, and Socrates never argues both for and against the same position. Moreover, Socrates is quite clearly repulsed by the Protagorean

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<sup>47</sup>We should note that this does not rule out the possibility of deciding by some rational means between two opposing arguments-- in fact, the author of the Dissoi Logoi does take a position on the issues he discusses after having presented his antithetical arguments. Protagoras would have done likewise in many cases, I think, and quite possibly on probabilistic grounds.

relativism which lends itself so well to *antilogike*.<sup>48</sup>

### 3. *Eristic and the Elenchus*

On the surface, the elenchus and eristic bear a striking resemblance to one another: in as much as they operate by means of question and answer both are essentially dialectical, and both tend to result in confusion or *aporia*. We should, however, heed Protagoras' claim that "...it is not right to call things similar because they have some one point of similarity...any more than to call things dissimilar that have some point of dissimilarity." [Pr.331d-e] In the case of eristic and the Socratic elenchus, the dissimilarities are significant.

In the first place, they differ in intention. One who practices eristic aims at winning the argument, regardless of

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<sup>48</sup>See Euthydemus 286b-c. Kerferd (1981) points out that Plato thought *antilogike* inadequate because it was easily abused, especially among the young who, as he remarks in the Republic, "...misuse it as a form of sport, always employing it contentiously, and, imitating confuters, they themselves confute others. They delight like puppies in pulling about and tearing with words all those who approach them." [Rep.539b] Socrates may very well have shared this objection: he quite clearly takes his elenctic mission very seriously. Given this difference, Nehamas (1990) has argued that eristic, antilogic, and the elenchus are distinct only in purpose and not in method. [p.6,9-10] This goes too far, I think. Socrates' more serious intentions compel him to adopt formal constraints (which I will discuss shortly) which differ significantly from those found in both eristic and antilogic.

the truth or falsity of the position adopted. Thus Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are portrayed as masters of both fighting in armour and fighting in the law-courts. Socrates exclaims with mock admiration that "...they have become so skilful in wordy warfare that they can confute with equal success anything which anyone says, whether false or true!" [Eud.272a] After asking Clinias a question, Dionysodorus leans aside and laughingly remarks to Socrates that "...whichever way the lad answers, he will be refuted." [Eud.275e] Later in the dialogue, Euthydemus argues fallaciously that since Socrates knows something, he therefore knows all things, adding that "...you yourself will always know, and all things, *if I choose.*" [Eud.296d, my emphasis] Truth has therefore become a function of caprice for the two *eristikoi*: if they desire, they are equally capable of refuting or proving the same propositions. In contrast to the "playful"<sup>49</sup> antics of the

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<sup>49</sup>Throughout the Euthydemus, Socrates comments on the "playful" nature of the sophists' arguments. At one point he begs the two sophists "...to save us, me and the boy [Clinias], from this tempest of logic, and to play no more but to be serious..." [Eud.293a] See also 277d-e, where Socrates consoles Clinias by telling him that "...these two are only dancing round you in play...". We should note that Socrates is able to extract value from the sophists' "tempestuous logic"--at 277e he remarks that Clinias "...must learn first of all, as Prodicus says, the right use of words." In the Protagoras, Socrates says that Prodicus' branch of knowledge (the correct use of names) is "...an old and god-given one" [Pr.340e], and claims that he is one of Prodicus' pupils. [Pr.341a] I suspect, however, that Socrates is either overstating the case somewhat, or simply pulling our leg: in the Charmides, he remarks that although he is "...no stranger to the endless distinctions which Prodicus draws about names", he has

sophists, Socrates and Clinias are at pains to discover the answer to a serious question: What knowledge will allow us to do well (*eu prattein*) and achieve *eudaimonia*? For Socrates, this a matter of the utmost importance, and although he does not discover what specific kind of wisdom will achieve this end in the Euthydemus, he remains confident that it is a kind of wisdom, and he is therefore at pains throughout the dialogue to exhort Clinias to study philosophy and thereby care for his soul. Moreover, even when Socrates is unable to discover the truth, he is committed to developing progressively more adequate answers to his elenctic questions. Unlike the sophists, who gleefully proclaim success the moment a contradiction is reached, Socrates sometimes reiterates the inconsistent beliefs and then asks the interlocutor to abandon or modify one or both of them so that they may hopefully progress. [see Pr.333a]

Second, although both eristic and the elenchus operate by means of the dialectical process of question and answer, they possess formal constraints which differ significantly. Eristic questions are posed in such a manner that the respondent must either (i) choose one of two (apparently) mutually exclusive and exhaustive possibilities, or (ii)

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"...no objection to your giving names any signification which you please, if only you will tell me to what you apply them." [Ch.163d; see also La.197d]

answer with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. In both cases the scope of the respondent's answer is limited in advance by the questioner. Thus Euthydemus chastises Socrates for qualifying his answers (Eud.296a), for answering a question with a question (for seeking more information in order to answer truly--Eud.295b), and for offering more information than was asked for in the question (Eud.296a). Socrates, on the other hand, tolerates an interlocutor's attempt to seek clarification before answering, and he encourages his interlocutor to volunteer information by asking open-ended questions (Eud.290a). Clearly, Socrates does not want his interlocutors to make speeches, and he prefers short answers (see Pr.334d-335c, and G.449b-c), but he is willing to accept more lengthy responses than the two *eristikoi*.

Third, while eristic and the elenchus both attempt to show that a given set of propositions is inconsistent, the manner in which they do so differs. First, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus seek a verbal contradiction alone, regardless of whether or not the interlocutor truly believes the propositions which are used to engender the contradiction. Socrates, on the other hand, as we have already seen, insists that the interlocutor truly believe the propositions they assert or agree with. This is, no doubt, the reason why he tolerates questions of clarification and encourages the interlocutor to volunteer information. Socrates therefore

seeks more than merely verbal contradiction: since he is testing the belief system of the interlocutor, he seeks what Benson (1989) calls "doxastic inconsistency". [p.596] Second, the two *eristikoi* are not willing to consider empirical evidence (Eud.294c-d), nor are they willing to admit inconsistency if a given proposition contradicts one to which they have given their assent earlier (Eud.287b). Socrates, on the other hand, is willing to consider empirical evidence, and insists on the long-term consistency of his discussions. Despite his playful claim that he is forgetful in the Protagoras (334c-d), he consistently displays the opposite quality by reiterating points which have been previously agreed upon.

Finally, eristic arguments succeed if the respondent accepts them, whether or not they are valid. They also succeed if the respondent does not agree with the contradictory conclusion, but is unable to disprove this conclusion or show that it has been reached fallaciously. For Socrates, however, the issue of success is complicated by the number of purposes toward which the elenchus is employed.<sup>50</sup> Among these is one which is most important for my purposes here: exhortation. To begin, we should note that Socrates seems to have two separate methods of exhortation. The first

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<sup>50</sup>For more on the various purposes of the elenchus, see chapter III.A



proceeds by way of purgative proof of ignorance, while the second simply seeks to prove to the interlocutor that wisdom is the highest good and hence eminently desirable. In the first case, Socrates succeeds if he is able to show that the interlocutor is incapable of providing an adequate account of the virtue in question--and he must show this to the interlocutor. Thus in the Laches, Socrates demonstrates that the two generals are unable to provide a satisfactory account of courage, while in the Charmides, Socrates shows that Charmides cannot give an adequate account of *sophrosyne*. In both these dialogues, the proof of ignorance purges the interlocutor of false conceit and is therefore instrumental toward more positive efforts. Thus, in the Charmides, Socrates remarks:

How can you think that I have any other motive in refuting you but what I should have in examining into myself? This motive would be just a fear of my unconsciously fancying that I knew something of which I was ignorant. [Ch.166c]<sup>51</sup>

And at the conclusion of the aporetic Laches, Socrates says to

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<sup>51</sup>The Euthyphro is an excellent example of an exhortation which fails. At the close of the dialogue (after refuting his interlocutor numerous times) Socrates remarks "But now I am sure that you know exactly what is holy and what is not. So tell me, peerless Euthyphro, and do not hide from me what you judge it to be.", to which the young man responds "Another time, then, Socrates, for I am in a hurry, and must be off this minute." [Eu.15d-e] We should note that this does not preclude the possibility that the reader will be successfully purged of false conceit and thereby be exhorted to the pursuit of wisdom--this, however, would be a device of Plato, who clearly appreciated the purgative value of the elenchus, and not a device of Socrates.

Lysimachus:

I maintain, my friends, that every one of us should seek out the best teacher whom he can find, first for ourselves who are greatly in need of one, and then for the youths, regardless of expense or anything. But I cannot advise that we remain as we are. [La.201a]

The proof of ignorance is thus a necessary first step on the path toward wisdom--a lesson which Socrates attempts to teach, at the command of God, to all those who profess knowledge while simultaneously neglecting "real progress toward goodness". [Ap.29a] In the second case, as in the Euthydemus, Socrates does not offer a proof of ignorance before exhorting his interlocutor to pursue virtue. This is, no doubt, due to the fact that an interlocutor like Clinias possesses no pretensions to knowledge from the outset, and so Socrates attempts to convince him that all men should strive to become as wise as possible and to give honourable service to those who can assist one in the attempt. Given the essential connection between virtue and knowledge for Socrates, he is exhorting Clinias to pursue both wisdom and the virtuous life. [Eud.282b-d] In a case like this, then, Socrates succeeds if he is able to demonstrate *to the interlocutor* that wisdom is the highest good and thus eminently desirable.<sup>52</sup> Finally, then, we should note that in both cases (exhortation with and without purgation) Socrates is barred on principle

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<sup>52</sup>Whether the elenchus is capable of such a task will be examined in chapter III.C

from using fallacious arguments intentionally. If Socrates refutes a proposed thesis by means of an argument which the interlocutor thinks is fallacious, then the interlocutor remains unconvinced that their belief is false. And if Socrates successfully argues for a proposition in a fallacious manner, then he may succeed in inculcating a moral truth, but he would do so by morally harmful means. That is, since adequate moral knowledge necessarily requires knowledge of *why* a particular action is good (and not merely the knowledge *that* a particular action is good), an interlocutor who holds (true) beliefs for fallacious reasons lacks adequate moral knowledge. Socrates, then, cannot use fallacious arguments knowingly since (a) they make for ineffective purgation, and (b) wilful deception harms the soul of the interlocutor by encouraging inadequate moral knowledge.

In conclusion, then, it is clear that Socrates did not invent the dialectical method of question and answer. Rather, he appropriated and refined a common sophistic technique--one which was thoroughly familiar to figures like Protagoras and Gorgias (and no doubt many others).<sup>53</sup> But Socrates' elenctic intentions, which differed significantly from those of the sophists, necessitated a transformation in

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<sup>53</sup>Indeed, this may account for the fact that, as Nehamas (1990) points out, the fourth century orator Aeschines "...could refer to Socrates as 'the Sophist' without giving any indication that he felt his description needed any justification." [p.3]

method. Socrates' seriousness resulted in (i) a commitment to progressively more adequate answers to elenctic questions; (ii) tolerance toward a wide variety of responses on the part of the interlocutor (such as qualified responses and requests for clarification); (iii) a clear emphasis on doxastic inconsistency over merely verbal inconsistency; and (iv) the rejection of fallacious argumentation in any serious moral context.

### C. Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to show that Socrates' method is similar in interesting respects to methods practised by earlier thinkers and to those of his contemporaries. I have done so in order to begin to clarify the nature of the elenchus through comparison with alternate philosophical methods. Socrates did not invent deductive argumentation, arguments from analogy, or dialectic as a whole, but he was without doubt the first to make systematic use of these techniques in the service of ethical inquiry. Moreover, the seriousness of his elenctic mission necessitated the transformation of earlier methods (primarily by imposing formal restrictions which govern the legitimacy of questions and responses) to make them more suitable for his moral

enquiries.

## Chapter II: Socratic Knowledge

Throughout the early dialogues, Socrates attempts to discover the moral knowledge necessary for living virtuously. In the Apology, he imagines himself saying to someone who claims to care about virtue:

My very good friend...are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honour, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul? And if any of you disputes this and professes to care about these things, I shall not at once let him go or leave him. No, I shall question him, and examine him, and test him; and if it appears that in spite of his profession he has made no real progress toward goodness, I shall reprove him for neglecting what is of supreme importance, and giving his attention to trivialities. [Ap.29d-30a]

Here we see Socrates claiming that it is a matter of "supreme importance" that one care for wisdom (*phronesis*), truth (*aletheia*), and the perfection of one's soul (*psyche*). And there is no other way to accomplish this, for Socrates than study philosophy, become wise, and thereby learn the nature of the good. On the basis of this fundamental connection between wisdom and virtue, then, Socrates persistently examines those who claim expertise in moral matters. His elenctic test is intended (among other things) to unmask pretenders to the intellectual and hence moral throne by contrasting the

knowledge they profess with the knowledge they possess. Moreover, Socrates sometimes asks his interlocutor to provide a definition as proof of their wisdom.<sup>54</sup> In the early dialogues, then, we see Socrates asking his interlocutors: "What is piety?", "What is courage?", "What is justice?", "What is temperance?", and "What is friendship?" But in all these cases Socrates leaves the discussion unsatisfied. Now Socrates need not know what "beauty" or "justice" or "piety" are in order to expose his interlocutors' spurious claims to knowledge. However, he *must* appeal to a set of epistemic criteria which allow him to decide whether or not a given knowledge claim is adequate.

However Socrates never bothers to explicitly address epistemological or methodological questions, and the reader who wishes to comprehend his epistemic views must therefore do so through a careful inspection of his practices. Although Socrates never makes knowledge itself the object of his elenctic questions, a pre-systematic epistemological framework is implicit in his methods. In this chapter I wish to examine Socrates' conception of knowledge in an attempt to clarify the epistemological framework which underlies his method. Before

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<sup>54</sup>Not all elenchi aim at demonstrating that the interlocutor lacks expert knowledge. Those that do, however, usually do so by showing (given that the ability to provide a definition is a necessary condition for expert knowledge) that a given definition is inadequate. For more on the various purposes of the elenchus, see chapter III.A.

we can determine whether or not his method is capable of achieving his epistemic goal, we must first determine what this goal in fact is. To this end, I will consider the role which the *techne*-analogy plays in Socrates' moral doctrine, as well as his theory of definition.

#### A. The *Techne*-Analogy

Although Socrates' proclivity for definition is perhaps the most familiar aspect of his conversations in the early dialogues, we should note that Socrates frequently poses his questions to a supposed expert: he asks a poet about the nature of the poet's art, generals about courage, a young *mantis* or seer about piety, and two friends about friendship. It is possible that Socrates adopts this strategy simply because he wishes to baffle the authorities by presenting them with an impossible intellectual task. On this view, Socrates' mission would be nothing more than an attempt to teach his fellow Athenians a lesson in epistemic piety or humility. Although this is, I think, one of Socrates' goals, I see no reason to think that this exhausts his intentions altogether. The purely negative view of the Socratic elenchus<sup>55</sup> presupposes

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<sup>55</sup>By this I mean 'epistemically negative'; the lesson in epistemic piety is in a sense a genuine positive goal.



that Socrates has already abandoned the positive search for knowledge, but as Vlastos (1983) writes:

Elenchus is first and last *search*. ...its object is always that positive outreach for truth which is expressed by words for searching (*hereuno, diereuno*), inquiring (*zeto, herono, suneroto*), investigating (*skopo, diaskopo, skeptomai, diaskeptomai*). This is what philosophy is for Socrates. When he thinks of being silenced by the civic authorities, he imagines them saying to him "...you shall no longer engage in this search nor philosophize..."[Ap.29c] where the 'nor' is epexegetic. [p.31]

If this is true, then it would seem that Socrates investigates the experts because he sincerely thinks that the expert is most likely to give an adequate response to his questions.<sup>56</sup>

Ideally, the expert *should* possess the knowledge relevant to their area of expertise, whether that area is poetry or piety.

Thus Socrates asks Crito:

Ought we to be guided and intimidated by the opinion of the many or by that of the one--assuming that there is someone with expert knowledge? Is it true that we ought to respect and fear this person more than all the rest put together, and that if we do not follow his guidance we shall spoil and mutilate that part of us [the soul] which, as we used to say, is improved by right conduct and destroyed by wrong? [Cr.47c-d]

Crito agrees, and Socrates concludes that:

In that case, my dear fellow, what we ought to consider is not so much what people in general will say about us but how we stand with the expert in right and wrong, the

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<sup>56</sup>There is no doubt that sometimes Socrates simply wishes to refute his opponent, as in the case of Thracymachus. However, such refutations were neither malicious nor wanton. In chapter three I intend to demonstrate more rigorously that Socrates used the elenchus to both prove and discover moral truths, and thus that he consulted the experts in order, at least sometimes, to learn.

one authority who represents the actual truth. [Cr.48a] Socrates is looking for a moral expert: a man who possesses knowledge of good and evil analogous in some way to the knowledge possessed by craftsmen. This explains the continual recurrence of the *techne*-analogy in the early dialogues, something which neither we nor Socrates' interlocutors should pass off as insignificant.<sup>57</sup> In order to understand what an adequate answer to a "What is X" question would be, then, we should first determine the role that the *techne*-analogy plays in Socrates' thought. That is, we should determine what expert knowledge in fact is and thereby determine its relation to definitional knowledge.

### 1. *The Socratic Conception of Techne*

In order to determine the extent to which Socrates thought that virtue was analogous to craft-knowledge, it is necessary to first determine the nature of *technai* in general. Here I am following Woodruff's (1990) distinction between "expert knowledge" proper (the "ruling *techne*") and the "subordinate *technai*". [pp.92-93] According to Woodruff, the

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<sup>57</sup>Note Callicles' poke in the Gorgias: "By heaven, you literally never stop talking about cobblers and fullers and cooks and doctors, as if we were discussing them." [Gr.491a]

latter class encompasses those *technai* which "...you can master without knowing exactly when it is good to apply them, or how their products are best used." [p.93], while the former is reserved for that *techne* which requires both mastery and the knowledge of the good which guides it. Lesser crafts like those of the sea-pilot, the horse-trainer, or the house-builder, are subordinate *technai* since ships can be piloted, horses can be trained, and houses can be built successfully without the knowledge of whether these activities *should* be undertaken (whether they contribute to the good). Further, there is only one ruling *techne*, which I shall call "superordinate" for the sake of simplicity, that Socrates acknowledges as genuine: the knowledge of good and evil. We should note, however, that while Socrates' aporetic efforts aim at purging epistemic charlatans of their of their misguided estimation of their own intellectual abilities, Socrates does not wish to show that they lack expertise entirely. Rather, Socrates merely wishes to show them that they do not possess the knowledge necessary for virtue, regardless of their expertise in other (lesser) matters.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>In the Apology, Socrates says that after he had become dissatisfied with the knowledge possessed by the politicians and poets, he turned to the craftsmen: "I knew quite well that I had practically no technical qualifications myself, and I was sure that I would find them full of impressive knowledge. In this I was not disappointed." [Ap.22c-d] The craftsmen, then, possess some kind of expert knowledge, though not that knowledge found in the ruling *techne*. Even in the Euthydemus, Socrates seems to find genuinely

As a preliminary step, we should make an initial division between productive and non-productive *technai*. In the Euthydemus, Socrates and Clinias are searching for "...such a knowledge as combines both how to make something and how to use what is made." [Eud.289b] Clinias rejects Socrates' proposal that the general's art is their quarry, and along with it the mathematical arts, on the grounds that they are both arts of hunting:

No art of hunting, he [Clinias] said, goes further than to hunt and to capture; but when they have captured what they hunted, they cannot use it; huntsmen and fishermen hand over to the cooks. Geometers and astronomers and calculators--for these are a sort of hunters too, since they are not mere makers of diagrams, but they try and find out the real meanings--so because they do not know how to use them, but only how to hunt, they hand over their discoveries... [Eud.290b-c]

The mathematical arts, then, like the other arts of hunting, have no product [*ergon*].<sup>59</sup> They do not produce but rather discover "the real meanings". Such theoretical *technai* are therefore distinct from those *technai* which possess distinct products like that of the cobbler (shoes) or the physician (health). Since Socrates thinks that virtue is productive, in what follows I will ignore the non-productive or purely theoretical *technai*.

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valuable elements in the word-games played by the two sophists: see Eud.277d and 285a-b.

<sup>59</sup>Roochnik (1991) points out that this distinction is echoed in the Sophist at 219c [p.187], and by Aristotle at Nicomachean Ethics 1177b and Politics 1325b [note 12].

Bearing this in mind, the subordinate productive *technai* possess eight essential characteristics. First, each art allows its practitioner to know a specific subject-matter. In the Ion, Socrates secures agreement to the proposition that "Each separate art, then, has had assigned to it by the deity the power of knowing a particular work?" [Ion.537c] and adds:

...with me the mark of differentiation is that one art means the knowledge of one kind of thing, another art the knowledge of another, and so I give them their respective names....If they mean simply knowledge of the same things, why should we distinguish one art from another? [537d-e]

Each art, then, has its own field of expertise, or in other words, a distinct set of concerns with which it is primarily occupied.

Second, expert knowledge is specialized.<sup>60</sup> That is, its scope does not reach beyond its subject-matter. In the Laches, Nicias chastises Laches (with Socrates' implicit approval) for thinking that "...the physician's knowledge of illness extends beyond the nature of health and disease." Thus he asks "Do you imagine, Laches, that he [the physician] knows whether health or illness is more terrible to a man?" [La.195c], expecting the answer to be 'no'. Finally, in the Apology, after acknowledging that the craftsmen were "full of impressive knowledge" [Ap.22d], Socrates laments the fact that "...on the strength of their technical proficiency they

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<sup>60</sup>See Gould (1955), p.34, and Woodruff (1990), pp.94-95.

claimed a perfect understanding of every other subject, however important..." [Ap.22d] We should note that Socrates does not claim that the craftsman possesses knowledge about his area of expertise and no other. Although Socrates is clearly adverse the sort of *polymathie* exhibited by Hippias, he never rules out the possibility that one individual may practice more than one craft.<sup>61</sup> Socrates is therefore claiming that each art can only know its specific subject-matter.

Third, as Woodruff (1991) points out, each art is comprehensive. [p.95] That is, each art "...covers the entire range of its specific subject." [p.95] such that one cannot claim to be an expert if one knows merely a portion of one's art. This is clear from the *Ion*, where Socrates argues that Ion is not an expert (instead, the recipient of a divine gift) since he is only capable of speaking well about Homer but not about Hesiod or Archilochus. [532b-533d]<sup>62</sup> Expert knowledge, therefore, consists in comprehensive, specialized knowledge about a specific subject.

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<sup>61</sup>Even Plato does not forbid such a possibility [see *Republic* 369c-370b and *Laws VIII* 846d-e]. Although Plato prohibits citizens from performing tasks which are outside their proper sphere in the ideal city, he differentiates between souls on the basis of generic abilities (those of craftsmen, guardians, and philosophers) and not specific abilities. That is, even for Plato, a bronze-souled individual can practice more than one craft; they simply cannot practice the *kinds* of activities reserved for guardians and philosophers.

<sup>62</sup>See also *Laches* 198d-e

Fourth, every productive art possesses a distinct power (*dynamis*). We can see this in Republic I, where Socrates says that "...each of the arts is different from others because its power is different." [346a], and then adds:

And does not each art also yield us benefit that is particular to itself and not general, as for example medicine health, the pilot's art safety at sea, and the other arts similarly?...And does not the wage-earner's art yield wages? For that is its power. [346a-b]

The power or *dynamis* of an art therefore refers to the ability which the art confers upon its practitioner. Just as the art of medicine confers the capability to produce health, and the art of navigation confers the ability to produce safety at sea, the wage-earner's art confers the ability to produce wages. The things produced by way of these abilities are, as I will claim below, *erga*.

Fifth, every productive art possesses an *ergon* or product which is determined by its function, and which is distinct from the activities of the craftsman. In the case of the sculptor, the completed sculpture is a physically distinct *ergon*, while in the case of the physician, the health of the patient is distinct from the activity of healing. In both cases, then, the *ergon* is extrinsic to the craft-process and acts as a final cause which motivates the craftsman's efforts.<sup>63</sup> But the *ergon* is not merely the goal of an art.

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<sup>63</sup>This characteristic is adopted by Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics, at 1094a3-6 and especially 1140b6-7.

It is also, according to Socrates, some good which the activity strives toward: in the passage from the Republic just quoted, Socrates refers to the product of each art as a "benefit that is particular to itself". And in the Gorgias, Socrates contrasts cookery with medicine on the grounds that the former "...pretends to know the best foods for the body", while a doctor *truly* knows what is best for the body. [Gr.464c-d]<sup>64</sup> The physician, who is a genuine craftsman, therefore aims at some good. To summarize provisionally, then: each productive art is distinguished by a specific capability which strives toward a specific good, extrinsic to the craft-process itself.

Sixth, *technai* are essentially rational. It is this, perhaps, which most attracts Socrates to the craftsman's knowledge. Since the *technai* are rational, the genuine craftsman is able to give an account of his practice. It is for this reason that Socrates refuses to acknowledge that the rhapsode's art is a genuine *techne* in the Ion, since the young rhapsode cannot provide such an account. Instead, Ion's skill

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<sup>64</sup>This presents a difficulty however, since it conflicts with the principle of specialization. That is, if *technai* are specialized, then they cannot know both how to achieve their goals and whether or not their goals are consonant with the good. The latter knowledge is, it seems, the province of the superordinate art of virtue alone, and it is this which leads Socrates to conclude that the lesser *technai* must be subordinate to the ruling *techne*. I will discuss this in more detail in conjunction with the eighth characteristic (the insufficiency of *technai*) below.



is attributed to inspiration and divine possession: a non-rational explanation. [Ion 542a-b]<sup>65</sup> Similarly, in the Gorgias Socrates sharply distinguishes between genuine arts and those practices which are "a mere routine and a knack [*empeiria*]" [G.463b], and claims that *rhetorike* belongs to the latter class and not the former:

I insist that it is not an art but a routine, because it can produce no principle in virtue of which it offers what it does, nor explain the nature thereof, and consequently is unable to point to the cause of each thing that it offers. I refuse the name of art to anything irrational. [G.465a]

The genuine expert is therefore able to provide an account of an essentially rational practice. He will be able to "produce the principle in virtue of which" he does what he does (a final cause), give an account of this end, and thereby both explain and justify his activities.

Seventh, the rationality of *technai* contributes to the common Greek conviction that all crafts can be taught. The teachability of expert knowledge is implicit at Protagoras

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<sup>65</sup>Ion protests at first that he "...should be very much surprised if by your argument you succeeded in convincing me that [I am possessed or mad when I praise Homer.]" [536d] At the end of the dialogue, however, Ion accepts the notion: "Soc: 'Choose, therefore, how you will be called by us, whether we shall take you for a man unjust or a man divine.' Ion: 'The difference, Socrates, is great. It is far lovelier to be deemed divine.'" [542a-b] It is unlikely that Ion is truly convinced. In fact, his appeal to a quasi-aesthetic criterion implies that he does not even understand the gravity of his ignorance. Nevertheless, Socrates' point stands: the poet is unable to give a rational account of his art.

319e-320b: here Socrates argues that if one cannot pass on one's knowledge (as Pericles cannot educate his sons in virtue), then one's success in this area cannot be due to genuine knowledge. Socrates makes the same point in the Meno:

It is not then by the possession of any wisdom that such men as Themistocles, and the others whom Anytus mentioned just now, became leaders in their cities. This fact, that they do not own their eminence to knowledge, will explain why they are unable to make others like themselves. [M.99b]

If you possess expert knowledge, therefore, you are able to teach it to others.

Eighth and finally, the subordinate *technai* are insufficient in themselves. That is, no subordinate *techne* is capable of knowing both (a) how to do something and (b) whether it ought to be done. This follows directly from the principle of specialization, since knowledge peculiar to each *techne* is distinct from knowledge of the good. But this also seems to conflict with Socrates' claim that each *techne* knows and strives toward the good of its subject. Woodruff (1991) writes:

Socrates recognizes that for this reason you will not be able to acquire rhetoric as a *techne* unless you also acquire, as a *techne*, the ability to avoid committing injustice (Gorgias 510a; cf.509e). It follows that no ordinary specialised *techne* is adequate in itself, and that all such *technai* must be subordinate as rhetoric is subordinate: you could not be *technikos* in rhetoric without being *technikos* in justice. [p.94]

But this, as Woodruff points out, undermines the principle of specialization. Now Socrates is clearly committed to the

specialization of *technai*.<sup>66</sup> Woodruff therefore proposes that Socrates maintains both principles for genuine *technai* and is subsequently compelled to claim that "...the subordinate *technai* are not *technai* in the true sense." [p.94] since they cannot know their end (the good). On Woodruff's account, then, there is only one true *techne*: the knowledge of virtue which regulates the subordinate crafts. But Woodruff is mistaken, I think. Socrates shows no willingness to speak of subordinate arts as anything less than genuine *technai*. In fact, in the Gorgias, he distinguishes between cookery and medicine on precisely these grounds: while cookery is "a mere routine and a knack [*empeiria*]" [G.463b], medicine is a genuine art--even though the physician does not know the good in a global or unqualified sense.

A more plausible explanation, I think, is the following: by postulating a superordinate art whose subject is the good in an unqualified sense, Socrates is at odds with the traditional conception of *techne*. He cannot claim that craftsmen know the good in an unqualified sense, since this is not their subject, and yet it would be absurd to suggest that they do not aim at some benefit. As a result, Socrates maintains, I think, a hierarchy of goods, such that each subordinate *techne* knows its own limited or qualified good,

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<sup>66</sup>See especially Ion 537c, and Ap.22d.

while he reserves knowledge of the good in an unqualified sense for the superordinate art of virtue. The physician, then, knows that he strives for health, and he knows what health is and how to achieve it, but he does not know whether it is actually beneficial (however one construes 'benefit') to heal a particular patient. For this, one would require the assistance of an expert in virtue. Further, we should note that this solution does not violate the principle of specialization, since the latter only prevents a particular art from knowing both how to accomplish its end and whether or not this end is good in an unqualified sense. Ends which constitute qualified goods are therefore included *within* the scope of genuine subordinate craft knowledge. All genuine craft-knowledge, then, is subservient to knowledge of the good, and hence the subordinate *technai* are insufficient in themselves.

To summarize: all subordinate productive *technai* embody specialized, comprehensive knowledge of a specific subject. They possess a distinct power or capacity and an *ergon*. This product is some qualified benefit which acts as a final cause. As such, it justifies the craftsman's techniques and allows judgement of his capabilities. Further, all *technai* follow an essentially rational procedure which is teachable and which allows the practitioner to give an account of his craft. Finally, while all *technai* possess knowledge of

their particular, qualified end, they are subordinate to knowledge of the good. That is, while each subordinate craft possesses knowledge of the particular, limited end sufficient for the accomplishment of its *ergon*, they do not possess knowledge of the good; i.e. the supreme end of human action.

## 2. Craft-Knowledge and Virtue

At this point I would like to examine the craft-analogy to determine the role it plays in Socrates' conception of virtue. If virtue is analogous to the arts, then it should possess the eight characteristics listed above. There is little doubt that Socrates thinks that virtue is at least a kind of knowledge if not identical with knowledge. In the Laches, Socrates argues that courage requires wisdom, for without wisdom it becomes mere "foolish endurance" [192d], adding slightly later that "...courage is a sort of wisdom." [194d] In the Charmides, Critias claims that "...self-knowledge is the very essence of *sophrosyne*" [164d] and Socrates adds that "...temperance or wisdom, if it is a species of knowledge, must be a science..." [165c] Finally, in the Euthydemus, Socrates argues that knowledge is the necessary cause of "good fortune" and "good doing" [281b], that ignorance is the cause of doing badly [281b-c], and then adds:

...the truth is that in all things which we said at first were good, the question is not how they are in themselves good, but this is the point it seems. If ignorance leads them, they are greater evils than their opposites, inasmuch as they are more able to serve the leader which is evil; but if intelligence leads, and wisdom, they are greater goods, while in themselves neither kind is worth anything at all. [Eud.281d]

On these grounds Socrates concludes "...none of the things is either good or bad, except these two, and of these wisdom is good and ignorance bad." [Eud.281e] For Socrates, then, wisdom is intrinsically good, and ignorance is intrinsically evil.<sup>67</sup>

But what kind of wisdom is the art of virtue? First, Socrates thinks that the wisdom which he seeks possesses a distinct subject matter: good and evil. In the Charmides, he argues that if *sophrosyne* is a science then it must be "...a science of something." [165c;168b] Although Critias proposes that "Wisdom is a science of other sciences and of itself" [166c], Socrates is unconvinced, and admits this possibility only "in order that the argument might

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<sup>67</sup>This creates a serious problem: if wisdom is the *only* thing which is intrinsically valuable, then it seems that Socrates must make knowledge an end in itself which is not valued for its consequences. In effect, Socrates would have to equate knowledge with the happiness (*eudaimonia*) which it produces, since they cannot both be the ultimate final cause if they are different from one another. I suspect, however, that Socrates is claiming that wisdom is intrinsically good, and that it valuable for the happiness it produces. Aristotle makes the same type of claim in the Nicomachean Ethics: at 1097b3-6 he writes that "Honour, pleasure, understanding, and every virtue we certainly choose because of themselves, since we would choose each of them even if it had no further result, but we also choose them for the sake of happiness, supposing that through them we shall be happy."

proceed." [169d] In the argument that follows, Critias claims that "the crown of happiness" [173d] can only be found in "...the knowledge with which he [the happy man] discerns good and evil.", [174b] and Socrates concludes that no art "...will be well or beneficially done, if the science of the good be wanting." [174d]<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>We should note that Socrates rejects the possibility that such a science can be called wisdom, since it would merely be "a science of human advantage." [174d] Critias objects that wisdom may certainly be advantageous, but Socrates reiterates that Critias has defined wisdom as the science of other sciences and of itself; that is, wisdom does not produce the effects of the individual sciences, but merely knows these sciences, and hence it cannot produce anything. This does not mean, however, that Socrates rejects the claim that wisdom is the science of good and evil. In fact, I think he is hinting to both Critias and Charmides that the source of their problem is Critias' definition of *sophrosyne* as the science of science, and not the Socratic claim that wisdom is the knowledge of good and evil. If Critias took this point, he would reject or modify his claim along the lines Socrates is implicitly suggesting, but he does not. Rather, Socrates abruptly ends the discussion in *aporia*. He does so because he is attempting throughout this dialogue to compete, as Teloh (1986) points out, with Critias for control of Charmides' young soul. [p.59] Although Critias becomes flustered, he is unable to admit his ignorance (thus the need for Socrates' strategic assumption that Critias' definition is correct at 169d), and he ends the discussion unconvinced. Charmides, on the other hand, is thoroughly convinced of both his ignorance (and thus of the need for further intellectual efforts) and of the fact that *sophrosyne* requires wisdom: "I am sure that I do not know, Socrates, whether I have or have not this gift of wisdom and temperance...and I am sure, Socrates, that I do need the charm, and as far as I am concerned, [I shall be willing to be charmed by you daily, until you say that I have had enough." [176a-b] Socrates, then, need not be terribly concerned that Critias has not taken the point since he has indirectly won the soul of Charmides.

Second, knowledge of virtue cannot be specialized, and here the *techne*-analogy begins to break down. The global scope of wisdom is an implicit premise which contributes to Socrates' confusion in the Euthydemus. Socrates and Clinias agree that the ruling art must both know how to produce and how to use its product (Eu.289b), but they are unable to determine the exact nature of this art. The most likely candidate is the "art of kings" which "provides something good for us", and thus is "...some kind of knowledge." [Eu.292a]  
They continue:

Socrates: Then does the art of kings make the people wise and good?

Crito: Why not Socrates?

Socrates: But does it make all of them good, and good in all respects? Does it impart every knowledge, shoemaking, and carpentry, and all the others?

Crito: I do not think so Socrates.

Socrates: But what knowledge does it teach? And what are we to do with it? For it must not be a contriver of any of those products which are neither good nor bad; it must impart no knowledge but itself alone. [Eud.292c-d]

This seems to suggest that the ruling art is specialized since it cannot possess the same content as the subordinate *technai*; it merely rules over them. That is, although knowledge of the good guides the actions of all the lesser arts, it does not know *how* to perform the activities of the lesser arts: one should consult a wise man before deciding whether or not one's surgery is conducive to the good, but one should not let



Hippias hold the scalpel. This, however, is misleading. Socrates has clearly identified the regress which threatens their account of the ruling art: if this art produces something good (good citizens) by imparting knowledge, then some further art would be required to direct us in the use of these citizens (as products) in turn. The ruling art must be, therefore, as Woodruff (1990) points out, "...adequate in itself".[p.95] It is for this reason that Socrates insists that the ruling art must know both how to create its *ergon* and how to use it. While the subordinate crafts must be specialized, then, the ruling art cannot be, or it would generate an unacceptable logical regress.

Third, the art of virtue possesses comprehensive knowledge of its subject matter. This follows from two things: (a) the fact that the good is an *eidos*, and (b) Socrates' belief in the unity of the virtues. In the first case, because the good is an *eidos*, it is that which causes *all* good things to be good. That is, the good plays the role both a final and a formal cause of action. As such, this knowledge cannot be confined to merely local contexts or particular situations. If one knows the *eidos* of the good, then one will know whether or not *any* particular action will result in benefit, and one will also know *why* any particular action will do so. This is why knowledge of the good must guide and regulate the actions of craftsmen in all the

subordinate *technai*. In the second case, the doctrine of the unity of the virtues<sup>69</sup> implies that one cannot know a part of virtue without knowing all of virtue. Hence Socrates' efforts in the Protagoras which aim at demonstrating that virtue can be taught since it (as a whole) is a kind of knowledge. [Pr.361a-c] Against Protagoras, who thinks that one can be just or courageous without being wise [Pr.329e and 349d, respectively], Socrates argues that both *sophrosyne* and courage are the same as wisdom [Pr.330c-333c; and 349e-360e respectively].<sup>70</sup> Thus at the end of the dialogue Socrates admits that while he began the conversation thinking that virtue cannot be taught, he "...is now bent upon contradicting himself by arguing that everything is knowledge--justice, courage, and temperance alike." [Pr.361b] If, then, knowledge of virtue is knowledge of the good which guides all action (whether just, courageous, or temperate), then such knowledge cannot be confined to any single virtue but must encompass the whole.

Fourth, knowledge of good and evil possesses a distinct power or capacity. This capacity is, I think, that of caring for the soul. In the Apology, Socrates remarks that:

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<sup>69</sup>The complexities involved in this doctrine are beyond the scope of this paper. See Irwin (1979), pp.54-56; Gulley (1968), pp.151-164; Ferejohn (1984); Penner (1973); Vlastos (1973), pp.221-265.

<sup>70</sup>See also Laches 195a.

I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls. [Ap.30a]

In the Hippias Minor, Socrates claims that ignorance is a disorder of the soul which is more dangerous than the disorders of the body. He therefore makes a request to Hippias:

I hope that you will be good to me, and not refuse to heal me, for you will do me much greater benefit if you cure my soul of ignorance than you would if you were to cure my body of disease. [372e-373a]

Similarly, in the Gorgias, Socrates argues that "injustice and ignorance and cowardice" are "evil conditions of the soul" [G.477b], and elicits Polus' assent that just punishment, though painful, frees the soul from "...a great evil, so that it is profitable to submit to the pain and recover health." [G.478c] The capacity which this kind of knowledge confers on its practitioner, then, is the ability to care for the soul by ridding it of ignorance and vice.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Socrates' comments at Euthyphro 13b-c do not rule this out. Here Socrates is arguing that piety cannot mean "the service of the gods", as Euthyphro proposes, but we should not take this to mean that virtue cannot be a kind of service or care, only that it cannot mean service of the gods. Socrates remarks: "The care is given for the good and welfare of object that is served. You see, for instance, how the horses that are cared for by the horseman's art are benefitted and made better. Don't you think so?...And so no doubt the dogs by the art of the huntsman, the cattle by that of the herdsman, and in like manner all the rest." [Eu.13b-c] If we understand the object of virtuous service to be the soul, then Socrates is not being inconsistent. This does make virtue rather self-serving, but this is a common notion in early Greek thought, and in Socratic ethics in particular. [cf. O'Brien (1967), pp.27-38]

Fifth, knowledge of good and evil, as Irwin (1977) argues, possesses a distinct (though somewhat vague) *ergon*. [pp.75-76] Irwin's case is made largely on the basis of Charmides 163a-d, in which Socrates admits, in Irwin's words, that not all the *technai* "...produce artefacts, but they do all have subject matters and products separate from themselves." [p.75; my emphasis]. If Irwin is correct, and virtue is an art, then it should possess an *ergon*. Roochnik (1986) points out, however, that Charmides 163a-d does not support Irwin's claim. [p.188] The key lines are the following:

Critias: That is not the true way of pursuing the inquiry, Socrates, he said, for wisdom is not like the other sciences...For tell me, he said, what result is their in computation or geometry, in the same sense as a house is the result of building, or a garment of weaving, or any other work of any of the many other arts? Can you show me any such result of them? You cannot.

Socrates: That is true, I said, but I can show you that each of these sciences has a subject which is different from the science. The art of computation, for instance, has to do with odd and even numbers in their numerical relations to themselves and to each other. [165e-166a]

Despite the fact that there is no *explicit* reference here to the product of theoretical sciences like computation, Irwin attempts to tease one from the Greek in a footnote:

...the phrase *plethous hopos echei pros hauta kai pros allela* (the multitude which they make with themselves and one another) suggests the product--the right answer is a

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and 84-86.]

result of the calculations distinct from the steps of calculations themselves. [note 44]

Roochnik argues, however, that this cannot be the case since *erga* are typically contingent upon the act of production, while this is not true in the case of a theoretical art like calculation, whose results are necessary. [p.188] Further, *erga* are the unique measure of the productive activity, while numbers can be the "product" of any number of calculations--a well built house testifies to a good carpenter, but the number 35 alone, as the product of a calculative act, testifies to nothing. [p.188] Most damaging, perhaps, is Roochnik's claim that if Irwin were correct, then "...all sequential reasoning that issues in answers would be productive. Since most reasoning fits that description, ...most reasoning is productive in nature." [p.188] But Socrates clearly thinks that there is such a thing as purely theoretical reasoning.<sup>72</sup> All that Charmides 165e-166a "suggests", then, is that all *technai* possess a distinct subject matter.

What Roochnik has not shown, however, is that virtue in fact lacks a product. To be fair, he is not attempting to do so; his goal is to demonstrate that the *techne*-analogy

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<sup>72</sup>See especially Gorgias 450d, which Roochnik translates as follows: "Others of the *technai* which accomplish their purpose entirely through speech and, one might say, are in need of little or no product (*ergon*) in addition, such as arithmetic, logistic, geometry and draughts."

cannot be taken as rigorously as Irwin wishes.<sup>73</sup> And yet Roochnik concludes his criticism of Irwin by saying that "...the purpose of the analogy is not to establish a theoretical model of moral knowledge." [p.190] But this conclusion is unwarranted: Roochnik has shown that virtue is not analogous to *all* the crafts (obviously, it cannot be both productive and non-productive), but this does not entail that virtue is nothing like some crafts, nor even that it is significantly dissimilar from most crafts, such that the *techne*-analogy cannot function as a "theoretical model for moral knowledge". But the *techne*-analogy is first and foremost an analogy and not an identity, and it will therefore break down if pushed too far. The important question, then, is this: is virtue analogous to the productive or to the non-productive *technai*? That is, does it possess a product? In the Euthyphro, at 13d-14a, Socrates argues that piety cannot be "service to the gods" since the arts that serve result in products, while Euthyphro cannot specify the nature of the

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<sup>73</sup>At one point Irwin (1977) writes that "...virtue is only craft-knowledge" [p.7] and by implication nothing more than this. More to the point: Roochnik is criticizing *the way* in which Irwin justifies his overly strong reading of the *techne*-analogy. Irwin wishes to claim that since all crafts have products, and virtue is a craft, that therefore virtue must have a product. Now it may be false, as Roochnik shows, that all crafts are productive, but this does not mean that virtue lacks a product. All Roochnik's argument shows is that one cannot claim that virtue possesses a product simply because it is a craft, since there are non-productive crafts.

ergon produced by the gods with the help of his pious service. While we can safely infer from this refutation that Socrates does not think that piety is service to the gods, this does not rule out the possibility that piety remains a kind of service for Socrates. Indeed, I have just argued that the function of virtue is to care for one's soul, and the examples Socrates uses at this point in the Euthyphro are all taken from care-giving arts: the horseman, the huntsman, and the herdsman, who care for their horses, dogs, and cattle respectively. [Eu.13a] The objects of these arts, according to Socrates, are "benefitted and made better" [Eu.13b], and there is no doubt that Socrates thinks that virtue and wisdom are a benefit to the soul. Further, at Euthydemus 291d-292a Socrates says "Pray does this royal art, ruling all, make anything for us, or not? Certainly it does, we said to each other. Wouldn't you say the same, Crito?" [291d] Although Socrates and Crito are unable to say exactly what this art produces, except that its *ergon* is "something good" [292a] and hence that it must be "some kind of knowledge" [292b], they are adamant that the ruling art is productive.<sup>74</sup> Although Socrates

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<sup>74</sup>This is, of course, rather uninformative (the product of the ruling art, i.e. knowledge, is knowledge), and Socrates and Crito are unable to clarify the claim further. Socrates proposes that this art is the "one by which we shall make other men good." [292d], but recognizes that this leads to a regress: "And what shall these be good for, and how useful to us? Shall we say, to make others the same, and they to make others, and so on and on?" [292d-e] We might be tempted to conclude from this that Socrates thought that

and Crito are unable to determine the nature of its product, the other dialogues paint a clearer picture: the art of virtue aims at happiness (*eudaimonia*).<sup>75</sup>

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wisdom was not productive, for if it created a product, then we would require some further art to determine how best to use this product. This would be a mistake, however. First, Socrates claims that the ruling art is distinct from the other arts in that it both produces and knows how to use its own product. [Eu.290d] Second, if the product is in fact happiness (*eudaimonia*), then the question of use does not arise--how does one "use" happiness? As a final *telos* it is an end-in-itself and hence cannot have instrumental value. In either case, therefore, this is simply a point of disanalogy between virtue and the productive arts.

<sup>75</sup>Especially Euthydemus 278a, 281a-282a; Charmides 173d-e; and Gorgias 470e-472e. See also Irwin (1977, pp.52-57), Gulley (1968, pp.151-152), Brickhouse and Smith (1989, pp.158-164), and Vlastos (1991, pp.200-232). Socrates seems to identify the final cause with pleasure in the Protagoras, and Irwin (1977) has subsequently made him into an outright hedonist in many respects [see especially pp.108-109]. This, however, is misleading: in this final argument from the Protagoras, Socrates addresses the claim that "to live pleasurably is good, to live painfully bad" [351c] simply because it is (a) the belief of the many, and (b) possibly also the belief of Protagoras. Further, there is no reason to think that Socrates subscribes to this view himself (unless he holds a very unconventional view of the meaning of "pleasure" and "pain" which he neglects to clarify), and at least one passage which suggests that he does not. In acknowledgement of the fact that he is really addressing the many, Socrates offers his imagined interlocutors the opportunity to retract their thesis. He says: "You may change your minds, if you can say that the good is anything other than pleasure, or evil other than pain. Is it sufficient for you to live life through with pleasure and without pain? If so, and you can mention no good or evil which cannot in the last resort be reduced to these, then listen to my next point. This position makes your argument ridiculous....suppose we now say that a man does evil though he recognizes it as evil. Why? Because he is overcome. By what? We can no longer say pleasure, since it has changed its name to good. Overcome we say. By what, we are asked. By the good, I suppose we shall say. I fear that if our questioner is ill-mannered [*hybristes*], he will laugh and retort, What ridiculous nonsense, for a man to do evil, knowing it is evil and that he ought not do it, because he is overcome by good." [Pr.355a-d] In the first place, Socrates treats this thesis as an



Sixth, the art of virtue is essentially rational. As Socrates makes clear in the Gorgias, a genuine *techne* must be able to "...produce the principle in virtue of which it offers what it does" [Gr.465a]. That is, it must "...point to the cause of each thing that it offers." and explain the nature of this cause. [Gr.465a] But Socrates is unable to specify the nature of *eudaimonia* adequately. He does think that it is good (*agathon*), that it is beneficial (*ophelimon*), and that it is admirable (*kalon*). He thinks that wisdom contributes to it and that ignorance detracts from it. He is also quite sure that it is not the possession and use of wealth, or power, or reputation, whether taken singly or together. But this still does not give us much, and it certainly does not measure up to Socrates' own standards. I think that there are two chief possibilities: either (a) Socrates does not think it is possible to specify the nature of *eudaimonia*, or (b) he thinks

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hypothesis: *if* you are going to say such things, *then* you will encounter an unacceptable absurdity. And second, as Goldberg (1983) points out, the ill-mannered speaker resolves the absurdity neatly by introducing a pleasure-pain calculus at 355e-356c. Goldberg writes: "...there is no apparent necessity to stress the absurdity of the consequence so heavily, especially when that absurdity is about to be explained away in an elegant fashion. ...Socrates wishes to show, and twice over at that, what oddities result from the substitution of pleasure and pain for the good and the bad. The insolent [ill-mannered] one whom Socrates introduces here is not to be identified with the many whom Socrates assumes are ready to laugh at his conclusion (357d). For if they laugh, they will laugh at themselves, whereas the new speaker's laughter is justified. By introducing and labelling this man as insolent, Socrates has found the only polite way that he himself can express his own laughter." [p.264; cf. pp.260-261]

it is possible, but he is (contingently) unable to do so. I find the second more plausible. If the first were true then the *techne*-analogy would break down severely. The art of virtue itself would become an *empeiria* which operates by rules of thumb. As such, one could not justify or explain one's moral decisions with anything more than inductive confidence, and the decision making process itself would resemble the utilitarian calculus which Socrates considers at the end of the Protagoras. It is unlikely, however, that a man who operates by rules of thumb will possess sufficient inductive confidence to feel comfortable when prosecuting his father for murder. Moreover, Socrates would have to be seen in an unappealing light, as a man who challenges fellow citizens to meet epistemic standards he knows to be beyond their reach.<sup>76</sup> But if I am correct, then it becomes difficult to specify the rational procedure embodied in the art of virtue. In the absence of a full account of *eudaimonia*, then, all Socrates can do is continue searching, and his only method for conducting this search is the *elenchus*.

Seventh, Socrates is convinced that the art of virtue is teachable. Socrates insists that if this art is teachable, then there must be teachers of virtue [M.89d], but he is unable to discover who these people might be:

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<sup>76</sup>Indeed, he would earn the "bitter and persistent hostility" he attributes to his investigations in the *Apology* [23a].

Meno: But don't you think there are teachers of virtue?  
Socrates: All I can say is that I have often looked to see if there are any, and in spite of all my efforts I cannot find them, though I have had plenty of fellow searchers, the kind of men especially whom I believe to have most experience in such matters. [M.89e]<sup>77</sup>

How then can Socrates think that virtue is teachable? With the exception of the Meno (a transitional dialogue), the Protagoras is the only early dialogues in which the question is explicitly addressed.<sup>78</sup> Although Socrates begins the discussion (seemingly) convinced that virtue cannot be taught [Pr.319a-320b],<sup>79</sup> he proceeds to argue that all the virtues are essentially related to, if not identical with, knowledge. By the end of the discussion Socrates notes (addressing himself in the third person) that he seems to be:

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<sup>77</sup>Socrates makes the same point at Laches 186a-187b.

<sup>78</sup>The question is tangentially addressed in the Laches, but the bulk of the dialogue is devoted to discovering the nature of courage.

<sup>79</sup>He believes this for two reasons. (a) The Athenian assembly takes advice from experts on only those matters which can be taught (the traditional *technai*), but they are willing to listen to anyone who has an opinion about the art of politics. And (b), the "wisest and best of our countrymen" [319e] are unable to pass their knowledge of virtue on to their children. The first argument requires, as C.C.W. Taylor (1976) points out, the implicit assumption that the judgement of the Athenian assembly is to be accepted as true. [p.72] But Socrates would certainly not agree with this. The second is only inductively true: Socrates claims that he "...could mention many others, good men themselves, who never made anyone better." [320b], but this only proves that many good men are incapable of teaching virtue, not that virtue cannot be taught. I think, therefore, that Socrates is advancing a claim which he does not sincerely believe in order to challenge Protagoras to demonstrate that he can indeed teach virtue and that he is therefore a moral expert.

...bent upon contradicting himself by arguing that everything is knowledge--justice, courage, and temperance alike--which is the best way to prove that virtue is teachable. [Pr.361a-b]

Which position does he really hold, then? I strongly suspect that Socrates remains confident that virtue can be taught, but that he is unable to justify this claim adequately since he is unsure about its precise nature.<sup>80</sup> That is, he is confined to a provisional (and quite hopeful) agnosticism on the issue, for although he lacks adequate justification to claim knowledge, he does possess sufficient reason for thinking that virtue *should* be able to be taught. The doctrine of the unity of the virtues and their essential kinship with wisdom provides good grounds for believing so, and Socrates consistently maintains these latter notions throughout the early dialogues. Although Socrates may have held an unconventional view of both virtue and what it is to teach, I think he is committed to the view that since virtue is a kind of knowledge, it should be able to be taught.

Eighth and finally, knowledge of good and evil is sufficient for doing the good, and thus for being virtuous (and by extension, happy). In fact, this marks the major difference between virtue and the subordinate *technai*. First,

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<sup>80</sup>See also Meno 71a-b, where Socrates expresses his agnosticism (but not outright scepticism): "And how can I know a property of something [that virtue can be taught] when I don't even know what it is?"

we should recall that according to Socrates, all men desire the good by nature. Before he can claim, then, that knowledge is sufficient for virtue, Socrates must rule out the possibility of incontinence, and with it, as Irwin (1977) points out, the possibility that knowledge of the good can be misused. [p.77] Now Socrates is quite clear that knowledge is, as he says in the Protagoras, "...a fine thing quite capable of ruling a man, and that if he can distinguish good from evil, nothing will force him to act otherwise than as knowledge dictates." [Pr.352c] This effectively prevents uses which do not contribute to the good from interfering with our natural desire for happiness. This is why, I think, Socrates claims elsewhere that while the practitioners of the subordinate crafts are capable of performing their actions poorly either intentionally or unintentionally, the virtuous man can only err involuntarily through ignorance.<sup>81</sup> The

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<sup>81</sup>I take Hippias Minor 373c-376c to be an unsuccessful attempt to justify this claim to Hippias. Socrates and Hippias agree that the best craftsmen (in the subordinate *technai*) are those who are also capable of intentionally performing their actions poorly. Socrates then extends the scope of his claim to include the virtuous man, such that "...he who voluntarily does wrong and disgraceful things, if there be such a man, will be the good man." [376b] Both Hippias and Socrates are unsatisfied with this conclusion, and the dialogue ends in *aporia*. But Socrates has given Hippias a revealing hint, as Gould (1955) points out: "Socrates does not really think there is such a man who 'voluntarily does wrong and disgraceful things'." [p.42] Hippias was, unfortunately, not sufficiently familiar with the Socratic denial of incontinence (explicit in a number of the early dialogues) to take the hint.

knowledge of good and evil, therefore, is sufficient for virtue and the happiness that accompanies it. Moreover, this explains why the art of virtue must rule over the subordinate crafts and direct their activities: while the specialized knowledge of the subordinate craftsmen can discern how to achieve their limited goals, only the superordinate art of virtue can determine what these goals ideally ought to be. That is, the subordinate *technai* require the guidance of knowledge of the good in order to perform their activities well in all contexts.

On these grounds I think we can conclude that Socrates viewed the art of virtue as significantly similar to the subordinate *technai*. Like the subordinate *technai*, it:

- (a) knows a distinct subject (good and evil).
- (b) embodies comprehensive knowledge of its subject, although Socrates is unable to specify the nature of its final cause adequately.
- (c) possesses a unique capacity (caring for the soul).
- (d) possesses a product/final cause (*eudaimonia*).
- (e) is essentially rational.
- and (f) can be taught.

Unlike the subordinate arts, however, the art of virtue (a) is not a form of specialized knowledge (it knows both the unqualified end of action and how to achieve it), (b) is always beneficial, and (c) is sufficient for happiness, and thus rules over the subordinate *technai*. It is only in these three respects, then, that the *techne*-analogy breaks down. These differences are significant, but they are precisely the

kind of differences we should expect from a species of knowledge which is clearly superior to its more common cousins. I conclude, therefore, that the art of virtue is sufficiently similar to the subordinate *technai* to warrant Socrates' use of the *techne*-analogy as a model for moral knowledge. That is, Socrates can (in good conscience) "...never stop talking about cobblers and fullers and cooks and doctors..." [G.491a], just so long as he is willing to make an attempt to demonstrate the limits of the *techne*-analogy. In this respect his efforts are somewhat less explicit than many might prefer (Callicles and Hippias included), but the effort is made nonetheless.

What then is Socrates searching for? He seeks expert knowledge of the good, such that one's natural desire for this end may be realized through the performance of right action. Such knowledge would be reliable enough to warrant confidence in the face of difficult moral decisions and strong enough to overcome fascination with lesser goods like power and wealth. It would therefore allow us to care for our souls and become *eudaimon*.

## B. Expert Knowledge and Socratic Definitions

That which attracts Socrates most strongly to the technical knowledge possessed by craftsmen is the latter's ability to give an account of their art. This is the primary motivation for Socrates' repeated requests for definitions. That is, a genuine expert in any field should be able to provide an adequate account of his art which includes a definition of its *telos* or *ergon*. Such an account is of crucial importance since it is this which allows the craftsman to explain and justify his actions. I intend to clarify the nature of Socratic definitions by examining (a) their uses, and (b) Socrates' criteria for adequacy.

### *1. The Uses of Definition*

Definitions play three roles in Socrates' thought. First, they act as paradigms by which individual actions may be judged. Second, they possess explanatory force which clarifies the reasons why particulars belong to a given kind. And third, they play a positive epistemic role: they are the necessary precondition for knowing some general truths about



defined terms.<sup>82</sup>

That Socrates wishes to use definitions as paradigms for judgement is clear from a passage in the Euthyphro. When Socrates asks the young seer for a definition of piety, he says:

Well now, show me what, precisely, this ideal is, so that, with my eye on it, and using it as a standard [paradeigma], I can say that any action done by you or anybody else is holy if it resembles this ideal, or, of it does not, can deny that it is holy. [Eu.6e]

What Socrates wants, therefore, is a standard or paradigm by which he can judge whether any given particular *x* is a genuine instance of *F* (where '*F*' is usually a moral term--in this case, piety). Geach (1966) has claimed, solely on the basis of this passage, that Socrates thought that definitions were both necessary and sufficient for such judgements, but this is misleading. [p.372]<sup>83</sup> The passage leaves little room for doubting that Socrates thinks definitions are sufficient for this paradigmatic use, but there is little evidence to suggest that they are also necessary for judging that *x* is *F* in all

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<sup>82</sup>In what follows I will adopt the convention of referring to particulars (whether objects or actions) as '*x*', and the Socratic form or *eidos* (which is usually, though not exclusively, a moral term) as '*F*'.

<sup>83</sup>This, when conjoined with the proposition "It is no use to try and arrive at the meaning of '*F*' by giving examples of things that are '*F*'." leads Geach to conclude that Socrates is committing a serious fallacy which not only renders his elenctic questions pointless, but it is "quite likely to be morally harmful." [p.371] For more on the "Socratic Fallacy" see Santas (1972), Beversluis (1987), and Benson (1990a).

cases. In fact, as Beversluis (1987) suggests, Socrates seems to be claiming that definitional knowledge is necessary *only* in borderline or perplexing cases, and not for the vast majority of judgements. [p.111]<sup>84</sup> Indeed, if Socrates thought that definitional knowledge was necessary for judging that x is F in all cases, then Socrates' constant appeal to examples (whether he uses them to discover truths through *epagoge*, clarify terms, or to refute a proposed thesis) would be question-begging. That is, if Socrates did not already know the nature of F, then he would be unable to judge whether or not his examples are genuine instances of F. Socrates must therefore think that definitions are sufficient for judging whether any given x is F, and necessary *and* sufficient only for extremely perplexing cases.

Second, Socrates uses definitions to explain why particular x's are instances of F. For example, a definition of piety must not only allow us to judge whether Euthyphro's father committed an impious act, but it must also explain *why*

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<sup>84</sup>In Euthyphro's case, definition is both necessary and sufficient for judging that x is F, but Euthyphro's case is clearly an exceptional one. Note Socrates' unabashed astonishment in the face of Euthyphro's bomb-shell: "Good heavens Euthyphro! Surely the crowd is ignorant of the way things ought to go. I fancy it is not correct for any ordinary person to do that [prosecute one's father on charges of impiety] but only for a man already far advanced in point of wisdom." [4a] Deciding Euthyphro's case therefore necessarily requires an adequate definition, but only because it is an extremely borderline and perplexing circumstance.

his father's action is impious. Socrates does not merely want the ability to judge; he also wishes to understand why any given judgement is correct or incorrect. Thus at the conclusion of the Lysis, he says that he and his interlocutors have "...made ourselves ridiculous" [Ly.223a] since they were unable to discover the nature of friendship, and hence do not know *why* they are friends.<sup>85</sup> And in the Hippias Major, he imagines himself being asked: "You Socrates, pray how to you know what things are beautiful and what are ugly? Come now, can you tell me what beauty is?" [HMaj.286c] Socrates cannot, and the implication is that definitional knowledge of the beautiful is necessary for defending one's beliefs about particular cases of F. That is, knowing the definition of F is necessary for defending the claim that x is F because knowledge of F explains why any particular x is a case of F. In the absence of such knowledge, one can know that someone is one's friend, or that something is beautiful, but one cannot know why these things are the case, and hence one cannot defend one's judgements.

Third, Socrates thinks that general truths about F depend on definitional knowledge of F. That is, not only do

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<sup>85</sup>Here is a clear case which demonstrates that one need not know the definition of F in order to judge that x is F. Socrates and Lysis know full well that they are friends, but they are simply unable to explain their relationship by providing an account of friendship itself.

definitions allow us to judge whether x is F and to defend these judgements by reference to an explanatory cause, but they also allow us to know general truths about F itself. The most frequent case of such use of definitional knowledge surrounds the perplexing question of whether virtue can be taught. In the Laches, Socrates claims that before they can discover how best to acquire wisdom, they must first know the nature of virtue. Thus Socrates asks Laches: "For how can we advise anyone about the best mode of attaining something of whose nature we are entirely ignorant?" [190b] Socrates makes the same point in the Meno, at 71b: "I confess my shame that I have no knowledge about virtue at all. And how can I know a property [whether virtue can be taught] of something when I don't even know what it is?" Finally, at the end of Republic I, Socrates claims that he cannot know whether justice is wisdom and virtue or ignorance and vice without adequate knowledge of justice itself. [RepI.354b] Socrates therefore thinks that in at least some cases definitional knowledge of F is necessary for knowledge of general truths about F.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Socrates repeatedly claims that he does not know the essence of virtue, and yet he knows that virtue is fine, beneficial, and good. He therefore cannot think that definitional knowledge is necessary for knowing *all* general truths about F.

## 2. Criteria for Adequate Definitions

Adequate definitions of moral terms must do four things for Socrates.<sup>87</sup> First, they must specify the essence (*ousia*) of the definiendum. Second, they must provide necessary and sufficient conditions for a particular thing's being a genuine case of the definiendum. Third, they must specify the *ergon* or *telos* of the definiendum. And fourth, they must make use of straightforward language which avoids the use of disputed terms.

In the first case, an adequate definition must name the essence (*ousia*) of the definiendum. Two things follow from this. First, as R.E. Allen (1967) points out, one cannot answer a "What is F" question by giving a distinguishing mark which is merely common to all instances of the definiendum. [p.320] That is, one cannot define thunder as "That which follows lightning" since, even if contingently true, it does not capture the essence of thunder, but rather an accidental property. Euthyphro makes this mistake when he claims that piety is that which is "...pleasing to the gods." [Eu.7a], and Socrates is only too happy to show him his

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<sup>87</sup>The criteria given are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for being an adequate definition of *moral terms only*. There is no reason to think that Socrates would be equally strict with definitions of non-moral terms. Since I am primarily concerned with his views about moral knowledge, I will ignore the issues involved in defining non-moral terms.

error. Although Euthyphro's response is sufficient for purposes of picking out the set of things which are holy (on his account), he has not specified the *ousia* of piety. Second, the definiens must specify the *eidos* or form of the definiendum. And since an *eidos* is common to particular instances of the definiendum, an adequate response must name a universal.<sup>88</sup> This means, then, that one cannot answer Socrates' request by giving him an example (a particular), as Hippias does when Socrates asks for a definition of the beautiful: the polymath cleverly responds that "a beautiful maiden is beautiful [*parthenos kale kalon*]." [HMa]. 287e]<sup>89</sup> To summarize: an adequate response to a "What is F" question must specify the essential nature of the definiendum in the form of a universal term.

Second, an adequate definition must specify both

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<sup>88</sup>Aristotle claims that "...Socrates did not make the universals or definitions exist apart; they [Plato and his followers presumably], however, gave them separate existence, and this was the kind of thing they called Ideas." [Metaphysics, 1078b30-32] R.E. Allen ((1967) and (1970)) has challenged this orthodoxy, claiming that "...in a strong sense of the term Forms are as 'separate' from their instances in the early dialogues as they are later on." [1970, p.147] For a defense of the traditional view, see Woodruff (1978) and (1982, pp.166-170).

<sup>89</sup>I choose this example since it (and perhaps it alone) resists Nehamas' (1975) claim that no interlocutor in the early dialogues makes the grievous error of confusing a universal with a particular outright. In the case of the Euthyphro, the Laches, the Charmides, and the Meno, however, Nehamas is quite convincing. We should note also that Socrates refutes Hippias' proposal by demonstrating that the maiden's beauty is qualified by its opposite (she is ugly in comparison to a god).

necessary and sufficient conditions for any particular thing's being a member of the set of entities named by the definiendum. Guthrie (1969) notes that the verb translated as "to define" in Plato is *horizein*, which originally meant "...to mark off the *topoi* or limits of a field or other territory from those of its neighbour." [p.110, ff.1] The sense is clearly preserved in Socrates' view of definition: by specifying necessary and sufficient conditions, an adequate definition will distinguish the limits of the class of things which are F. That is, it will include all and only those things which are F, and it will exclude all and only those things which are not-F. This criterion is perhaps most evident in Socrates' use of counter-examples during the course of his refutations. When Laches proposes that courage is "a kind of endurance" [La.192b], Socrates points out that many kinds of endurance do not deserve to be called "courageous"--specifically, those actions which fall under the rubric of "foolish endurance". What Socrates has done, then, is demonstrate that Laches' definition does not specify a sufficient condition, since there exist enduring actions which fail to be courageous. Similarly, when Charmides proposes that "temperance is the same as modesty" [Ch.160e], Socrates argues that while some modesty is good and beneficial, some forms are evil and destructive. [Ch.161a] Thus temperance, which is always good [Ch.160e], cannot be identical with

something that is only sometimes good. Again, Socrates has demonstrated that Charmides has provided a non-sufficient characteristic: there exist actions which are modest but not also temperate. Finally, when Hippias agrees that 'the fine' (to *kalon*) is that which "...is pleasant through sight and hearing." [HMaj.298a], Socrates remarks: "Well, but are we then to say that those practices which are beautiful, and the laws, are beautiful as giving pleasure through our senses of sight and hearing...?" [HMaj.298b] In effect, Socrates has demonstrated that "being pleasant through sight and hearing" is a non-necessary condition for being 'the fine', since there exist things which are fine and yet are not sensibly perceptible at all. To summarize, then, an adequate definition must specify, in the words of Nahknikian (1971), some characteristic (*idea*) which is "both common and peculiar...to bone fide instances of the definiendum." [p.127] That is, it must specify necessary and sufficient conditions for any particular thing's being a member of the set of entities named by the *eidos* in question.

Third, an adequate definition must specify the *ergon* or *telos* of the definiendum. If it did not, it would fail to explain *why* it is that a given particular is subsumed under the scope of the universal *eidos*. An adequate definition, then, must possess explanatory power. Euthyphro's distinguishing mark (to *hosion* is the god-loved) ultimately



fails for precisely this reason. Since Euthyphro acknowledges that piety is good and noble, and that, in R.E. Allen's (1967) words, "...the goodness in things is...a reason for loving and not a consequence of it"[p.325], Socrates proceeds to demonstrate that being "loved by the gods" specifies a *pathos* of (a property connected with) piety, but not the essence of piety itself. As such, Euthyphro's definition cannot explain why his case against his father is pious. That is, it may be true that Euthyphro's legal action is pious, and it may also be loved by the gods, but this latter is not the reason why it is pious. Later in the dialogue Euthyphro proposes that piety is a kind of service performed for the gods.[Eu.12e] Socrates argues inductively that all service aims to benefit the object served, and the gods, who are of necessity supremely good in themselves, are therefore in little need of Euthyphro's pious assistance. And so Euthyphro modifies his definition: he means a kind of service analogous to that of a slave.[Eu.13d] Socrates argues, however, that arts which serve must produce something and hence Euthyphro's definition is inadequate since it does not specify the product of this pious service.[Eu.13d-14a] Now Euthyphro makes a rather feeble attempt to comply, but in point of fact he avoids the issue altogether and merely reiterates a version of his earlier definition: "If anyone knows how to say and do things pleasing to the gods in prayer and sacrifice, that is holiness..."[Eu.14b] It is Socrates'

response that is most interesting for my purposes:

...the fact is that you are not eager to instruct me. That is clear. But a moment since, you were on the very point of telling me--and you slipped away. Had you given the answer, I would have now learned from you what holiness is, and would be content. [Eu.14b-c]

All Euthyphro had to do, apparently, was give an adequate account of the product of piety. Unfortunately, it seems such knowledge was the province of the gods and not the prophet. Euthyphro's definition fails, then, because it does not explain why the art of service is pious. That is, since piety aims at producing some good, an adequate account must specify the nature of the *ergon* which piety achieves. The *ergon*, then, as that for the sake of which pious actions are undertaken, would possess the explanatory power of a final cause: it is that in virtue of which pious things are pious, or that which makes pious things pious.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>This requirement is also apparent at Hippias Major 302c. Here Socrates claims (contra Hippias) that if two things are beautiful, then "...they must be beautiful by virtue of an essential character belonging to both and not of a character which is lacking in one or the other." Socrates wants the *ousia* of the beautiful, not a mere *pathos* which is contingently connected with this *eidos*. That is, he wants that *in virtue of which* all beautiful things are beautiful. That such an account would require specification of an *ergon* is apparent at Euthydemus 291d-292e and Tharmides 163d-e. In the former case, Socrates and Clinias agree that an adequate account of the ruling art must specify the nature of its *ergon*. Their failure to do so prompts Socrates to say that 'We are just as far from knowing, or farther, what is that knowledge which will make us happy.' [Eud.292e] And in the latter case, Critias proposes that temperance is 'the making or doing of good things', but Socrates is unsatisfied since Critias has not specified the nature of the uninformatively vague 'good things'.

Fourth, and finally, adequate definitions must make use of straightforward language and they must avoid the use of disputed terms. The former is evident, as Nahknikian (1971) points out, from the definition of 'colour' Socrates proposes at Meno 76c-77a. [p.135] Meno has difficulty discovering the single *eidos* which is common to the many virtues, and so Socrates illustrates the kind of response he seeks by giving a definition of 'shape': for Socrates, shape is "...the limit of a solid." [M.76a]<sup>91</sup> He then gives a definition of colour based on the Empedoclean theory of effluences since he thinks that this will help Meno, who studied under Gorgias (a pupil of Empedocles), to grasp the point more clearly. But Socrates is not happy with his Empedoclean definition: he laments the fact that it is "a high-sounding answer" [M.76e]<sup>92</sup>, and adds that he believes that the definition of shape was better. This is quite probably because it was not overly technical and "high-sounding". Now Socrates is quite clear that an adequate definition must be couched in terms which are familiar to both parties in a discussion [M.75d], but his displeasure with the Empedoclean definition suggests, in Nahknikian's words, that

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<sup>91</sup>This definition is by genus and specific difference, but there is no good evidence to suggest that Socrates thought that all definitions must necessarily take this form. See Grimm (1962), pp.16-17.

<sup>92</sup>Nahknikian (1971) translates this phrase as "in the high poetic style". [p.135]

the terms of the definiens "...must also be precise in themselves." [p.135] Neither can the definiens make whole or partial use of disputed terms: it is no help to define virtue as the art which produces happiness, since happiness is an ambiguous term which could be taken in many senses.<sup>93</sup> At Charmides 163d-e, Socrates pleads with Critias to "...be a little plainer" since the young man has defined *sophrosyne* as the 'making or doing of good things', where 'good things' remains distressingly unclear. And in the Gorgias, Callicles proposes that justice is power, where power is understood in terms of being the stronger. [G.488b-d] Socrates complains, however, that "the powerful" is ambiguous: the many are more powerful than the few, and yet Callicles is certainly no democrat. [r.489b-c] Callicles clarifies his claim by identifying power with 'the better', and the better with 'the nobler', which prompts Socrates to remark: "You see then that you are playing with words but revealing nothing." [G.489e] since 'the nobler' is no more informative than any of Callicles' other choices. An adequate definition, therefore,

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<sup>93</sup>Indeed, Gulley (1968) writes: "The Greeks invariably specified the good as happiness (*eudaimonia*). *Eudaimonia* means, roughly, 'being blessed with good fortune'. It is often used synonymously with prosperity or 'faring well' (*eupragia*). All the philosophical schools are agreed that *eudaimonia* is the end. As Aristotle says, it is a platitude to assert that *eudaimonia* is the chief good (Nicomachean Ethics.1097b)." [p.77] It is not enough, then, for Socrates to simply claim that the end of virtue is *eudaimonia* without clarifying this ambiguous term.

must use straightforward language which is clear both in itself and to the interlocutors, and it must avoid the use of disputed terms.

### 3. Conclusion: Socratic Definitions

I have claimed, then, that definitions play three important roles in Socrates' philosophical discussion. First, they are standards or paradigms which are sufficient for judging whether any given *x* is *F*, but both necessary and sufficient for extremely perplexing cases. Second, definitions allow us to defend our judgements about particular beliefs and actions. That is, without definitional knowledge, one can know that a particular *x* is *F*, but not why *x* is *F*, and hence one cannot defend one's judgements against opponents. And third, Socrates thinks that in at least some cases definitional knowledge of *F* is necessary for knowledge of general truths about *F* (whether virtue can be taught, etc.). Further, I have argued that Socrates presupposes four chief criteria of adequacy for definitions. First, adequate definitions must specify the essence (*ousia*) of the definiendum, and thus they cannot be in the form of a particular example of *F*, nor can they merely name a distinguishing mark of *F*. Rather, they must elucidate the

essential nature of F (what it is to be F) in the form of a universal. Second, they must provide both necessary and sufficient conditions for a particular x's being a genuine case of F. Third, they must specify the *ergon* or *telos* of F. If they did not, definitions would lack the power to explain and hence to justify judgements about particular actions and beliefs which are F. Fourth, and finally, the definiens must make use of straightforward language which is clear both in itself *and* to the interlocutors, and it must therefore avoid disputed and uninformative terms.

### C. Knowledge: Certainty and Reliability

We have seen that Socrates intends the *techne*-analogy to be taken seriously as a model for moral knowledge, and that the primary virtue of the expert is his ability to provide an account which includes a Socratic definition. One issue remains for my account of Socratic knowledge: is the knowledge possessed by the genuine expert infallible? Does Socrates require that the genuine expert possess epistemic certainty? Gould (1955) argues that for a number of pre-Socratics going back to Homer, as well as for Socrates himself, the term *episteme* means no more than a practically oriented "subjective

conviction" [p.15] in the majority of its instances. Further, Gould uses this practical conception of knowledge as a natural bridge to span the distance between Socrates' conception of virtue and the traditional *technai*. This interpretation has come under fire, deservedly. Vlastos (1957) argues that (a) almost none of Gould's examples of this practical use of *episteme* are taken from Attic Greek, and that in point of fact, its occurrence in Attic Greek is extremely infrequent (less than fifteen percent in Herodotus, and only once elsewhere--in Heraclitus) [p.208]; and (b) Gorgias 454d shows that the distinction between *pistis* and *episteme* has become uncontroversial or self-evident by the time of Socrates. Vlastos writes:

All that Socrates has to do is set the two words, *pistis* and *episteme*, side by side before him, and Gorgias feels the difference right away, with no temptation to counter with, 'Don't we sometimes mean *pistis* by *episteme*?' [p.209]

Vlastos therefore concludes that while Socrates was absolutely convinced that knowledge was valuable, he did not identify knowledge with conviction. [p.210] Following Vlastos, Hintikka (1974) has added that Gould "oversimplifies" the problem, for while "...there is no doubt that he is fully right that there is an element of 'know-how' in the concept of *episteme*..." [p.34], this need not overshadow the theoretical aspects of Socrates' moral knowledge.

But while Socrates' epistemic goal is not a purely

"subjective conviction", neither is it intellectual certainty. We should note that Plato certainly felt the epistemic angst which followed from the proto-sceptical assaults of the sophists on traditional Greek religion and morality, and he responded by introducing the metaphysics necessary to ground an epistemology whose primary goal was "ideal" knowledge. Although Socrates' moral discourse may have presupposed a rudimentary epistemology, it is clearly devoid of the epistemological concerns which occupied Plato. Woodruff (1990) writes:

When Socrates disclaims knowledge or undermines the claim of another, he does not do so by attacking the truth, the certainty, or even the source of the particular item of knowledge that is in question. Instead, he challenges the reliability of the person who claims knowledge, by asking him for a definition that would hold in all circumstances. The point is not to ascertain whether he is right in this case, but whether his claim could hold for every case. [p.87]

This is, I think, an intriguing suggestion. Woodruff claims that when Socrates challenges the experts, he does not do so by calling the certainty of their knowledge in question, although this is inevitably the result. Although refuting an interlocutor by means of a valid argument entails that the expert lacks certainty about his professed area of expertise, there is no reason to think that Socrates' mind is troubled by questions of certainty or a lack therewith. These are Plato's problems, and they are addressed with the metaphysics Plato introduces. Socrates, on the other hand, stands outside the



sceptical debates that have motivated so many philosophers in the centuries that follow.<sup>94</sup>

Indeed, it would be absurd to think that Socrates demanded epistemic certainty from experts in the subordinate *technai*. No one expects their auto-mechanic to possess infallible knowledge of car repair, though one certainly expects that they possess sufficient knowledge to fix one's car. Among the subordinate *technai*, then, epistemic certainty would be sufficient for the performance of one's duties, but it would certainly not be necessary. Socrates would surely agree: in the Apology he claims that the subordinate craftsmen "...knew many fine things" [Ap.22d], and then adds:

But, men of Athens, the good artisans also seemed to me too have the same failing as the poets; because of practising his art well, each one thought he was very wise in the other most important matters, and this folly of theirs obscured that wisdom... [Ap.22d]

We should note two things in this passage: first, despite the fact that the craftsmen lack something which Socrates considers important, he nonetheless does not hesitate to call them "professional experts"; and second, Socrates does not criticize them for lacking epistemic certainty, but rather for invalidly inferring that their specialized expertise extends beyond its proper scope. It would be equally absurd to think that Socrates was looking for epistemic certainty in matters

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<sup>94</sup>For an interesting discussion of the relation between Socrates, Plato, and the later sceptics, see Woodruff (1986).

of virtue. Although he criticizes his fellow Athenians for failing to demonstrate their knowledge of virtue, this failure cannot be construed as a failure to possess a kind of divine wisdom: when Socrates tests the oracle's pronouncement, he is genuinely *surprised* that none of the self-professed experts measure up to their boasting--thus his expectation that he will disprove the oracle. [Ap.21c;22b] And when he tells the results of his testing to the jury, he swears by the dog and insists on his honesty. [Ap.22a] The lack of knowledge Socrates discovers among the experts, then, comes as a surprise not only to Socrates, but to the majority of Athenians as well. If Socrates thought that they lacked divine wisdom, understood as epistemic certainty, then we could hardly expect him to be surprised when he had demonstrated their ignorance. Socrates may have made some mistakes, but we could not seriously think that he mistook the generals, the politicians, the poets, the sophists, and the craftsmen in general, for gods. I conclude, therefore, that the knowledge which Socrates seeks and is unable to find cannot be epistemic certainty, for otherwise his philosophical mission would be trivial. His criteria for adequate definitions are rigorous, certainly, but they are not divine.

Socrates cannot think, therefore, that the only genuinely reliable knowledge would be an epistemically certain grasp of *eide* through essential definitions. One must grasp

*eide*, surely, and one must do so through an adequate definition, but one need not possess epistemic certainty. Indeed, all that Socrates requires is knowledge which is sufficiently reliable for the life of virtue and thus for *eudaimonia*. Now I am intentionally leaving the precise status of this "reliable knowledge" ambiguous for the moment. That is, I wish to defer the obvious question "How reliable must knowledge be in order to qualify as sufficient for virtue." until I have given a more thorough examination of the positive capabilities of the elenchus. Nonetheless, it is clear that Socrates goal is neither Gould's "subjective conviction", nor is it some impossibly stringent conception of certainty.

#### D. Conclusion: Socratic Knowledge

Although Socrates claims in the Protagoras that "It is the argument itself that I wish to probe.", he slyly remarks that through testing the argument "...it may turn out that both I who question and you who answer are equally under scrutiny." [333c] Now it is a commonplace to assert that the Socratic elenchus tests not merely propositions, but also the

lives of those who maintain these propositions.<sup>95</sup> It is not a commonplace, however, to claim that in doing so Socrates is indulging both a moral and an epistemological concern. Why does Socrates test his interlocutors' *bioi*? It is in part, I think, because he is searching for both a peculiar kind of knowledge and a peculiar kind of individual.<sup>96</sup> That is, he is looking for reliable knowledge, and he sincerely believes that such reliable knowledge can only be found in that most uncommon of figures: a moral expert.

For Socrates, that which primarily qualifies someone as a moral expert is their ability to give a definition of virtue, and an adequate definition must (a) specify the essence of the definiendum in the form of a universal, (b) specify necessary and sufficient conditions for a particular thing's being a genuine instance of the definiendum, (c) indicate and explain the *telos* or *ergon* of the definiendum, and (d) they must be couched in straightforward language. There can be no doubt that Socrates' criteria are stringent: providing an adequate definition of virtue is no small task, and it comes as no surprise that neither the 'experts' nor

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<sup>95</sup>See Laches 187e, Apology 28e, and Brickhouse and Smith (1991) pp. 135-140.

<sup>96</sup>There is no doubt that Socrates possesses a genuine concern for the welfare of his fellow Athenians, but this consideration should not overshadow his epistemic interests. That is, Socrates is perfectly capable of both testing his interlocutors and searching for adequate knowledge at the same time.

Socrates are capable of succeeding in the early dialogues. But although Socrates and the more conventional experts are incapable of doing so, Socrates has no good reason to think that the task is impossible. Indeed, if it were impossible, then, we would hardly find him exhorting people to a study whose highest end was beyond their reach. Socrates must therefore have thought that expert knowledge of virtue by way of essential definition was a legitimate goal. The invariable failure to succeed should be attributed not to the impossibility of the task nor to a natural deficiency of human reason, but rather to the contingent deficiencies of those who joined Socrates in the search. Whether or not the elenchus is in fact capable of achieving reliable knowledge and the degree of reliability sufficient for virtue is the subject of chapter III.

### Chapter III: The Socratic Elenchus

In the first chapter I gave an account of some of the major methodological practices current in the time of Socrates. In the second chapter I argued that Socrates understood the kind of knowledge he sought as analogous to that of the *technai* in general, and I attempted to clarify the nature of this epistemic goal by examining his theory of definition. In this chapter I will examine the Socratic elenchus itself, concentrating on (a) its types and purposes, (b) its logical form, and (c) its formal constraints. This will allow me to address in (d) what Vlastos (1983) has called "the problem of the Socratic elenchus".[p.30]. That is, I will examine whether or not the elenchus is capable of achieving Socrates' epistemic goal and if so, then to what degree it is so capable. I will argue that the elenchus is in fact capable of justifying positive epistemic convictions about virtue.

### A. The Elenchus: Types and Purposes

Commentators on the early dialogues often speak of "the elenchus" as if Socrates' method had a single goal and a single form. Socrates' reluctance to discuss his method no doubt contributes to the confusion, since we are forced to speculate on his intentions and his techniques. Vlastos (1983) writes:

...only in modern times has 'elenchus' become a proper name. So the 'What is F?' question which Socrates pursues elenctically about other things, he never poses about the elenchus, leaving us only his practice of it as our guide when we try to answer it ourselves. [p.28]

But one thing that is quite clear from the early dialogues is that Socrates uses the elenchus for a variety of purposes. This in turn necessitates, I think, corresponding modifications in the formal constraints Socrates imposes on his discussion. I therefore wish to offer an alternative understanding of the elenchus which construes it in the plural. Socrates has, I think, at least four uses for the elenchus, and here I am chiefly following Woodruff (1986): (a) a purgative elenchus which attempts to convince the interlocutor that his beliefs are inconsistent and that he is therefore confused; (b) a defensive elenchus which Socrates uses to justify his own moral convictions; (c) an elenchus which Socrates uses to evaluate the truth of an interlocutor's proposed definition; and (d) a deliberative elenchus which

Socrates uses to clarify the consequences of an agreed upon moral principle, or to determine whether a particular belief or course of action is consistent with that moral principle. [p.26]

In the first case, Socrates clearly intends some of his elenctic examinations as demonstrations of logical confusion. In the Apology, Socrates describes the "...bitter and persistent hostility" [Ap.23] which he earned (following, he thought, the command of the oracle) from his repeated demonstrations of inadequacy on the part of the poets, the politicians, and the craftsmen. [Ap.22a-e] The pedagogical value of such a demonstration is implicit throughout the early dialogues, but Socrates makes the point explicitly in the Meno after he has shown the slave-boy his mathematical error:

At the beginning he did not know the side of the square of eight feet. Nor indeed does he know it now, but then he thought he knew it and answered boldly, as was appropriate--he felt no perplexity. Now however, he does feel perplexed. Not only does he not know the answer; he doesn't even think he knows....In fact, we have helped him to some extent toward finding out the right answer, for now not only is he ignorant of it, but he will be quite glad to look for it. [M.84a-b]

Now it is somewhat misleading to call this use of the elenchus a "demonstration", since Socrates need not effect his purgation by means of a valid argument. Indeed, as Woodruff (1986) points out, "A merely purgative argument need not even presuppose principles of logic, since its aim is only to convince the interlocutor that his beliefs are



incoherent." [p.26] That is, it is possible for purgative arguments to be intentionally fallacious, just so long as they convince the interlocutor that he is confused. This of course presupposes that Socrates already knows that his interlocutor is ignorant, but Socrates does seem to think so in some circumstances: his arguments against Meletus in the Apology are largely purgative in intent, although here Socrates is not so much interested in getting Meletus to admit confusion as he is interested in getting the jury to see Meletus' confusion. The premises in a purgative elenchus can therefore be false, and the inferences drawn from them can be unwarranted, just so long as the interlocutor agrees to them and thus admits his confusion.<sup>97</sup> Finally, since the demonstration of inconsistency is a preparatory for genuine philosophical progress, the purgative elenchus is not an end in itself.

Second, Socrates uses the defensive elenchus to justify his own moral convictions. Woodruff (1986) writes that the defensive elenchus "...shows that an interlocutor who rejects one of Socrates' beliefs cannot consistently maintain that rejection." [p.26] Socrates' conversations with Callicles and Polus in the Gorgias are excellent examples of this form. Polus maintains both that the tyrant is the most powerful of

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<sup>97</sup>It is of course perfectly possible to purge someone of false conceit by means of non-fallacious arguments as well, and I suspect that in many cases Socrates would desire to do so.

men, and that doing wrong is better than suffering it; both are contraries of familiar Socratic positions. Callicles maintains (a) a form of "natural justice" which anticipates that of Thracymachus in Republic I,<sup>98</sup> (b) that courage, knowledge, and the good are different from one another, and (c) that pleasure is the highest good--again, contrary to familiar Socratic theses. With both Polus and Callicles, Socrates demonstrates, or takes himself to have demonstrated, the falsity of their beliefs and thus the truth of his own. When Socrates asserts that evildoers are "the unhappiest of all, and that those who are punished are less so." [G.473b], Polus replies that refuting this statement would be difficult. Socrates responds with uncharacteristic conviction: "Not difficult, Polus, but impossible, for the truth is never refuted." [G.473b] In the subsequent examination, Polus is compelled to admit that doing wrong is a greater evil than suffering it, and that those who are justly punished are benefitted thereby. In the end, Socrates and Polus agree that Polus' position has been proven false, and that the Socratic position has been proven true. [G.479e-480b]<sup>99</sup> Similarly,

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<sup>98</sup>That is: "...the more powerful carries off by force the property of the weaker, the better rules over the worse, and the nobler takes more than the meaner." [G.488b])

<sup>99</sup>Polus is compelled by reason to agree, but is reluctant at times. At the end of the discussion he is not thoroughly convinced that Socrates is correct--he says: "To me it seems fantastic, Socrates, but I suppose it is consistent with what was said

Callicles' beliefs are proven false, although Callicles is belligerent and mocking throughout, and unconvinced at the end. We should note several things here. First, the defensive elenchus presupposes at least basic principles of logic. Without them, Socrates could demonstrate neither truth nor falsity. Second, when conducting a defensive elenchus, Socrates must convince the interlocutor of the truth or falsity of the conclusions reached. This is apparent at Gorgias 471c-472c, where Polus attempts to refute Socrates' claim that he who acts justly will receive benefit and be happy, and that he who acts unjustly will be unhappy. Polus makes his attempt by citing a counterexample: Archelaus is known to have performed "...greater crimes than any in Macedonia" [G.471c], and yet, according to Polus, Archelaus is the envy of everyone. But Socrates claims that Polus has conducted a rhetorical argument which merely appeals to a host of witnesses (Polus and the many agree that Archelaus is both unjust and supremely happy), and this, of course, does not convince Socrates, since he denies that Archelaus is happy. That is, Socrates rejects the counterexample and is unpersuaded:

But I, who am one, do not agree with you, for you cannot compel me to; you are merely producing many false witnesses against me in your effort to drive me out of my property, the truth. But if I cannot produce in you

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before." [G.480e]

yourself a single witness in agreement with my views, I consider that I have accomplished nothing worth speaking of in the matter under debate; and the same, I think, is true for you also, if I, one solitary witness, do not testify for you and if you do not leave all these others out of account. [G.472b-c]

While Polus may convince any number of listeners, his refutation fails because he has failed to convince his chief interlocutor, Socrates.<sup>100</sup> As such, he has not defeated Socrates, and he has therefore failed to defend his own position.<sup>101</sup> Third, the defensive elenchus cannot make use of intentionally fallacious argumentation. When purging an interlocutor of false conceit, Socrates need only convince his opponent that their beliefs are inconsistent, but in the defensive elenchus Socrates is attempting to justify his own convictions on the basis of valid argumentation. He might

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<sup>100</sup>Socrates makes the same point at Gorgias 475e: "And although all other men except me agree with you, I require no witness to testify for me save you alone, and putting you alone to the vote I ignore the rest." I will refer to this characteristic of the elenchus as the "availability constraint" hereafter (see especially chapter III.D.2).

<sup>101</sup>Is Socrates refutation of both Polus and Callicles successful, despite the fact he manages to convince neither interlocutor? To some extent, I think it is. Both Callicles and Polus make use of basic logical principles, agree to the inferences drawn by Socrates, and agree with the conclusion reached. And yet they withhold their assent in the end. But their failure to agree is not due to the fact they dispute the logic of the argument (assuming that they are indeed saying only what they genuinely believe), but rather to the fact that their pride is stronger than their commitment to reason. Despite the fact that they worship a false god, then, they have implicitly agreed that Socrates' conclusion is warranted. Socrates has therefore defended his position even if Callicles and Polus are too proud to admit defeat.

convince his interlocutor if he deliberately used fallacious arguments, but he certainly would not convince himself.

Third, Socrates uses the elenchus to test definitions--perhaps the most common use in the early dialogues. Further, Socrates generally takes the failure on the part of his interlocutor as proof that the definition is false, and thus that the interlocutor is ignorant. That is, the definition testing argument is closely aligned with Socrates' disproof of expert knowledge. According to Woodruff (1986), the key difference between the defensive elenchus and the definition testing elenchus is that in the former Socrates states a position which he defends by refuting those who oppose it, while in the latter, he "...states no position on the main question and says that he has none." [p.27] As in the case of the defensive elenchus, Socrates cannot claim elenctic success unless he demonstrates that the definition is false to the *interlocutor*. If he did not do so, then he would not convince the interlocutor that they lacked expert knowledge, and hence there would be no pedagogical benefit. Further, Socrates cannot intentionally use fallacious arguments when testing a definition since not only the interlocutor but he as well has a stake in the outcome of the inquiry. As a result, it is not sufficient to merely convince the interlocutor that he does not possess the knowledge requisite for expertise--Socrates himself must be convinced. Finally, since Socrates must *prove*

that the definition is inadequate, and thus that the interlocutor is ignorant, he must appeal to some standard which is accepted by both he and interlocutor. The definition testing elenchus therefore presupposes the Socrates and the interlocutor share both the Socratic view that definitions are necessary for expert knowledge and a theory of adequate definitions.<sup>102</sup>

Fourth and finally, following Brickhouse and Smith (1991), Socrates uses a deliberative elenchus to clarify the consequences of an agreed upon moral principle, or to determine whether a particular belief or course of action is consistent with that moral principle. [pp.151-156] The clearest (and perhaps the only) example is the Crito: here Socrates and Crito attempt to 'unpack' the logical consequences of their shared belief that "one must never willingly do wrong" [Cr.49a] in order to determine whether or not this principle is consistent with a proposed action-- Socrates' escape. We should note three things here. First, as in the definition-testing and defensive elenchi, Socrates cannot intentionally use fallacious argumentation. Socrates is *seeking* the truth, and does not merely wish to convince Crito that he has a moral obligation to remain in prison. There is little reason to think that Socrates already knows

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<sup>102</sup>Typically, Socrates introduces the latter into the discussion.

the answer to the problem, and merely wishes to make the point for Crito's benefit. After Crito has laid out the plan for escape in full [Cr.45a-46b], Socrates says:

So we must examine the question whether we ought to do this or not; for I am not only now but always a man who follows nothing but the reasoning which on consideration seems to me best. And I cannot, now that this has happened to us, discard the arguments I used to advance, but they seem to me much the same as ever, and I revere and honour the same ones as before. *And unless we can bring forward better ones in our present situation, be assured that I shall not give way to you...* [Cr.46b-c]

Although Socrates seems quite confident here that Crito's proposal is unacceptable, he allows the possibility that he might be wrong. The question is not closed, and Socrates has a vested interest in making a genuine attempt to discover whether or not he ought to escape. Second, the goal of this elenchus is merely consistency. Socrates and Crito have agreed upon the general moral principle that 'one ought never to willingly do wrong' in advance, and do not question it. This principle is therefore assumed to be true,<sup>103</sup> and he and Crito endeavour to discover whether or not the proposed escape is consistent with it. Third, since the truth or falsity of the conclusion reached is contingent upon Socrates' antecedent conviction in his general moral principle, the positive capabilities of the deliberative elenchus are dependent on a defensive elenchus which justifies the general moral principle

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<sup>103</sup>Socrates quite probably has good reasons for thinking it is true, but he neglects to share them with us.

invoked.

Although it is true to some extent that Socrates has only one method, the elenchus, we should not let this obscure the fact that his elenctic intentions differ significantly from conversation to conversation. This difference in intention necessitates important methodological variations within the elenchus. That is, Socrates adopts a variety of formal constraints in his various discussions which are contingent upon the character of his interlocutor and Socrates' goals at that particular time. The great virtue of distinguishing types of elenchus in this manner is interpretive flexibility. That is, if we admit that the kind of elenchus Socrates uses is contingent upon his intentions in particular contexts, then we can allow Socrates to justifiably claim success in varying dialogical situations despite the fact that the epistemic results achieved seem to differ significantly. We should note, finally, that since neither the purgative nor the deliberative elenchus purports to establish the truth or falsity of a proposition, neither necessarily leads to the 'problem of the elenchus'.<sup>104</sup> In what follows, then, I will concentrate solely on the defensive elenchus and the definition-testing elenchus.

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<sup>104</sup>See chapter III.D for my formulation of this problem.



## B. The Structure of the Elenchus

At this point I would like to introduce Robinson's (1953) distinction between direct and indirect refutation. For Robinson, an indirect elenchus uses the thesis as a premise in its own refutation, while in a direct elenchus, Socrates secures agreement to some further set of premises which are not deduced from the thesis and which lead to an unacceptable consequence without making use of the thesis itself. [p.22] Robinson also wishes to classify as indirect those refutations made by counter-example or the "negative instance".<sup>105</sup> He writes that

...the following argument is clearly indirect: 'If all X were A, then, since P is an X, P would be A; but P is not A; therefore it is false that all X are A.' Yet it differs from the simple negative instance only in that we need an extra premise in order to see clearly that P is a negative instance of the thesis that all X are A. I have therefore classified all arguments from the negative instance as indirect. [p.24]

In Robinson's jargon, such a refutation is a "destructive hypothetical syllogism" [p.24], but we might better describe it as an instance of *modus tollens tollendo*: 'If A, then B; but not B; therefore not A'. Finally, Robinson wishes to distinguish between those refutations which make use of extra-

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<sup>105</sup>This is, no doubt, the major motivation for his claim that of the 39 refutations he counts in the early dialogues, "...31 seem to be indirect." [p.24] In a deviously Socratic manner, however, Robinson leaves the reader to his or her own devices by neglecting to give textual references to support his claim.

premises, *in addition to the minor premise* (above: 'but not B'), when drawing an unacceptable consequence from the assumption, and those which use only the minor premise. [p.25] In all cases of indirect refutation, however, Robinson thinks that, with or without the aid of extra premises in addition to the minor, Socrates "...deduces the falsehood from the assumption". [p.25]

Vlastos (1983) has claimed, however, that in no case does Socrates "deduce" the unacceptable consequence from the thesis itself. [pp.29-30] Vlastos writes that:

The premises from which Socrates derives [the negation of the thesis] generally do not include [the thesis] and even when they do, there are others in the premise-set elicited from the interlocutor, not deducible from [the thesis]. [p.30]

This is, I think, correct. There are two possibilities for Robinson: Socrates can deduce the unacceptable consequence from the thesis with or without the aid of extra premises in addition to the minor. When Socrates uses extra premises in addition to the minor, then Vlastos is surely correct: the unacceptable consequence is only a consequence of the conjunction of the thesis, the minor premise, and the extra premises invoked. As such, the unacceptable consequence has not been deduced from the thesis alone. And when Socrates does not use extra premises in addition to the minor (refutation by counter example or the "negative instance"), Vlastos is again correct: the unacceptable consequence is only

a consequence of the *conjunction of the thesis and the minor premise*. Now the minor premise clearly cannot be deduced from the thesis itself, since a thesis like 'All X is A' entails that anything which is X is also A and thus that anything which is not A is not X. It is simply not possible to deduce from 'All X is A' some X which is not A. In fact, Socrates invariably proposes a possible counter-example, and then elicits agreement from the interlocutor that the proposed case is a genuine case of X, *and* that it is also not A. When Socrates uses *modus tollens tollendo*, then, he does deduce an unacceptable consequence, but he deduces this consequence from *the conjunction of the thesis and the minor premise, not from the thesis itself*. Vlastos is therefore correct: Socrates never deduces an unacceptable consequence directly from the thesis itself.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>Robinson also cites Charmides 170 in support of his claim, and he adds that "The refutation without extra premisses is common in the Lysis; otherwise the arguments in that dialogue would not be so unusually short." [p.25] But Robinson is clearly glossing the refutation at Charmides 170. He writes: "...from the thesis that temperance is knowledge of knowledge Socrates professes to deduce without the aid of any extra premiss the unacceptable consequence that temperance, when it knows knowledge, does not know what that knowledge is knowledge of." [p.25] This is misleading. The fact that temperance, as defined by Critias, is a form of knowledge which has knowledge as its object, and yet does not "...know what that knowledge is knowledge of" is not the unacceptable consequence Socrates draws. In fact, Socrates only draws an unacceptable consequence at 171c-d, one and a half Stephanus pages later, where he concludes that such knowledge would be unable to distinguish the true expert from the pretender, and hence would produce no benefit (*ophelimon*). Socrates therefore draws the unacceptable consequence with the help of a large number of extra premisses, chief among

There are, then, a very small number of genuinely indirect refutations in the early dialogues, as Vlastos (1983) has pointed out. [p.39] Among them are the refutations<sup>107</sup> of Polemarchus' definition of justice as giving "...each what is owed to him." [RepI.331e], and the refutation of Euthyphro's first definition of piety. [Eu.6e-8a] In each of these cases, Socrates shows that the thesis asserted by the interlocutor, when conjoined with a set of independent admissions which are not deduced from the thesis, entail an unacceptable consequence. As well, the refutations by counter-example at

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which, perhaps, is the implicit premise that all knowledge is beneficial. Further, I can find only one argument in the Lysis which does not use extra premises in addition to the minor to reach its unacceptable consequence, despite the fact that a number of the refutations here are "unusually short". The clearest candidates would probably be found at Lysis 211d-213d, where three refutations of Menexenus' claim that 'if X loves Y (without reciprocation) then X and Y are mutual friends' come fast and furious. [Ly.212b] Of these, only the first makes no use of extra premises in addition to the minor, since here Socrates refutes Menexenus with a counter-example: Menexenus agrees that (a) his definition does not exclude cases where a lover loves someone who is either indifferent to the lover or downright hostile, and (b) in such cases, neither party is a friend to the other. [Ly.212c] As such, Socrates does not deduce a falsehood from the thesis, but rather demonstrates the falsity of the conjunction of the thesis and the minor premise. A similar example can be found at Hippias Major 498a-b.

<sup>107</sup>There are two. Socrates argues that Polemarchus' definition results in the unacceptable consequence (a) that "...in all things, justice is useless when they are in use, but useful when they aren't." [RepI.333d], and (b) that justice is "...some sort of craft of stealing." [RepI.334b]

Lysis 212b-c and Hippias Major 498a-b are also indirect. Here, however, Socrates shows that the thesis, in conjunction with the minor premise, entails an unacceptable consequence. The majority of Socratic refutations, therefore, are direct: in most cases Socrates does not use the thesis as a premise in its own refutation, but instead elicits a number of independent premises from the interlocutor which collectively entail the falsehood of the thesis.

At this point I would like to present Vlastos' (1983) account of the logical form of direct refutation. Not only is it extremely lucid, but it has become virtually canonical in the secondary literature. It 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 and r, but not to them.
- (3) Socrates then argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that q and r entail not-p.
- (4) Thereupon Socrates claims that not-p has been proved true, p false. [p.39]

I wish to make one minor correction to this account. Vlastos claims in (2) that the agreement to q and r is *ad hoc*, by which he means: "Socrates argues from q and r, but not to them." This is patently false. Clearly, Socrates sometimes introduces premises solely on the grounds that the interlocutor believes them: they are neither derived from previous admissions, nor are they justified by independent

argument. At the same time, Socrates can and does argue for the premises he introduces by way of *epagoge*. In fact, this is the chief use of *epagoge* in the early dialogues.<sup>108</sup> Sometimes, therefore, the agreement is genuinely *ad hoc*, and sometimes it is not. Vlastos' account therefore requires a slight modification: I suggest we rewrite (2) as 'Socrates secures agreement to q and r (each of which may stand for a conjunct of propositions). Moreover, q and r are not derived from the initial thesis, and Socrates may or may not provide an independent argument which purports to establish q and/or r'.

In its corrected form, the logical form of standard or direct elenchus is therefore the following:

- (1) The interlocutor asserts a thesis [p] which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation.
- (2) Socrates secures agreement to q and r (each of which may stand for a conjunct of propositions). Further, q and r are never derived from the initial thesis, and Socrates may or may not provide an independent argument which purports to establish q and/or r.
- (3) Socrates then argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that q and r entail not-p.
- (4) Thereupon Socrates claims that not-p has been proved true, p false.

In this form, Vlastos' account of the logical form of the

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<sup>108</sup>See for instance Euthyphro 10a-11a, where Socrates uses *epagoge* to introduce the premise "Whenever an effect occurs, or something is effected, it is not the thing effected that gives rise to the effect; no, there is a cause and then comes the effect." [10c]; and Gorgias 474d-475a, where Socrates uses an *epagogic* argument to establish the premise that if anything is more fine (*kala*) compared to something else, it must be so because it is more pleasant, more useful, or both.

"standard elenchus" holds for all instances of the defensive elenchus and those cases of the definition-testing elenchus which have the form of direct refutation. Here, after the interlocutor asserts a thesis {p} which is contrary to Socrates' beliefs, Socrates secures agreement to some set of premises {q,r}, and then argues that these premises prove the contradictory of the interlocutor's thesis {not p}. Finally, Socrates claims that {not-p} (his own position) has been proven true, and thus that the interlocutor's thesis {p} has been proven false. Thus in the Gorgias, Socrates argues against both Polus and Callicles that it is worse to do than to suffer injustice.<sup>109</sup> In the Republic, Socrates argues against Polemarchus that the just man will not harm anyone,<sup>110</sup> and against Thracymachus that the just man does not rule for his own advantage but for that of his subjects.<sup>111</sup> And against Euthyphro, Socrates argues that pious things are loved by the gods because they are pious, and not that pious things are pious because they are loved by the gods.<sup>112</sup> Finally, it might seem that Vlastos' account cannot apply to the definition-testing elenchus, since Socrates repeatedly claims that he is

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<sup>109</sup>Against Polus at 474b-475e, and against Callicles throughout the conversation--the conclusion is reached at 508c.

<sup>110</sup>See Republic I, 335a-335e.

<sup>111</sup>See Republic I, 338c-347c.

<sup>112</sup>See Euthyphro 9d-11a.

not an expert, and hence possesses no definitions of moral terms, even after he has refuted a definition by means of the standard elenchus. But Vlastos' (4) does not require Socrates to claim that he has proven the interlocutor's definition false by proving his own definition true. Socrates never disproves a definition by proving an opposing *definition*; rather, he proves some non-definitional claim true which is inconsistent with the proposed definition. Thus in the refutation of Polemarchus, who proposes that justice is 'benefitting one's friends and harming one's enemies', although Socrates does prove that the just man cannot harm anyone and hence that Polemarchus' definition is false, he does not even hazard a guess about what the just in fact is.

### C. Formal Constraints

Socrates adopts two formal constraints during elenctic questioning. First, Socrates explicitly insists that the interlocutor say or agree only to those propositions which they genuinely believe to be true (the doxastic constraint). And second, he insists that they refrain from making speeches (the conciseness constraint).

The first formal restriction, which Benson (1989b) calls the "doxastic constraint", governs the admissibility of



propositions asserted by the interlocutor. [p.78] One cannot, according to Socrates, answer an elenctic question with a position one does not really hold, as Protagoras tries to do. When Protagoras says

I really can't admit that justice is holy and holiness just; I think there is some difference there. However, [Protagoras] said, what does it matter? If you like, let us assume that justice is holy and holiness just. [Pr.331c]

Socrates responds:

It isn't this 'if you like' and 'if that's what you think' that I want us to examine, but you and me ourselves. What I mean is, I think the argument will be most fairly tested, if we take the 'if' out of it. [Pr.331c]

This passage testifies, as I have mentioned in chapter I.B.3, to the fact that Socrates, unlike Zeno, refuses to debate unasserted or hypothetical propositions. Because the elenchus tests lives and not merely disembodied claims, Socrates insists that one's admissions reflect one's real beliefs about the matter. If the interlocutor's admissions did not do so, then the refutation of their position would be a matter of little consequence. The "doxastic constraint" is therefore intended to ensure that Socratic discussions possess existential significance for the participants.

The second formal constraint, like the "say what you believe" constraint, also governs the admissibility of propositions into the elenchus. Here Socrates insists that the respondent, in Vlastos' (1983) words, "...is to refrain

from speechifying--to give short, spare, direct, unevasive answers to the questions." [p.35] This constraint (I shall call it the "conciseness constraint") is perhaps most apparent in the Protagoras and the Gorgias, where Socrates confronts interlocutors for whom the practice of speech-making is a commonplace.<sup>113</sup> The Gorgias opens just after the sophist has given "a fine and varied display" [G.447a] of his intellectual talents, but Socrates clearly disdains such shows of wisdom. He politely refuses Callicles' offer to convince Gorgias to give another demonstration of his proficiency in speech-making, saying:

Most kind of you, Callicles, but would he [Gorgias] also be willing to converse with us? I want to learn from him what is the scope of his art and just what he professes and teaches. As for the exhibition, let him give us that, as you suggest, on some other occasion. [G.447b-c]

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<sup>113</sup>We might also expect Hippias to make attempts at speechifying in both the Hippias Minor and Hippias Major, but he does not. The Hippias Minor begins just after Hippias has given a "magnificent display" [HMin.363a] on "...many things of various kinds about Homer and diverse other poets" [HMin.363b-c], and Socrates waits until the crowd has dispersed before asking Hippias to clarify his meaning. Hippias quickly makes the transition from speech-giving to question and answer dialectic, saying: "I should be strangely inconsistent if I refused to answer Socrates, when at each Olympic festival, as I went up from my house at Elis to the temple of Olympia, where all the Hellenes were assembled, I continually professed my willingness to perform any of the exhibitions which I had prepared, and to answer any questions which anyone had to ask." Although I doubt that Hippias' standard 'question period' resembled a Socratic conversation, the polymath clearly had a significant amount of experience with methods other than speech-making. Further, his unbridled sense of self-importance probably lead him to believe that he could play any dialectical game equally well.

Moreover, although Socrates praises Callicles' initial speech at 482c-486d, he does not do so on the basis of its content. Rather, Socrates praises Callicles for speaking with knowledge, good will, and frankness, and then subsequently summarizes Callicles' point in extremely brief fashion. [G.488b] It is not, then, on the basis of Callicles' speech that Socrates admits the thesis in question into the elenchus, but on the basis of Callicles' simple and straightforward agreement with Socrates' formulation of the thesis. Further, in the Protagoras, Socrates requests that Protagoras refrain from giving long speeches, playfully claiming that his short memory prevents him from following lengthy arguments. [Pr.334c-335b] But Socrates is not serious, of course: the power of his memory is clear in many of the early dialogues--most notably in his remarkable ability to remember seemingly innocuous propositions which are admitted early on and which conflict with later responses. Socrates must therefore oppose speech-making purely on methodological grounds. We should note, then, that Socrates *will* admit propositions made during the course of a speech, but only if they are reformulated as simple responses to a Socratic question.

#### D. The Problem of the Socratic Elenchus

Given the logical form of standard or direct elenchus, we can now clearly see the 'problem of the elenchus'. When the interlocutor asserts some thesis {p}, Socrates secures agreement to some further set of premises {q,r} which entail the negation of {p}. Socrates then claims in (4) to have proven the contradictory of the interlocutor's thesis true {not p}, and thus to have proven the interlocutor's thesis itself {p} false. But all the logical form of standard elenchus entitles Socrates to claim is that a given set of premises which includes the thesis (here, {p,q,r}) is inconsistent. It would seem, then, that Socrates is only warranted in claiming that the conjunct of p,q, and r is false, and thus that one of p,q, or r is false. What then leads Socrates to believe, on the strength of his demonstration of the inconsistency of {p,q,r}, that {p} is in fact false, as he does at Crito 48a and 49c-d, Republic I 335e and 347d, and Gorgias 475e and 508c?<sup>114</sup> I wish to begin my

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<sup>114</sup>Vlastos (1983) writes that "only in the Gorgias does Socrates maintain that his theses have been 'proved true' [G.479e] or, equivalently, by a powerful metaphor, have been 'clamped down and bound by arguments of iron and adamant' (508e-509a). In previous dialogues he contents himself with weaker language. He describes his elenctic refutation of {p} by saying that {not p} 'has become evident to us' (*ephane hemin*) [see Pr.353b; Eu.15c; RepI.335e], or by observing that the interlocutor now 'sees' (*horas*, Eu.11a) or 'knows' (*iste*, Pr.357e) that {not p}. How substantial is this difference? Since all those texts remain

exploration of this problem by critically examining Vlastos' (1983/1994)<sup>115</sup> account, which attempts to justify a constructivist reading of the elenchus.<sup>116</sup> By outlining the problems with Vlastos' view, I think we will be in a better position to determine just what a successful constructivist account must include. Following my presentation of Vlastos' account, then, I will offer an alternative and more plausible

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unexplicated and we are given no analysis of what we should understand by proof, we cannot be sure. Even so, the difference in tone is unmistakable." [pp.71-72] There are instances outside the Gorgias, however, where the context indicates that Socrates considers to have proven {not p}, especially Republic I 335e, where Socrates concludes at Republic I 335e, that "If, then, anyone affirms that is just to render each his due and he means by this that injury and harm is what is due his enemies from the just man and benefits to his friends, he was no truly wise man who said it. For what he meant was not true. [ou gar alethe helegen] For it has been made clear to us that in no case is it just to harm anyone." Here, not only has the conclusion {not p} been made evident, but Socrates is confident enough in his argument to claim that the man who utters Polemarchus' thesis is not wise, since "...what he meant was not true." The 'problem of the elenchus', then, should not be confined to the Gorgias alone; in fact, I suspect that Socrates did not rigorously distinguish between 'proving' and weaker terms like 'making evident'. In all likelihood, the Socrates of the Gorgias is explicitly doing what he had always taken himself to be doing: establishing the falsehood of the interlocutor's thesis.

<sup>115</sup>Vlastos' "The Socratic Elenchus" was originally published in 1983, but appears in Socratic Studies (1994) in slightly modified form. Since the later version of this essay includes modifications made in light of critical responses in the secondary literature, and thus represents Vlastos' most recent thoughts on the matter, all references will be to the 1994 version of this essay unless otherwise noted.

<sup>116</sup>By "constructivist", I mean simply an account which attempts to show that the elenchus, as Socrates employs it, is in fact capable of justifying positive convictions about (primarily) virtue.

interpretation of the elenchus, in which I will attempt to argue that when Socrates claims to have proven {not-p} true and {p} false, he has reasonable grounds for doing so.

### 1. *Vlastos' Constructivist Account of the Elenchus*

Vlastos (1994) begins by offering a provisional definition of the elenchus which is consistent with his account of its formal structure:

Socratic elenchus is a search for moral truth by question and answer adversary argument in which a thesis is debated only if asserted as the answerer's own belief and is regarded as refuted only if its negation is deduced from his own beliefs. [p.4]

Vlastos next presents the two (formal) constraints I have already mentioned in III.C, above: (a) the "oratory" constraint, and the "doxastic" constraint. That is, Socrates insists that (a) the interlocutor must give straightforward answers to elenctic questions, refraining from speech-making, and (b) the interlocutor must say only those things which he genuinely believes to be true. Vlastos focuses on the second of these two constraints, and subsequently seems to think that 'being believed by the interlocutor' is sufficient for the admissibility of a proposition into the elenchus. To this end, Vlastos denies that Socrates appeals to *endoxa* as the measure of truth on the grounds that they are believed by the

many, arguing on the basis of Gorgias 472b-c and 474a-b, Laches 184e, and Crito 46d-47d, that "Socrates stands on his repeatedly expressed conviction that the only opinion which matters in the argument is that of the arguers themselves." [p.14]<sup>117</sup>

Vlastos next outlines the formal structure of the elenchus and poses the problem he wishes to resolve: given the formal structure of the elenchus, which only warrants the conclusion that Socrates has demonstrated the inconsistency of a given premise-set, how can Socrates claim, as he does most clearly at Gorgias 479e and 508e-509a, that he has proven

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<sup>117</sup>Vlastos admits that Socrates may use endoxic premises, but he does not do so because they are believed by the many; if they are believed by the one who asserts them, then, according to Vlastos, they are admitted. We might note that in the (1983) version of his essay, Vlastos had argued that Socrates must use at least some non-endoxic premises, otherwise he could not hope to justify the non-endoxic conclusions which perplex his more traditional interlocutors. Kraut (1983) pointed out that this was erroneous, citing Arrow's paradox: "...he [Arrow] lays down four intuitively plausible axioms about how group decisions ought to be made, and then shows that there is no way of satisfying all four. His conclusion--that reasonable group decisions are not even logically possible in some cases, is widely believed to be counter-intuitive, even though all of his premisses seem perfectly obvious." [p.63] Indeed, much philosophy consists simply in working out the consequences, which may indeed be unorthodox, of widely accepted beliefs. Vlastos admits his error in the 1994 version of his essay, and, claiming that the point is dispensable, dispenses with it. [note 45, p.16] We might also note that Vlastos is correct to claim that Socrates never says to the interlocutor that they must admit some belief because it is endoxic. Socrates is willing to use *endoxa*, however, if the interlocutor admits to believing these premises. So although Socrates never uses *endoxa* as a court of final appeal, he sometimes seems to simply assume that the interlocutor will believe what everyone believes (see, for example, Euthydemus 278e]

{not-p} true and thus {p} false? Vlastos' claims that Socrates is justified in claiming that he has proven {not-p} true given two key assumptions:

[A] Whoever has a false moral belief will always have at the same time true beliefs entailing the negation of that belief. [p.25]

and:

[B] The set of elenctically tested moral beliefs held by Socrates at any given time is consistent. [p.28]

Vlastos' argument, then, is the following: if Socrates had any false moral beliefs, then given [A], he would also have true beliefs entailing the negation of those beliefs. If this were the case, however, Socrates' beliefs would be inconsistent, which contradicts assumption [B]. It cannot be, then, that Socrates has any false beliefs, since this entails a contradiction. Taken together, [A] and [B] therefore imply that Socrates has no false beliefs. So when Socrates argues that premises {q} and {r} entail {not-p}, we are justified in taking {q} and {r} as true, since (i) Socrates has agreed to them, (ii) he will only say those things which he believes, and (iii) he has no false beliefs. But if {q} and {r} are true and they entail {not-p}, then {not-p} is true as well, and thus Socrates can confidently proclaim he has proved that {not-p} and thereby shown the falsity of the interlocutor's thesis {p}.

Since Vlastos' account stands or falls on assumptions



[A] and [B], I would now like to examine his attempt to justify them. Vlastos begins his justification of [A] by offering an hypothesis: noting that the interlocutor is always free to abandon one or all of the premises which entail the contradictory of their thesis, Vlastos writes:

Surely Socrates would be aware of this ever present possibility. Why then is he not worried about it? Because, I submit, he believes that if a wrong choice were made, *he would have the resources to recoup that loss in a further elenchus*. This, I am suggesting, is his general view. If you disappointed him by denying {q} [and/or {r}] instead of {p}, he is confident that he could start all over again and find other premises inside your belief system to show that you haven't got rid of the trouble--that if you keep {p}, it will go on making trouble for you, conflicting with these new premises as it did with {q} and {r} before. [p.22]

In support of this hypothesis Vlastos offers two passages from the Gorgias. At Gorgias 474b, Socrates says to Polus "For I think that you and all other men as well as myself hold it worse to do than to suffer wrong and worse to escape than to suffer punishment." Vlastos thinks that this first passage testifies to an implicit distinction between what he calls "overt" and "covert" belief. [p.23] Clearly, Polus does not believe (in the standard sense of the term) what Socrates says he and all other men believe; indeed, he thinks the Socratic thesis is "fantastic" [G.480e], and that in fact *no one* believes it. [G.473e] Vlastos supposes then that when Socrates takes the interlocutor's thesis as their genuine belief, he:

...is telling them that, along with their (overt) belief in {p}, they have certain other (overt) beliefs which

entail {not-p}. In this sense, they do (covertly) believe {not-p}. [p.23]

So while Polus overtly believes that it is worse to suffer harm than to do it, he also believes things which, unbeknownst to him, entail the contradictory of this thesis. But justifying [A] requires one more thing: that the beliefs which entail the contradictory of the thesis are always present in the interlocutor. Vlastos thinks that this latter claim is apparent at Gorgias 482a-b, where Socrates, after chiding Callicles for his frequent inconsistency, says:

You must either then prove against her [philosophy], as I said just now, that to do wrong and evade punishment for wrongdoing is not the worst of all evils; or if you leave this unrefuted, then by the dog that is god in Egypt, Callicles will not himself agree with you, Callicles, but will be at variance with you throughout your life.

This, Vlastos thinks, testifies to the fact that the interlocutor will always believe propositions which entail the Socratic thesis and thus the contradictory of their own: "Callicles is being told that if he cannot refute the Socratic thesis..., he will always (his "whole life long") believe propositions which entail it." [p.24] Vlastos therefore concludes that:

Here we have conclusive evidence for Socrates' conviction that when he shows his interlocutors the inconsistency of their thesis with the conjunction of premises to which they have agreed, they will never succeed in saving their thesis by retracting one or more of the conceded premises; if they try to save it in that way, they are bound to fail; fail they must, if, regardless of which of them they retract, there will always be others in their

belief system which entail the Socratic thesis.[p.24]

Finally, we should note that Socrates must not only be making this assumption, but he must be aware that he is making it, otherwise *he could not think himself justified* (even if he was) in claiming that the thesis had been proven false. To this end, Vlastos claims that Socrates has purely inductive support for [A]: every time Socrates attempts to refute a thesis which he considers false by proving its contradictory (which he considers true), he always finds the premises he needs within the interlocutor's belief system.[p.26] When Socrates fails to convince an interlocutor, therefore, it is never due to the fact that they lack the beliefs necessary to prove the contradictory of their thesis.<sup>118</sup>

Vlastos takes several passages from the Gorgias as justification for assumption [B]. To begin, he cites Gorgias 481d-482b, where Socrates cleverly contrasts his own two loves, Alcibiades and philosophy, with Callicles' two loves, the Athenian *demos* and Demos, son of Pyrilampes. Socrates says:

Now I notice on every occasion that, clever though you be, whatever your favourite says and however he describes

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<sup>118</sup>Callicles is an excellent examples here: although he has admitted numerous propositions which, when taken together, entail the contrary of his theses, he is not thoroughly convinced that he has lost the argument. Socrates' failure to convince Callicles, however, is not due to a lack of beliefs which oppose the latter's theses, but rather to Callicles' sense of pride and thus his emotional inability to admit defeat.

things to be, you cannot contradict him, but constantly shift to and fro. In the assembly, if any statement of yours is contradicted by the Athenian *demos* you change about and say what it wishes, and you behave much the same toward the handsome young son of Pylilampes. [G.481d-e]

In contrast to the fickle *demos*, however, Socrates' favourite, philosophy,

...is far less unstable than my other favourite [Alcibiades], for the son of Clinias is at the mercy of now one argument, now of another, but philosophy always holds to the same... [G.482a-b]

And not only is philosophy the paragon of consistency, according to Vlastos, but so too is Socrates. At Gorgias 482b-c, Socrates remarks that:

I think it better, my good friend, that my lyre should be discordant and out of tune, and any chorus I might train, and that the majority of mankind should disagree with and oppose me, rather than that I, who am but one man, should be out of tune with and discordant with myself.

And at Gorgias 490e, Callicles complains that Socrates keeps saying the same things, to which Socrates replies, "not only that, Callicles, but about the same matters." Finally, we should note that in order to justifiably proclaim that he has proven the thesis false, Socrates must be aware of assumption [B]. To this end, Vlastos claims that, again, Socrates has purely inductive support for [B]:

The consistency of the set {q,r} is being inferred from its track record in Socrates' own experience: in all of the elenctic arguments in which he has engaged, he has never been faulted for inconsistency. [ff.69;p.27]

According to Vlastos, then, given that Socrates has inductive

evidence for assumptions [A] and [B], he is warranted, having shown that the set of premises {q,r} admitted by the interlocutor entail {not-p}, in thinking that {not-p} is true and hence {p} is false.

There are number of problems with Vlastos' account. First, although I am in agreement for the most part with Vlastos' interpretation of Gorgias 474b and 482a-b (which he uses to justify assumption [A]),<sup>119</sup> there is a significant

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<sup>119</sup>Kraut (1983) has argued for an alternative reading of Gorgias 482a-b. He thinks that Socrates' claim that Callicles will be at odds with himself his whole life if he does not refute the Socratic thesis is a strictly empirical matter: "I take this to be an empirical claim: Callicles cannot help accepting the premisses Socrates has used in his argument against him [not, of course, against Polus], since they are a deep seated part of his rigid moral outlook. To put the point more generally, Socrates is assuming a certain amount of psychological and moral fixity in all of his interlocutors: they are all compelled to live with the premisses he uses in his arguments against them. If this is what Socrates is assuming [and not assumption [A]], then he is of course justified in saying that if Callicles resists Socratic principles, then he will always have a contradiction in his system of beliefs. Since he will always cling to the premisses Socrates has elicited from him, and since those premisses entail the conclusion that doing injustice is worse than suffering it, then unless Callicles accepts this conclusion he will always contain a contradiction within himself." [p.67] Kraut therefore prefers to interpret Socrates as "...making the less arrogant claim that, given a certain fixity in human beliefs, he can always find contradictions in his opponents." [p.67] But this conclusion is not warranted. If Kraut wishes to make Callicles' inconsistency an empirical issue (it just so happens that Callicles is committed to premisses which (i) he refuses to welsch on and (ii) which entail the Socratic thesis), then Socrates' diagnosis is, so to speak, Callicles-specific. That is, Kraut is maintaining that Socrates' claim applies only to Callicles and no other interlocutor. How then can Kraut make the leap from a Callicles-specific, empirical problem to the non-empirical claim that "Socrates can always find contradictions in his opponents."? If Kraut were correct about Gorgias 482a-b, then Socrates would simply be warranted in thinking

problem with his justification of assumption [B]. Although Socrates' love (philosophy) "always says the same things" [G.482b], when Socrates admits that he does likewise at Gorgias 490e, he says that he always says the same things "about the same matters." There is no indication here that Socrates always says the same things about absolutely everything; simply about the "same matters". That is, there is no indication in the passages Vlastos cites that Socrates thinks all of his beliefs, from his views on piety to his views on the proper preparation of a Greek salad, are consistent.<sup>120</sup> Vlastos seems to infer the latter, stronger conclusion from Gorgias 482b-c, where Socrates claims that he would rather his lyre were out of tune with itself than he himself were out out of tune and inconsistent. But surely

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that he could find contradictions in *only those opponents who (it just so happens) deny the Socratic theses while simultaneously believing premises which entail them*. But this amounts to claiming that Socrates is warranted in thinking that he is capable of finding contradictory beliefs in those people (and only those people), who (it just so happens) possess contradictory beliefs. While Kraut's interpretation accords with the text, it renders Socrates' claim trivial.

<sup>120</sup>Further, the claim Socrates makes at Gorgias 490e offers Vlastos even less support when put in context. At 490b-e, Socrates attempts to introduce a series of analogies (including an analogy from the crafts) into the discussion, against the wishes of Callicles: "You keep talking about food and drink and doctors and nonsense. I am not speaking of such things." [G.490c] When Socrates proclaims that he always says the same things about the same matters, he may be restricting the scope of this claim to only those things he has just mentioned, and the *techne*-analogy in particular.

this passage should be read normatively and not descriptively: Socrates is *aiming* for consistency, and quite probably he is aiming for the consistency of all of his beliefs and not just his moral beliefs, but there is no reason to think (and the height of *hybris* to suppose) that he has already succeeded. Indeed, as Kraut (1983) points out, Socrates is often puzzled by his ideas--presumably because they appear inconsistent at times. Here we might think of his belief that (i) he is not wise, and (ii) that the oracle, who says he is the wisest man in Athens, must be speaking the truth.<sup>121</sup> Further, as Brickhouse and Smith (1984b) have pointed out, Socrates' only tool for resolving inconsistencies is the elenchus, and there is no reason to think that Socrates has (or is even capable) of submitting all his beliefs to the elenchus, even if he elenchizes with himself in his spare time.[pp.191-192] Socrates is, after all, a finite being: not only is he capable of the intellectual slips and blind-spots which plague all

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<sup>121</sup>See also, as Kraut points out, (i) the Hippias Minor, where Socrates twice "...reaches a paradoxical conclusion (better to commit injustices than voluntarily than involuntarily), and then confesses that he keeps changing his mind about it." [p.69]; and (ii) at the end of the Gorgias, Socrates claims that neither he nor Callicles should engage in the political life until they have an adequate grasp of virtue, and at the present time neither are competent because they "can never hold to the same views about the same questions." [G.527d] Now it is possible that Socrates is being ironic in both these cases, and perhaps also in every early dialogue which ends in *aporia*, but it is certainly not as plausible as the simple acknowledgement that sometimes, about some matters at least, Socrates was just confused.

philosophers, but he has no realistic hope (except perhaps in death, given an immortal soul) of sorting out his beliefs in microscopic detail from top to bottom. Vlastos' final hope, then, is the "inductive evidence" which he thinks justifies [B]: Socrates thinks that consistent beliefs cannot be refuted in (non-eristic) argument, and he has never been refuted in (non-eristic) argument, hence he has inductive grounds for thinking that his beliefs are consistent and therefore true. But as Vlastos himself admits, this is "a very chancy inference" [note 69;p.27], since

...the results of elenctic arguments are powerfully affected by the argumentative skill of the contestants; since that of Socrates vastly exceeds that of his interlocutors, he is more effective in finding beliefs of theirs which entail the negation of their thesis than they are when trying to do the same with him. So his undefeated record need not show that his belief-set is consistent; it may only show that its inconsistencies have defied the power of his adversaries to ferret them out. [note 69;p.27]

Now not only do I doubt that Socrates' argumentative skill outstrips that of an interlocutor like Protagoras, who seems to make perfectly reasonable argumentative moves which stop Socrates cold,<sup>122</sup> but Socrates quite probably engages in elenchus with himself, and it is doubtful that his argumentative skill outstrips itself.<sup>123</sup> If Socrates' beliefs

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<sup>122</sup>See Protagoras 331d-e and 333d-e.

<sup>123</sup>See Symposium 176d-e. Despite the fact that this is an unquestionably Platonic dialogue, I doubt that Plato is misrepresenting his teacher's habits on this point.



are inconsistent then, and I think there is good reason to suppose this to be true in at least some cases, then this must be due to the fact that Socrates himself suffers from the seemingly unavoidable intellectual ailments which plague all philosophers.<sup>124</sup>

Second, on Vlastos' account, as Brickhouse and Smith (1984b) point out, the Socratic method becomes a method which only Socrates can practice. [pp.194-195] Even if Socrates does believe that assumptions [A] and [B] are what justify his

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<sup>124</sup>In a related vein, Polansky (1985) argues that if Vlastos is correct then Socrates does not need to elenchize in order to discover the truth, but only to demonstrate truths to others. He writes: "Why need Socrates merely confirm the premisses he uses when he could go ahead and confirm that the conclusion he is after belongs to his set of moral beliefs and must therefore be true?...Thus, if Socrates really accepts 'C' [that all of his beliefs are true], then he has no need to go through the elenctic argument, for in the same way that he supposedly confirms his premisses he may confirm the conclusion he seeks." [p.257] Polansky is claiming, then, that on Vlastos' reading, Socrates becomes epistemically faultless, and hence that he becomes the standard of truth: if Socrates believes X, and Socrates only believes consistent and hence true beliefs, then X must be true. But if this is the case, then Socrates has no need to argue for the conclusions he seeks; he could simply inspect his belief system to determine whether or not he already believes either these conclusions themselves or other propositions which entail them. This argument fails, I think, for two reasons. First, since Socrates' confidence in the truth of his beliefs is justified inductively according to Vlastos, Socrates must continue elenchizing in order to continually buttress this confidence. That is, since there is always the chance that he might be wrong (as Vlastos thinks Socrates recognizes: see note 69, pp.27), the simple fact that Socrates believes X does not mean that X is absolutely true. Second, Polansky seems to claim that for Vlastos, Socrates' beliefs are true because they are believed by Socrates. This is doubtful: presumably, Socrates believes a set of propositions because they are true and not the other way around.

elenctic conclusions, his success is due to the fact that (i) his beliefs are consistent and hence true, and (ii) he believes the premises which entail {not-p}. However, given the "widespread intellectual impoverishment"<sup>125</sup> of Athens at the time Socrates is conducting his elenchi, it would be odd for Socrates to think that many (if any) other Athenians maintained perfectly consistent belief-systems made up solely of true beliefs, and hence would be able to perform an elenchus themselves. Brickhouse and Smith (1984b) therefore write that:

Socrates plainly did not believe that each of his fellow Athenians held all and only true moral beliefs, and he most assuredly would not recommend a method to them that permitted them to *assume* any such thing. [p.194]

And yet Socrates repeatedly encourages others to elenchize, most clearly in the Apology.<sup>126</sup> Brickhouse and Smith are therefore claiming that since assumptions [A] and [B] ground Socrates' confidence in its results, and that it is unreasonable to suppose that Socrates thought others, beside himself, held all and only true beliefs, then Socrates would be unjustified in recommending the practice of elenchus to his countrymen. Brickhouse and Smith write, therefore, that "...any account of the elenchus...must allow us to make sense of it as a method which Plato or Socrates would prescribe [to

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<sup>125</sup>Brickhouse and Smith (1984b), p.193

<sup>126</sup>See Apology 23c, 39c, 38a, and 41e-42a.

others] as a method of moral enquiry." [p.194]

Third and finally, assumptions [A] and [B] explain why *Socrates* is confident that, should his interlocutor retract {q} or {r} in order to save their thesis, he will always be able to find other premises which entail the negation of that thesis. *Socrates* is therefore confident that retracting premises is futile. But assumptions [A] and [B] do not explain, nor does Vlastos bother to consider, why it is that the *interlocutor* almost never does retract {q} or {r} in order to save their thesis.<sup>127</sup> For Vlastos, as Polansky (1985) writes:

...it seems that comprehending the way in which the elenchus serves as an instrument in the search for universal truth only requires knowing why Socrates can take his arguments as demonstrations. [p.249; my emphasis]

If the interlocutor recognized that assumptions [A] and [B] are true, then presumably they would realize that abandoning {q} or {r} would be ineffective; but surely it is unreasonable to expect that *Socrates'* interlocutors think that [A] and [B] are true. If we note that, as I claimed in chapter III.A, when performing either a defensive or definition-testing

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<sup>127</sup>I can think of only one examples where this takes place: the Gorgias as a whole. Here Callicles claims that Polus made the mistake of maintaining that to do wrong is worse that to suffer it. Callicles retracts this claim, saying that "...it was as a result of this admission that he [Polus] was caught in the toils of your argument and silenced, because he was ashamed to say what he thought." [G.482d-e] *Socrates*, of course, is unfazed and draws the Socratic thesis from the different set of premises believed by Callicles.

elenchus, Socrates takes himself to have succeeded in refuting his opponent if and only if *he manages to convince the interlocutor that their belief is false*, then the fact that Socrates feels confident that he has proven {not-p} true is not sufficient for a proclamation of elenctic success. Not only must *Socrates* feel confident that {not-p} has been proven true, but the *interlocutor* must feel confident that Socrates has proven {not-p}. And if this is true, then as Benson (1989b) points out, whatever justifies Socrates in taking his conclusion as true must be available to the interlocutor. [pp.70-77] This "availability constraint", as Benson calls it, therefore governs the conditions under which Socrates can justifiably claim success. [p.70] Since Socrates *does* claim elenctic success (in both defensive and definition testing elenchi), then a satisfactory account of the elenchus must be one in which that which justifies Socrates' confidence in the truth of his conclusions is also capable of justifying the interlocutor's confidence. *A fortiori*, an account which observed this principle would explain why Socrates' interlocutors typically do not waltz on their premises in order to save their theses.

To conclude, then: a satisfactory account of the elenchus must satisfy three conditions. First, it must be consistent with a finite and fallible Socrates who (i) is perfectly capable of maintaining inconsistent beliefs, and

(ii) would be loathe to overestimate his own intellectual capabilities. Second, it must characterize the elenchus in such a way that any reasonable Athenian could conduct elenctic examinations which were, at least in principle, capable of successfully justifying moral beliefs. And third, it must take into account the necessity of showing not only why Socrates is confident in the success of his demonstrations, but why the interlocutor is likewise confident. In doing so, such an account would explain why it is that Socrates' interlocutors almost invariably refuse to retract premises they have admitted in order to rescue their thesis from inconsistency.

## *2. An Alternative Interpretation of the Elenchus*

Vlastos attempted to ground the truth of {not-p} on Socrates' epistemically faultless belief in the truth of the premises {q,r} which entail {not-p}. Although I have argued that there is no reason to think that Socrates was epistemically faultless, and even less to think that he would have construed his own intellectual capabilities in such terms, in general terms Vlastos' approach seems to be the most promising one. That is, I am inclined to think that the key to solving the problem of the elenchus lies in discovering why

both Socrates and the interlocutor take the premises which entail {not-p} to be true. I therefore wish to begin by examining four independent<sup>128</sup> sources of epistemic justification: (i) the Socratic *daimonion*, (ii) *endoxa*, (iii) obvious truths, and (iv) *epagoge*. I will discuss each of these sources briefly in turn, and then address their epistemic role together. I will argue that Socrates uses these sources to justify the truth of premises {q,r}, and that both he and the interlocutor are therefore warranted in claiming that the conclusion {not-p} has been proven true. That is, I will argue that both Socrates and the interlocutor have good reasons (though not infallible reasons) for construing elenctic arguments as sound demonstrations of the truth of {not-p}. Finally, I will argue that my account satisfies the necessary interpretive conditions which I outlined in my critique of Vlastos above.

First, Socrates apparently regards the voice of his *daimonion* to be extremely trustworthy. Before I examine the strength of his confidence in this extra-rational source of justification, I would like to provide a brief account of what

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<sup>128</sup>By 'independent' here, I simply mean sources of justification whose results are not contingent upon elenctic enquiry. That is, although beliefs provided by these sources can be used in the elenchus, their truth is not grounded by the elenchus. Socrates cannot appeal to the results of some further elenchus in order to justify his confidence in premises {q} and {r}, since this further elenchus would itself make use of some set of premises which are in need of justification.

the *daimonion* actually tells Socrates. In the first place, the *daimonion* habitually operates by giving Socrates a sign (*semeion*)<sup>129</sup> that warns Socrates not to perform some *particular* action. Thus at Apology 31d, Socrates remarks that at times a "voice" (*phone*) comes to him, "...and when it comes it always dissuades me from what I am proposing to do, and never urges me on." Similarly, in the Euthydemus, Socrates claims that one day as he was preparing to leave the Palaestra, his *daimonion* gave him a sign which prompted him to remain. [Eud.272e] The *daimonion*'s admonitions, then, are invariably negative, and they always concern some *particular* matter. They do not, therefore, directly provide Socrates with positive convictions about general issues. Further, the "signs" Socrates receives require interpretation. If, therefore, the 'voice' in the dressing-room at the Palaestra actually says something to Socrates, it could not be much more than "no". Now Socrates gives us no clue about his interpretive methods concerning the *daimonion*, but I suspect that he would primarily appeal to experiential evidence. That is, I suspect Socrates would simply consider (briefly) what action he was at *that moment* actually contemplating or engaging in and assume that the interdiction applied to it. Despite the fact, then, that Socrates tests the divine

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<sup>129</sup>See Apology 40b and Euthydemus 272e.

pronouncement of the oracle indirectly through repeated elenchi, he would probably not use the elenchus to test the commands of the *daimonion*. Indeed, if the *daimonion* always gives advice about particular actions Socrates is on the verge of engaging in, then he would in many cases lack the time necessary for an adequate elenctic test. We should note, however, that even if the *daimonion* only gives negative counsel about particular courses of action, Socrates could, at least in principle, inductively infer general moral principles from it. That is, if the divine voice spoke to Socrates every time he considered engaging in some action or type of action, then he would have good (non-rational and non-elenctically tested) evidence for a general principle prohibiting that type of action. He would therefore be warranted (despite the fact that we never see him doing so in the early dialogues) in believing that certain general principles are true when he uses them in an elenchus.

Second, Vlastos (1994) has claimed that while Socrates uses *endoxa* as premises in the elenchus, he does not do so because these beliefs are endoxic.[pp.15-16]<sup>130</sup> That is, Socrates does not appeal to the fact that a belief is endoxic as justification of its truth and hence for its admissibility into the elenchus; instead, Vlastos thinks that satisfying the

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<sup>130</sup>See footnote 11 for Aristotle's definition of *endoxa*.



doxastic constraint is sufficient for admitting propositions.

Vlastos writes that he:

...is not restricting in the least Socrates' freedom to use commonly accepted beliefs among the agreed-upon premises from which he deduces the negation of the opponent's thesis. Any proposition on whose truth he and the interlocutor agree is grist to his mill. If the proposition is a "reputable belief"...so much the better. [p.15]

In support of his view, Vlastos also adds that Socrates never tells the interlocutor that they must grant some proposition because it is a reputable belief on the topic. [p.13]<sup>131</sup> This does not rule out, however, the possibility that Socrates thinks that at least some endoxic beliefs are true. If Socrates further assumes (on the strength of these beliefs being *endoxic*) that a significant number of his interlocutors believe these propositions, then he could ask his elenctic questions in such a way that the interlocutor can not help but grant him the answer he seeks and which he considers true. Indeed, this is precisely what happens at Euthydemus 278e-279a, where Socrates asks Clinias:

Do we all wish to do well in the world? Or perhaps this is one of the questions which I feared you might laugh at, for it is foolish, no doubt, even to ask such things. Who in the world does not wish to do well?

Now Socrates may have a non-traditional conception of what it

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<sup>131</sup>Indeed, as Polansky (1985) points out, if Socrates thinks that the interlocutor should always say what they truly believe, then pointing out that a particular proposition is endoxic would be "a breach of urbanity and gratuitous". [p.249]

is to do well, but he is relying on the endoxic nature of the belief that 'all men desire to do well' to compel Clinias to agree. That is, Clinias has no choice but to agree, unless he wishes to appear irrational.<sup>132</sup> Similarly, the first question Socrates puts to Charmides has only one answer for any reasonable Greek: he asks Charmides "...whether you would not acknowledge temperance to be of the class of the noble and good?" [Ch.159b] Again, Charmides could not deny this endoxic belief without appearing, at the very least, terribly odd.<sup>133</sup> Further, in the argument which begins at Gorgias 497d, Callicles is refuted because he attempts to combine his hedonism with the common Greek conviction that the good man is courageous and wise. As Dodds (1959) points out:

A consistent hedonist would refuse to admit the initial premise [that the good man is courageous and wise]. But it was difficult for a Greek not to admit it, since in common speech *aner agathos* so often meant simply "a brave man" or "an able man". [p.314]

My last example is also taken from the Gorgias. At 474b, Polus claims that everyone including himself believes that suffering wrong is worse than doing wrong. Socrates, of course, maintains the opposite (non-endoxic) view and endeavours to prove it. Now Socrates could use non-endoxic

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<sup>132</sup>It is more likely that Clinias has simply not considered the opposing claim at all.

<sup>133</sup>Socrates puts virtually the same question to Laches, after the latter proposes the courage is "a sort of endurance of the soul". [La.192b-c]

premises to demonstrate the truth of his belief, but he would stand a better chance of convincing the interlocutor if he argued for his non-endoxic view from conventional premises. Accordingly, Socrates secures agreement from Polus that while suffering wrong is 'worse' than doing it, doing wrong is more 'shameful' than suffering it. That this latter proposition, which is deeply ingrained in Polus' belief-system, is in fact endoxic is testified to by Callicles at 483a, who claims that Polus (and this was his mistake) granted this premise because he was simply arguing from 'convention' and afraid to give his real opinion. Finally, we should note that among the endoxic beliefs which Socrates appeals to is the belief that the good, the fine, and the beneficial are essentially related. That is, Socrates regularly invokes his traditional belief in the essential connection between the good, the fine, and the beneficial.<sup>134</sup> We should note that although Socrates

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<sup>134</sup>Socrates insists that any answer which conflicts with the belief that virtue is good (*agathon*), fine (*kalon*), or beneficial (*ophelimon*) must be rejected. At Charmides 159c, Socrates introduces the claim that temperance is fine, to which Charmides immediately agrees, and at 160d-e Socrates argues that because temperance is fine, it must also be good. At Laches 192c, Socrates asks Laches if courage is fine, fully expecting the answer: "Most fine, certainly". And in the Meno, Socrates explicitly claims that everything which is good is also beneficial. [M.87e] Even Protagoras agrees without hesitation that virtue is fine at 349e, and at 350e Socrates claims that that which is fine is necessarily good as well. In fact, as Irwin (1977) notes, Socrates regularly moves back and forth between *kalon*, *agathon*, and *ophelimon* without any attempt to justify his dialectical manoeuvres. [p.49] Now it is true that in all these cases Socrates makes his point and then asks the interlocutor for consent. We might think, then, that the

invariably asks for the interlocutor's agreement about endoxic premises, this does not mean that he necessarily entertains the possibility of disagreement. Requests for assent are, in at least some cases, simply a convention of dialogue.

Socrates also appeals to obvious truths, which we can subdivide into three species: (a) empirically obvious truths; (b) conceptually obvious truths; and (c) logically obvious truths. In the first place, Socrates occasionally appeals to empirical truths as he does at Meno 89b-89e, where he argues that for any subject which can be taught, one ought to be able to discern teachers of that subject. And yet neither he nor Meno have ever encountered a teacher of virtue; hence "...we may safely infer that it [virtue] cannot be taught." [M.89e]<sup>135</sup> Socrates also appeals to empirical evidence at Euthydemus 285d-286e. Here Dionysodorus makes use of the Protagorean doctrine that 'it is not possible to speak falsely' (and hence

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interlocutor could reject this Socratic assumption and force Socrates to adopt a different argumentative strategy. But in point of fact, no interlocutor does so. Thracymachus, despite his harsh belligerence, agrees that justice (*to dikaion*) is beneficial when he claims that justice is the advantage of the stronger. [RepI.339a-b] And the discussion with the absurdly self-important and frequently difficult Hippias is in fact predicated on Hippias' agreement that virtue is fine, since he equates the fine with the honourable and professes to teach fine and honourable pursuits to the young. [HMaj.286a-b] Even Socrates' most hostile interlocutors, then, do not dispute the connection between the good, the fine, and the beneficial. If Socrates nowhere discusses nor defends the relation between virtue and these characteristics, then, it is for good reason: only an imbecile or a madman would dispute it.

<sup>135</sup>The same point is made in the Protagoras at 319a-320b.

to contradict) against Ctesippus, who is unable to cope with the argument and becomes silent. Socrates, however, takes over, and after Dionysodorus challenges him to refute the Protagorean claim, Socrates points out that the challenge itself refutes the claim. Second, Socrates appeals to obvious conceptual truths. So, for example, at Gorgias 467d-468a Socrates first distinguishes between the class of actions and objects which are good, those which are bad, and those which are neither good nor bad, and then asks Polus: "Now do men, when they act, perform these indifferent actions for the sake of the good, or the good for the sake of the indifferent?" When Polus replies "Surely the indifferent for the sake of the good.", he could not possibly have given the opposing answer, since the concept of 'the indifferent' excludes its being a final cause.<sup>136</sup> And at Euthyphro 10c, Socrates makes the conceptually obvious point that if something is loved, then it is "...in the process of becoming something, or undergoing something, *by some other thing*." Euthyphro agrees, of course, because 'love' is a relational predicate which implicates the existence of its *relata*. Third and finally, Socrates appeals to logically indubitable truths. Here, following Gulley (1968), we might think of Protagoras 333a, where Socrates uses

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<sup>136</sup>That is, if something is 'indifferent' it cannot motivate desire, but it can be done as a means to some desirable end such as the good.

the logically obvious principle that 'anything which has an opposite has one and only one opposite' to convict Protagoras of inconsistency. Although Socrates remarks that Protagoras must either give up the dictum 'one thing, one opposite' or his belief that wisdom is distinct from temperance and folly (and thus opposed to both), Socrates gives no indication that it would be reasonable to withdraw the logical principle. In fact, Socrates concludes by saying: "Then must not temperance and wisdom be the same, just as earlier holiness and justice turned out to be the same." To conclude, then, this small sample suggests, I think, that Socrates is willing to make use of premises which are obvious truths in a variety of senses.

Fourth and finally, Socrates appeals to inductive evidence for many of the premises he uses in the elenchus. This is, in fact, his most frequent argumentative strategy. As Robinson (1953) points out, Socrates uses a variety of forms of epagogic arguments, including inferences (i) from a single case to a single case,<sup>137</sup> (ii) from a set of cases to another case,<sup>138</sup> and (iii) from a set of cases to a universal (which then may or may not be applied to a further

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<sup>137</sup>See Hippias Major, 284a-b.

<sup>138</sup>See Apology, 27b.

case). [p.33-34]<sup>139</sup> Further, the *techne*-analogy is frequently used to induce propositions which are subsequently introduced into the elenchus.<sup>140</sup> Thus Socrates uses an extended inductive argument based on the *techne*-analogy at Republic I 341c-342e to demonstrate that, contra Thracymachus, rulers in all fields and disciplines rule for the benefit and advantage of the ruled and not themselves. Similarly, Socrates uses an epagogic argument based on evidence from the crafts at Euthyphro 13a-c to establish the proposition that 'all care and service aims at the benefit and betterment of the object cared for'. In the first case, Socrates' induction leads to a principle which, in itself, contradicts Thracymachus' definition of justice; in the second, Socrates draws further consequences from the principle obtained inductively which contradicts Euthyphro's definition of piety. Socrates therefore uses epagogic arguments to introduce propositions into the elenchus which, either by themselves or in conjunction with other propositions, serve to justify his conclusions. We should note also, that Socrates' epagogic arguments from analogy typically serve to transfer rather

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<sup>139</sup>For induction to a universal pure and simple, see Gorgias 467c-d and 474d-475b; for induction to a universal which is subsequently applied to another case, see Euthyphro 10ff.

<sup>140</sup>There are, of course, many analogical arguments in the early dialogues which do not refer to the crafts: see Hippias Minor 373c-376c, Laches 190a, and Lysis 217c-e.

obvious truths from a familiar domain to a more difficult domain like virtue. Since this allows Socrates and the interlocutor to draw conclusions about difficult matters on the basis of their prior knowledge of simpler matters, it grounds their moral conclusions in a kind of average, everyday knowledge which is difficult to contest.

The question that remains, then, is the following: since Socrates can use these four sources to support his use of premises within the elenchus, *to what extent* are they capable of *justifying* his conviction in premises {q} and {r} and hence in the truth of {not-p}?

First, even if Socrates could, in principle, use his inductive confidence in the *daimonion* to justify the beliefs he uses in the elenchus (although we never actually see him doing so in the early dialogues), he could not expect his interlocutors to share the confidence he receives from divination. So although the *daimonion* could provide Socrates with some reason to think that he had proven {not-p} true, Socrates could not use this source of justification to convince the interlocutor. Since this latter is, I have argued, a necessary condition for making a warranted claim of elenctic success, the *daimonion* is of little help.

Second, Vlastos was correct to point out that there is no necessary connection between the endoxicality, so to speak, of a belief, and its being true. Further, since Socrates



clearly does not endorse *all* endoxic beliefs, we can infer that he did not make the mistake of thinking that, in general, endoxic beliefs are true *on the grounds* that they are believed by the many. That is, if Socrates thinks that some endoxic beliefs are true, then he must have some other reason (besides its being endoxic) for thinking so. And since Socrates' primary method of justification is the elenchus, he could not invoke endoxic premises (which he thought were true) within a particular elenchus on the grounds that they were elenctically justified without begging the question. However, there is a species of endoxa whose need (or lack thereof) for justification does not even seem to occur to either Socrates or the interlocutor. That is, Socrates sometimes makes use of beliefs which are endoxic, and which both he and the interlocutor take as uncontroversial (like the belief that the good, the fine, and the beneficial mutually entail one another). That neither Socrates nor the interlocutor ever consider questioning some endoxic propositions is not, of course, because they are believed by the many, and neither Socrates nor the interlocutor wishes to appear outrageous in the face of overwhelming popular support for some claim. It is rather, I think, because a small but significant number of endoxic beliefs are so deeply ingrained in the minds of 5th

century Athenians that they are simply assumed to be true.<sup>141</sup> Socrates is not, therefore, considering these beliefs true because he thinks it impossible that they are false; rather, he and his interlocutors assume their truth without considering the possibility of their falsehood. He does not consider this small but significant body of premises as hypotheses, then, since an hypothesis is something whose possible falsehood is acknowledged; rather, he simply takes their truth for granted. Although this seems to conflict with a deep-seated interpretive tendency to make Socrates a paradigmatic enlightenment intellectual, it is nevertheless, I think, a truism to claim that any given rational conversation takes place against a background of implicit assumptions.<sup>142</sup> Socrates is, I think, no different in this

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<sup>141</sup>I shall refer to these beliefs hereafter as "deep *endoxa*". Among them I count the beliefs (i) that virtue is good, fine, and beneficial, and (ii) that all men desire happiness. This is a small set of beliefs, clearly (though there may be a few others), but they are absolutely crucial to the Socratic project. Any interlocutor who concedes these two points (and in fact no interlocutor denies them) has, so to speak, 'bought into' a common rational framework which allows Socrates to demonstrate (with the help of a significant number of other beliefs) certain Socratic theses.

<sup>142</sup>Crito 46b does not invalidate this claim. Here Socrates says: "Not now for the first time, but always, I am the sort of man who is persuaded by nothing except the reason that seems best to me when I reason about the matter." Although Socrates is a very rational individual, nothing here excludes the possibility that when he "reasons about the matter" he is making use of implicit assumptions. Indeed, as Kraut (1983) notes, Aristotle points out in the Posterior Analytics [72b5-25] that since demonstrations necessarily utilize a finite number of steps, all demonstrations

respect, nor should we fault him for being so.

Third, despite the fact that it is theoretically possible to dispute those obvious truths which are either empirically or conceptually based (more so the former), they carry a great deal of *prima facie* weight during an elenchus precisely because they are obvious. Neither Socrates nor his interlocutors are Cartesian sceptics who feel the need to search for first principles from which they can deduce the certainty of either their experiential or their common-sense conceptual beliefs. As a result, both Socrates and the interlocutor have good reasons for taking these beliefs as true, despite the fact that they lack perfect and complete justification. Needless to say, logical truths (such as the belief that anything that has an opposite has one and only one opposite) are capable of producing even stronger conviction. When Socrates appeals to beliefs which are obviously true, then, he does so because they are so intuitively plausible that they do not require further elenctic justification. As a result, Socrates can use them in the elenchus with confidence that is based on good, although imperfect, reasons.

Finally, when Socrates conducts an *epagoge*, he typically speaks as if the conclusion reached is not merely probable but quite certain. As Guthrie (1969) points out,

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make use of premises which cannot themselves be demonstrated. [p.62]

*epagogic* arguments are only perfectly rationally justifiable if (a) they are made on the basis of a complete enumeration of cases; (b) they are intended to lead the mind on to an intuitive grasp of the universal; or (c) if the speaker explicitly specifies that the conclusion is merely probable.[p.107] Robinson (1953) claims that while traces of all three forms can be found in the early dialogues, philosophers prior to Aristotle did not rigorously distinguish between enumeratively certain *epagoge*, intuitively certain *epagoge*, and merely probable *epagoge*. [pp.35-38] Robinson argues:

We at this period of human history may be overwhelmingly convinced that Socrates has in no sense reviewed all the instances; but it does not follow that Socrates and Plato, because they were no fools, would never have thought they were reviewing all the instances when they obviously were not. It was easier for them to think so because they had not clearly distinguished intuitive from enumerative *epagoge*, and the sense of having intuited the universal was therefore able to reinforce without conflict or detection the sense of having run through every case. [p.36]

Further, as Aristotle notes, even if it is never possible to give a complete enumeration at the level of particulars, it is possible to do so at the level of species, and Socrates seems to do just this at Charmides 159c-160b. Here Socrates divides human affairs into those which concern the body and those which concern the soul in order to induce the proposition that "...in all that concerns body or soul, swiftness and activity are clearly better than slowness and quietness." [Ch.160b] I

think it is sensible to suppose that Socrates, since he did not distinguish rigorously between kinds of *epagoge*, and since he sometimes practised enumeration from species instead of particulars (again without rigorously distinguishing this from other methods of *epagoge*), viewed the results of his inductive arguments as, at the very least, quite reasonable, and at the most, quite certain. Further, those epagogic arguments which make use of analogy (and the *techne*-analogy in particular) carry significant *prima facie* plausibility. Although it is possible to challenge these arguments by questioning the validity of the comparison between cases, Socrates' interlocutors rarely do so.<sup>143</sup> The vast majority of Socratic analogies, then, serve to transfer rather uncontroversial knowledge from a familiar domain to a more difficult domain like virtue. This effectively grounds their moral conclusions in more everyday knowledge which is difficult to contest.

I have argued that Socrates uses deep *endoxa*, obvious truths, and *epagogic* arguments to justify the truth of the premises he uses to establish {not-p}. Two questions remain:

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<sup>143</sup>I can think of only one case where such a challenge occurs: at Gorgias 491a, the ever difficult Callicles protests that Socrates "...never stops talking about cobblers and fullers and cooks and doctors, as if we were discussing them." Here Callicles has challenged the *techne*-analogy itself, and not just a particular claim made on the basis of this analogy. Although Socrates immediately takes up the argument from another angle, he does not hesitate to work in further references to the crafts throughout the remainder of the dialogue.

(i) is the support he receives from these non-elenctic sources sufficient to warrant his conclusion that {not-p} has been proven true?; and (ii) if it is, does this account of the elenchus satisfy the requirements I mentioned in my critique of Vlastos' account?

First, I think that these sources of non-elenctic justification are, in principle, capable of justifying the premises Socrates uses in the elenchus, where we understand a justified proposition as a "reasonably warranted belief". I argued that deep *endoxa*, while obviously questionable, were not in fact questioned by either Socrates or his interlocutors. Both Socrates and his interlocutors, then, simply assume the truth of these beliefs. As such, they are capable of warranting Socrates' confidence in those premises which are either deep *endoxa* or logically implied by these *deep endoxa*. Further, Socrates' appeal to obvious truth and to *epagogic* arguments share one common feature: both appeal to the *prima facie* or intuitive plausibility of a belief. As such, they are both capable of warranting Socrates' confidence in those premises which are either obviously true in the senses mentioned, epagogically established, or logically implied by either. Socrates has, then, several sources of non-elenctic justification which are capable, in principle, of warranting his belief that {q} and {r} are true, and thus that he has proven {not-p}.

I want to stress that these sources are capable of doing so, however, only in principle. Socrates does not always make use of these three sources of justification when introducing premises. As I mentioned in chapter III.B, while some premises Socrates introduces into the elenchus are clearly supported with independent argumentation, some are (as Vlastos thought they *all* were) genuinely *ad hoc*. That is, sometimes Socrates simply introduces premises which are logically unsecured within the argument and asks the interlocutor for agreement. These premises are neither derived from the thesis nor from propositions which have been independently established. As such, I must conclude that Socrates is warranted in claiming that he has proven {not-p} true in only those elenctic arguments in which he has made use of no *ad hoc* premises. So, for example, Socrates has reasonable grounds for thinking that he has successfully refuted Critias in the argument at Charmides 167c-169c, which is conducted primarily by *epagoge* with the additional appeal to an obvious conceptual truth.<sup>144</sup> Socrates does not, however, have reasonable grounds for thinking that he has refuted either Polus at Gorgias 473a-479e, or Callicles at 488b-509a, since both of these arguments contain numerous *ad hoc*

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<sup>144</sup>Such as the fact that if temperance is a science (*episteme*) then it must be a science of something. Even this, however, is consequently supported with *epagogic* evidence.

premises.<sup>145</sup>

Second, I argued in III.D.1 that a satisfactory account of the elenchus must do three things. The account of Socrates' elenchus which I have given satisfies, I think, all three of these conditions. First, all three of the sources of non-elenctic justification mentioned (except for those obvious truths which are logically indubitable) provide no more than good reason for believing the truth of a given proposition. As such, Socrates can make use of them, feel that his conclusions are warranted, and refrain from thinking that his conclusions are absolutely certain. Second, since all three sources of non-elenctic justification rely heavily on the intuitive plausibility of propositions, any reasonable Athenian is capable of mimicking Socrates by conducting cross-examinations of himself and others. And third, my account clearly shows why it is that both Socrates and the interlocutor are confident in the truth of their elenctic conclusions. Since the premises are warranted on the basis of

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<sup>145</sup>In each of these cases, however, Socrates claims to have proven {not-p} true, despite the fact that he has no reasonable grounds to think he has done so. At the conclusion of the argument against Polus, Socrates remarks: "Has it not been proved [apodedeiktoi] that what was asserted [by Socrates] is true?". [G.479e] And at the conclusion of the argument against Callicles, Socrates remarks that the Socratic position (that it is worse to do wrong than to suffer it) has been "buckled fast and clamped together...by arguments of iron and adamant." [G.508e-509a] I will discuss the significance of this discrepancy my conclusion to this chapter (III.E)



intuitive plausibility and thus constitute *prima facie* evidence for {not-p}, both Socrates and the interlocutor have good, though not infallible, reason for thinking that their conclusion is warranted. Moreover, this explains why Socrates' interlocutors typically do not waver on their premises to save their thesis. I think it is reasonable to suppose that they do not do so because, typically, they have a stronger commitment to {q} and {r} than they do to their initial theses.<sup>146</sup> Most of Socrates' interlocutors have never before considered questions of essence (whether of justice, piety, friendship, beauty, etc.) until Socrates challenges them to do so. The theses they assert, then, are not the result of countless hours of philosophical contemplation. And the premises they subsequently admit are typically rather innocuous taken singly; they are the kind of common knowledge that any Athenian might acquire in the course of a few decades of day to day living. So while interlocutors are psychologically attached to their theses (after all, Socrates has called their collective bluff, and their egos and reputations are on the line), they have, I think, a stronger attachment to their commonsense, everyday beliefs. They do

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<sup>146</sup>Gulley (1968) has made a similar point. He writes that Socrates aims "...to establish as the contradictory of the respondent's initial thesis a proposition presented as so obviously true that the respondent is driven to abandon his thesis." [pp.43-44]

not retract {q} and {r}, then, not because they recognize the pointlessness of doing so in the face of Vlastos' Socrates, who is epistemically faultless. Rather, the premises they admit have some *prima facie* connection with what they take to be the truth, where this is understood as belief grounded by intuitively plausible knowledge.

#### E. Conclusion: The Socratic Elenchus

In this chapter I have argued that the Socratic elenchus is, *at least in principle*, capable of justifying positive convictions about virtue, where justification is understood as 'grounding belief in intuitively plausible knowledge'. I have claimed that despite the logical form of the elenchus, which only seems to allow Socrates to demonstrate the inconsistency of a given premise-set {p,q,r}, both Socrates and interlocutor, by relying on three sources of non-elenctic justification, are, *in principle*, warranted in thinking that Socrates has indeed proven {not-p} true and thus proven the interlocutor's thesis {p} false. That is, both Socrates and the interlocutor are so warranted when and only when the elenchus makes use of no premises which are 'logically unsecured'; i.e. when the elenchus uses no premises which are not derived from the interlocutor's thesis nor from

some intuitively plausible truth which is justified non-elenctically.

As I noted previously, however, Socrates claims elenctic success even when he has indeed made use of logically unsecured or *ad hoc* premises. What, then, are we to make of this--the, if I may be so bold, real 'problem of the elenchus'? The most plausible explanatory hypothesis I can offer is the following. If Socrates were careful, he would have framed his elenctic questions in such a way that every response would be grounded in some intuitively plausible truth. But he was not so careful. In the first place, I think that Socrates typically thought that he had proven his conclusions true, even when he had not, throughout the early dialogues (and his life). He possessed good reasons for some of the premises he used, while he lacked sufficient justification for others. I suspect that his complete lack of epistemological and logical interests lead him to overestimate his actual elenctic accomplishments. Having succeeding in proving a proposition by means of valid argumentation grounded in intuitively plausible truths on some (if not many) occasions, he simply took it for granted that this was what he was actually doing on every occasion.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>147</sup>In saying this, I do not wish to convict Socrates of gross logical negligence. It would be absurd to claim, for example, that Christopher Columbus was a poor navigator because he lacked a radar-guidance system, or worse yet, that he was a poor cook

One issue remains to be addressed. In chapter II, I argued that Socrates conceived of adequate moral knowledge as a kind of expertise which necessarily makes use of essential definitions. Further, I argued that Socrates' epistemic goal was not infallible knowledge of good and evil, but rather merely *reliable* knowledge of good and evil. That is, I argued that Socrates desired only that knowledge which was sufficiently reliable for the life of virtue and thus happiness (*eudaimonia*). In chapter III, I argued that the Socratic elenchus is in principle capable of validly demonstrating the truth of a given proposition believed by Socrates and is therefore capable of defending this belief against the philosophical attacks of his opponents. I have argued, therefore, that the elenchus is capable (and that Socrates took it to be capable) of justifying Socrates' beliefs. But did Socrates think that the knowledge justified in this manner was sufficiently reliable for the life of virtue and happiness? The answer, I think, is 'yes'. Although he lacks expert knowledge, he has knowledge which is sufficiently reliable for his own happiness. As Vlastos (1994) writes, Socrates is confident in the

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because he had no interest in food preparation techniques. Socrates' case is similar, I think. He lacked both the logical machinery and the logical interest necessary for an adequate appraisal of the nature and limits of his own methods. For these, of course, the Greeks had to wait for Plato and Aristotle.

...pragmatic value of [his] beliefs: they articulate intuitions which prove practically viable in his own experience; they tell him who is happy and who isn't, he does what they tell him and he is happy. [p.26]

Even when Socrates reaches for the hemlock, there is no indication that he is anything less than supremely confident in the truth of his beliefs. He is calm and self-assured as the servant delivers the poison: "...he received it [the cup of hemlock] quite cheerfully, Echecrates, without a tremor, without any change of expression." [Ph.117b]. In fact, Socrates is so confident that he remarks at his trial that to go on questioning in Hades with the likes of Odysseus and Sisyphus "...would be unimaginable happiness". [Ap.41c] And yet he lacks something: he is no expert, he has no definitions of virtue which can withstand elenctic testing. In chapter II.D, I argued that the knowledge Socrates lacked was not epistemic certainty. The knowledge he lacked was the knowledge of essences through adequate definition, clearly, but he was not aiming for certainty about these matters. Instead, his overwhelmingly practical outlook required only that knowledge which was sufficient for virtue and happiness. The knowledge afforded by the elenchus was, I think, sufficient for Socrates' purposes. What he possessed was knowledge which was adequate for judging whether or not he ought to engage in political life, or to try to escape from prison: in short, he possessed knowledge sufficient for

managing his day to day affairs with the reasonable confidence that he was doing so in accordance with his conception of virtue. What he lacked was the definitional knowledge necessary for moral judgments in all circumstances, even extremely perplexing and borderline cases. For this, only an adequate definition would do; this he did not have, and it was this, I think, that he spent the remainder of his life searching for. Further, there is nothing in Socrates' method which would have prevented him from succeeding to some degree. Although the elenchus is infected with the uncertainty of *ad hoc* beliefs and its reliance on *endoxa* and intuitively plausible beliefs, Socrates could remain confident that if he continued to elenchize, he would develop a progressively more adequate conception of virtue. His criteria for expert knowledge were stringent, no doubt, and necessarily so: he needed, for purely pragmatic reasons, to distinguish the experts from the pretenders. But his criteria were not so stringent, I think, that they rendered his project impossible from the outset.

#### Chapter IV: Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to discover whether or not Socrates' method, the *elenchus*, was capable of justifying positive convictions about virtue. I began in the first chapter by comparing and contrasting this method with alternate philosophical methods which existed prior to and concurrently with it. In the second chapter I argued that Socrates conceived of knowledge as a kind of expertise, essentially similar to that of the craftsmen, and that the most essential feature of this knowledge was that it conferred upon its holder the ability to give an account (through definition) of the final cause which motivates one's actions. Socrates was, therefore, searching for adequate definitional knowledge of the good--the final cause of moral actions which, if properly understood, could be used in a process of rational decision making. In the third chapter I argued for a constructivist account of the *elenchus*. I claimed that the premises Socrates used to deduce the contradictory of his opponents' theses were grounded in either intuitive plausibility or through *epagogic* arguments and analogies. I further argued that while there was nothing, in principle, which prevented Socrates from thinking that the *elenchus* was

capable of adequately justifying the truth of the conclusions he reached when employing it, his reliance on *ad hoc* premises undermined the validity of his argumentation. Yet Socrates did not seem to distinguish between those arguments which made use of *ad hoc* premises and those which did not. Although he could be reasonably confident only that the latter class of arguments were valid, he habitually spoke as if the vast majority of his arguments were valid. As a result, I claimed that Socrates, who was unconcerned with the epistemological and methodological issues which occupied Plato, was unaware of the problem with his elenchus. This need not diminish our appreciation of Socratic philosophy however. He, at least, possessed knowledge which was sufficient for him to manage his moral affairs with the reasonable confidence that he was doing so in accordance with virtue. What he lacked would have been a difficult achievement indeed: knowledge sufficiently reliable for moral judgements in all circumstances, no matter how perplexing and controversial they might be. Even here, however, he had reasonable confidence in a set of basic moral beliefs which could act as his guide and prevent him, even when faced with his own unjust imprisonment and death, from succumbing to vice and the corruption of the soul. Socrates, then, possessed that wisdom which was sufficient for his own happiness. Limited though his wisdom was, it was sufficient for him to be the "bravest and wisest and most just" [Ph.118a]



of all those then living in Athens, without encroaching on the province of the gods.

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